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Turasóireachta agus Spóirt  
Department of Transport,  
Tourism and Sport

# Sustainable Mobility Policy Review

Background Paper 8  
Public Transport in Rural Ireland



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## Context and questions for consideration

This background paper is one of a number of papers that have been prepared by the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport to inform a public consultation on Ireland's sustainable mobility policy. The review work arises from a commitment in the *Programme for a Partnership Government*<sup>1</sup> to review public transport policy "to ensure services are sustainable into the future and are meeting the needs of a modern economy". The *Programme for a Partnership Government* specifically recognises the value and benefit of rural transport, in particular for older people vulnerable to social isolation. It commits to examining how best to improve integration of public transport services with other transport services and develop new routes reflecting international best practice. The public consultation is designed to give stakeholders, interested parties and the general public the opportunity to reflect on the information and analysis in the papers, to share their views, and to contribute to the development of a Sustainable Mobility Policy Statement.

Sustainable Mobility can be described as linking people and places in a sustainable way by supporting:

- comfortable and affordable journeys to and from work, home, school, college, shops and leisure;
- travelling by cleaner and greener transport;
- a shift away from the private car to greater use of active travel (walking and cycling) and public transport (e.g. bus, rail, tram).

All elements of sustainable mobility (public transport, cycling, walking) are being considered in the policy review. Each background paper includes a number of questions to generate ideas about the extent to which the present approach to sustainable mobility is working well, the areas which are not, and future priorities.

This background paper sets out the factual situation in relation to public transport in rural Ireland and poses the questions below on this issue. Participants in the public consultation are not confined to answering the suggested questions below and are invited to offer any other contribution they wish to make. It is recommended that submissions are confined to circa 2,500 words or less.

- 8.1 What are the opportunities and challenges in providing public transport in rural areas?
- 8.2 How can we continue to ensure that the transport needs of rural communities are met in the context of the *Project Ireland 2040* objective to regenerate rural Ireland by promoting environmentally sustainable growth patterns?
- 8.3 Are there international best practice examples around the provision of public transport in rural areas that could be applied in an Irish context?

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Structure of the paper

**Section 2: What is meant by rural transport?** sets out the Central Statistics Office's definition of "rural" and rural population trends. The Section describes why rural transport is important in Ireland and internationally as a means of reducing social inclusion and improving quality of life. It also focuses on the barriers and challenges to providing rural transport which have been identified internationally.

**Section 3: Existing policy context** sets out the current policies relevant to public transport in rural areas in Ireland. The Section looks at a number of key reports which examined the provision of public transport services in rural Ireland.

**Section 4: Public transport services in rural Ireland** sets out details of the Local Link services funded under the Rural Transport Programme and an overview of other public transport provision in rural areas. The Section also outlines the responsibility of the National Transport Authority for securing public transport services in rural Ireland.

**Section 5: Development of Local Link** looks at the recent and planned future development of Local Link services especially in the context of the NTA's *Local Link Rural Transport Programme Strategic Plan 2018-2022*.

**Section 6: Local Link – Integration with other transport services** looks at the involvement of the Local Link offices in the development of relevant local and regional plans and strategies. This includes co-operation in the provision of bus stops and shelters in rural areas. The Section also examines integration with other State-funded transport services such as health related transport and the work of the National Integrated Rural Transport Committee in this area.

**Section 7: Population patterns and travel trends in rural areas** looks at population patterns in Ireland and the geographical distribution in urban and rural areas. It also looks at urban-rural differences in car ownership and commuter journeys.

**Section 8: Public transport in an ageing society** identifies the importance of public transport in Ireland as the population gradually gets older. It outlines details of a number of reports on the perceptions of public transport among older people in rural areas.

**Section 9: International case studies** looks at rural transport in a number of other countries. In order to get a broader understanding of some international experiences of rural public transport services, it combines research of international reports and studies as well as information provided by other countries. The Section explores the comparisons which can be drawn between Ireland and other countries including the challenges to providing rural transport.

## **1.2 Purpose of the background paper**

The purpose of this background paper is to outline the provision of public transport services in rural areas, with a special focus on the development of “Local Link” services, under the Rural Transport Programme (RTP).

For the purposes of this paper, public transport includes rail and bus services, both public and private, and small public service vehicles such as taxis. Other forms of transport services which target specific groups, e.g. Health Service Executive (HSE) non-acute transport services are considered to be closed or specialist type transport services rather than public transport services. Some of these services are discussed in terms of the potential for their integration with Local Link services.

The main analysis Sections of the paper correspond to one of the following four broad categories:

- Background information on public transport services in rural Ireland
- Overview of Local Link services
- Integration of Local Link services
- Domestic and international examples of rural public transport services

The potential for public transport to address the wide array of transport needs in rural areas it clearly offers in urban areas is constrained by the impact of the very different population densities these two types of areas have on the potential level of patronage and the distances involved. Consequently, there is an impact on the potential efficiency and cost and benefits of public transport service/systems.

In urban areas, there is congestion, with its impacts on quality of life, economic cost and local air quality and public transport can reduce those problems. In rural areas, the use of private transport does not create the same issues it does in urban/built up areas.

The context for transport in urban and rural areas differs. The question is what is the best approach to providing appropriate levels of service across the country.

## **1.3 Rural public transport data**

The National Transport Authority (NTA), which is a statutory body operating under the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (DTTAS), has been assigned national responsibility for integrated local and rural transport, including management of the RTP. This paper draws on material provided by the NTA in relation to the role and operation of the Local Link services which are funded under the RTP. It also includes information on the provision of public transport in rural areas from a number of other jurisdictions.

## 2 What is meant by rural transport?

### 2.1 Introduction

This Section sets out the Central Statistics Office's definition of "rural" and rural population trends. It describes why rural transport is important in Ireland and internationally as a means of reducing social inclusion and improving quality of life. The Section also focuses on the barriers and challenges to providing rural transport which have been identified internationally.

### 2.2 What is meant by "rural"?

Before looking at the topic of rural transport, it is worth briefly considering the scope of the term "rural". The Central Statistics Office (CSO) defines a settlement of fewer than 1,500 people as "rural". In 2016, 37% of Ireland's population lived in settlements of fewer than 1,500 people or in individual houses in rural areas<sup>2</sup>.

The *National Planning Framework (NPF)*<sup>3</sup> recognises the contribution of rural areas to Ireland's identity and to overall national development in economic, social, cultural and environmental terms. The *NPF* states that "*there are many towns and villages with populations of more than 1,500 people that are intrinsic to sustaining viable rural communities and do not function independent of their rural hinterland.*" It also notes that "*there is a distinction between rural areas located within the commuter catchment of the five city regions and large towns and those that are outside commuter catchments*".

### 2.3 Why is rural transport important?

#### 2.3.1 Ireland

In Ireland, the importance of transport is regarded as a key determinant in combating social exclusion as well as enabling access to health and social services, education, and employment opportunities. The lack of availability of public transport significantly diminishes the quality of life for people who are heavily dependent on it.

The *Action Plan for Rural Development (2017)* notes that providing high quality, interconnected rural transport is key to the realisation of the inherent social and economic potential of rural areas in Ireland. An improved transport system will have positive influences for rural communities and business by reducing travel time and business costs.

The 2010 Oireachtas Committee *Report on Rural Transport Provision*<sup>4</sup> pointed out that improved rural transport provision can help:

- Reduce social inclusion;
- Improve people's quality of life (including mental health);
- Strengthen social networks, reduce isolation and prevent social segregation;
- Reduce the burden of care on families;
- Allow people to shop in their local communities;
- Keep rural life alive and generates better levels of security in people's lives.

### 2.3.2 International

A 2015 report by the European Parliament<sup>5</sup> noted that problems of poor access to transport are particularly severe in rural, mountainous and remote areas, where a “circle of decline” is observed. It considered that this was driven by a number of interacting factors that can impede local development and employment and make it difficult to establish sustainable basic services. The report found that the provision of public transport services to these areas enables the local population to retain their independence and access basic services and facilities, limiting the risk of depopulation.

A 2016 Parliamentary Report in New South Wales, Australia<sup>6</sup> on access to transport in rural areas, noted that poor transport can have a significant impact on people's quality of life, especially for disadvantaged groups. For people living in rural areas, the report found that poor transport limits their ability to do basic tasks for example, shopping, banking or going to the doctor. This can result in isolation from their communities as well as limiting their chances of finding employment and attending education.

## 2.4 Barriers and challenges in the provision of rural transport

The barriers and challenges in the provision of public transport services generally, and particularly in rural areas, have been well documented. Likewise, the difficulties of social exclusion/inclusion and transport disadvantage have been similarly documented.

In 1985, the then Department of Transport (officially named the Department of Communications), in the *Transport Policy Green Paper*<sup>7</sup>, stated that one of the biggest challenges facing the Government was determining the minimum level of mobility it should be providing to people living in rural areas. The paper concluded that innovative methods for providing rural transport which are frequent, reliably and comfortable and economic in terms of the burden on the Exchequer were required.

Demand for travel is largely dictated by the relationship between the location of origins and destinations, where people live and where they need to go for their daily needs, accessing work, health facilities, education, shops, visiting friends and family. In general, there is a strong relationship between public transport usage and population density.

Land-use patterns in Ireland are dominated by low to medium density development in suburban areas, highly dispersed rural populations and the growth in peripheral development of services and employment. This settlement and employment locational context, which dictates travel demand, is difficult to serve by public transport. In very isolated rural areas the demand for travel may not support the provision of bus services but may have to be met by local hackney services or community car schemes where they exist.

The main barriers to the provision of public transport services in rural areas which have been identified internationally include:

- Lack of co-operation between the different responsible authorities, including in relation to funding.

- Distance from towns and services leading to poor provision of, and access to, services.
- Legal and regulatory frameworks being primarily geared towards conventional public passenger transport whereas innovative transport services can be neglected. This is especially relevant in rural areas with dispersed population where it is difficult to provide cost-effective conventional public transport.
- Poor and inflexible image.
- Lack of Information about the (often limited) services which might be available.
- Lower quality of transport infrastructure.
- Cost of public transport.

The barriers and challenges for the provision of rural transport were summed up by the European Union's (EU) Actions on the integration of Rural Transport Services (ARTS) *Rural Transport Newsletter No. 1*<sup>8</sup>. This noted that low population density in rural areas is one reason for poor demand and prevents the cost effective operation of existing public transport services. A further problem identified for public transport in rural areas was the on average low-income of people living in these areas and that the people who need transport most can least afford it.

## 2.5 Transport disadvantage in rural areas

Similar to the term "rural", the term "transport disadvantage" has many definitions. Transport disadvantage can be defined as a set of circumstances whereby those affected have limited or no access to public transport and have difficulties accessing conventional transport services<sup>9</sup>. "Transport disadvantage" has two aspects: inadequate public transport for people who do not have licenses or access to a car; and the financial burden of car costs for those who are forced to have cars due to poor public transport.

The 2010 Joint Oireachtas Committee's *Report on Rural Transport Provision* noted that poor rural transport can be wide ranging and can affect the following areas:

- Jobs, education and often school activities;
- Healthcare;
- Social and leisure activities;
- Confidential advice and specialist support;
- Food shopping.

In its 2016 report, Irish Rural Link, a non-profit organisation campaigning for sustainable rural development in Ireland, stated that the lack of transport puts pressure on rural residents as it reduces their ability to access services and employment<sup>10</sup>. These issues have a negative impact on their social lives and mental health due to social isolation, particularly for vulnerable groups.

## 2.6 Social exclusion in rural areas

Social exclusion can occur when an area or group of people experience a combination of linked problems, such as unemployment, low education, low incomes and poor housing and are subsequently pushed to the margins of society<sup>11</sup>. These problems can distance them from jobs,

income and education opportunities and as well as social networks. It can also result in little access to power and decision-making bodies and a reduced chance of influencing policies that affect them<sup>12</sup>.

The right to have access to the services and amenities that enable people to participate fully in society is essential. Given that rural areas are characterised by people and services often being some distance from each other, it is no surprise that substantial problems related to accessibility may be found in rural locations. Although the majority of the population are car owning, there remain significant non-mobile groups. A 2017 report by Kilkenny LEADER Partnership found that people most at risk of social isolation and who rely on public transport services in rural areas are: older people; people who have disabilities; people on low incomes and young people<sup>13</sup>. Therefore, limited or non-existent public transport in rural areas have direct effects on people's ability to access employment, education, healthcare and other essential services and further increases their experiences of marginalisation.

**Section 2 key points:**

- In 2016, 37% of Ireland's population lived in settlements of fewer than 1,500 people or in individual houses in rural areas.
- The provision of public transport in rural areas plays a critical role in addressing "quality of life" concerns, providing access to services and combatting social exclusion.
- Internationally, the barriers to the provision of public transport in rural areas are similar and Ireland is broadly no different to elsewhere.
- Public transport is a key element for both economic development and social inclusion in rural areas, and in particular for disadvantaged members of society in rural areas.

## 3 Existing policy context

### 3.1 Introduction

This Section sets out the existing policy context relevant to public transport in rural areas in Ireland. It also looks at a number of key reports which examined the provision of public transport services in rural Ireland.

### 3.2 Programme for a Partnership Government

The Programme for a Partnership Government recognises the value and benefit of rural transport to many communities, in particular for older people vulnerable to social isolation. It commits to examine how best to improve integration of services in the rural bus network within regions, including public buses, school transport and the HSE transport networks. These commitments are being examined in the context of the policy review of sustainable mobility.

### 3.3 Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport

The Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (DTTAS) has responsibility for national transport policy. In its Statement of Strategy 2014-2019<sup>14</sup> which will be updated in 2019, the DTTAS' high level goal for land transport is "to best serve the needs of society and the economy through safe, sustainable and competitive transport networks and services." In order to achieve this goal, the DTTAS' objectives are to enhance land transport services and investment; promote and advance safety on the transport network; and promote better sustainability in land transport. The Statement of Strategy recognises that many of the DTTAS' spending and investment decisions have lasting implications for Ireland's societal and economic development. It also acknowledges the strong linkages with other important Government policy areas.

### 3.4 Project Ireland 2040 – Building Ireland's Future

In 2018, the Government launched *Project Ireland 2040*<sup>15</sup> which comprises the *National Planning Framework (NPF) to 2040* and the *National Development Plan (NDP) 2018-2027*. It sets out the Government's vision for how to develop the country over the coming decades. The *NPF* sets out the spatial strategy for Ireland to accommodate, in a sustainable and balanced way, the projected demographic change. The *NDP* sets out the infrastructure investment priorities that will underpin the implementation of the *NPF* over the next ten years. The Government has set out 10 National Strategic Outcomes which are the shared benefits that will be experienced across the country as the *NPF* and *NDP* are implemented.

Some of the key objectives of the *NPF* are to regenerate rural Ireland by promoting environmentally sustainable growth patterns, and to transform settlements of all sizes through imaginative urban regeneration and bring life/jobs back into cities, towns and villages.

In relation to rural areas the *NPF* places a major focus on:

- Strengthening Ireland's rural fabric and supporting the communities who live there;

- Planning for the future growth and development of rural areas, including addressing decline, with a special focus on activating the potential for the renewal and development of smaller towns and villages;
- Putting in place planning and investment policies to support job creation in the rural economy;
- Addressing connectivity gaps;
- Better coordination of existing investment programmes dealing with social inclusion, rural development and town and village renewal.

Under the *NDP*, investment of €8.6 billion is being prioritised to sustainable mobility nationally over the period 2018-2027. Transport investment under the *NDP* in regional and local roads is estimated at €4.5 billion with indicative funding of €6.6 billion for strategic investment priorities for national roads. This is important given the sharp disparity between urban and rural areas in terms of car ownership and further details on this are set out in Section 7. The Rural Regeneration and Development Fund of €1 billion has been established under the *NDP*. The Fund presents an opportunity for relevant agencies to apply for co-funding for suitable investment projects in towns and villages with a population of less than 10,000 and outlying areas, including sustainable mobility related projects.

While there is capital investment for public transport in rural communities under the *NDP*, it recognises that the main emphasis for investment in these areas is operational funding for Public Service Obligation (PSO) services in rural areas and Local Link services. This investment will continue over the lifetime of the *NDP*.

### 3.5 Realising Our Rural Potential – Action Plan for Rural Development<sup>16</sup>

*Realising Our Rural Potential - Action Plan for Rural Development*, which was launched by the Government in 2017, aims to unlock the enormous potential of Ireland’s rural communities to improve the lives of those living and working in rural areas.

Through a framework of supports at national and local level, the *Action Plan* takes a coordinated approach across Government to both the economic and social development of rural Ireland. The *Plan* covers a three-year period and contains a series of time-bound actions which are monitored and reported on regularly. The *Plan* is based around 5 Pillars:

1. Supporting Sustainable Communities;
2. Supporting Enterprise and Employment;
3. Maximising our Rural Tourism and Recreation Potential;
4. Fostering Culture and Creativity in Rural Communities; and
5. Improving Rural Infrastructure and Connectivity.

The *Plan* recognises that the provision of a high quality, inter-connected system of transport in rural Ireland is key to the realisation of the inherent social and economic potential which exists in rural areas. The fourth progress report for the Action Plan was published in June 2019<sup>17</sup>.

Pillar 5 contains actions relating to public transport, the Rural Transport Programme (RTP), air travel and transport solutions aimed at improving transport connectivity between rural areas, local population centres, cities and international destinations. Of these actions six are specific to public and rural transport, as can be seen in Table 3.1.

**Table 3.1: Action plans for rural transport in the RTP**

No.	Action	Timeline	Responsible Bodies
251	Conduct a full review of public transport policy, including the rural transport dimension, to ensure that it meets the needs of rural communities.	2017	DTTAS, NTA
252	Work with rural communities to assess and implement improvements to existing rural transport routes and develop new rural transport routes as necessary.	On-going	NTA
253	Rollout a programme of awareness of the Rural Transport Programme among rural communities.	On-going	NTA
254	Ensure that RTP vehicles are accessible, having regard to all passenger needs.	On-going from 2017	NTA
255	Examine the potential for integration of HSE non-emergency transport services with rural transport services.	On-going	NTA, HSE
257	Conduct a review of the small public service vehicle driver licensing framework to ensure the availability of taxi/hackney services including rural areas.	2017	DTTAS, NTA

## 3.6 Public transport in rural areas – research in Ireland

### 3.6.1 *Sustaining Viable Rural Communities (2017) Joint Committee on CHG*<sup>18</sup>

This report, produced by the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, considered issues in relation to public transport in rural areas, including:

- Creation of transport strategies for specific regional areas (similar to the NTA’s *Transport Strategy for the Greater Dublin Area 2016-2035*<sup>19</sup>);
- Potential amendment of the functions of the NTA relating to regional development;
- A need to support more on-demand, flexible, imaginative solutions to rural transport;
- A more regular, service-focused (rather than demand-focused only) rural transport service;
- The transfer of the RTP to the Department of Rural and Community Development;
- Whether the RTP itself required amendment;
- Greater publicity of the Local Link services to increase public awareness of the services offered.

### **3.6.2 Energising Ireland's Rural Economy (2014) CEDRA<sup>20</sup>**

The Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas (CEDRA) was established in 2012 by the then Department of Environment, Community and Local Government and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. The group consisted of a range of experts in both rural and economic development who were tasked with identifying strategic initiatives that would ensure rural areas contribute to national economic growth and development. The CEDRA Report was published in April 2014. The priority recommendation made by CEDRA was the need for a coordinated approach to rural development across Government, led by a Cabinet Minister.

In relation to public transport in rural areas, the Commission supported the Government's initiative to improve and integrate the Rural Transport Programme into the overall public transport system and recommended ongoing and comprehensive monitoring of the programme to ensure that it meets the transport needs of rural Ireland going forward.

The Government's 2017 *Action Plan for Rural Development*, referred to earlier, builds on and goes further than the CEDRA report recommendations. The plan seeks to address not just the economic development of rural areas, but also seeks to support the social and cultural development of rural communities across the country.

### **3.6.3 Report on rural transport provision (2010) Joint Committee on ASTCR&G**

The report, referred to earlier in Section 2, was produced by the then Joint Oireachtas Committee on Arts, Sports Tourism, Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. It made a number of recommendations including:

- An effective integrated rural transport policy should be agreed beginning with a 5-year Rural Transport Programme.
- The establishment of a specific statutory authority responsible for the delivery of a sustainable Rural Transport Programme.
- Meet the needs of particularly vulnerable groups including:-
  - Providing vouchers to allow the elderly to more easily avail of private taxi services;
  - Re-deploying CIÉ school buses outside of their normal school-run periods.

Other points noted by the report included:

- Rural transport problems are not unique to Ireland.
- UK research shows transport as the single most important concern of rural dwellers. Transport is a major barrier to social inclusion in rural areas.
- Different rural communities have different transport needs.
- It is unlikely that door-to-door public transport service can be provided to every single household in rural areas. A combination of services at different levels of frequency is needed.
- Rural transport options are not confined to any one method of transport, but can be a mix of modes.

### **3.6.4 Towards a sustainable rural transport policy (2009) IRL-Comhar<sup>21</sup>**

Irish Rural Link (IRL) is a national network of organisations and individuals campaigning for sustainable rural development in Ireland and Europe. In 2009, IRL produced a report on the challenges to the delivery of sustainable rural transport. It noted that there is no 'one' solution to rural transport issues and that rural transport is a complex issue which is affected by other Government policies.

The report concluded that rural transport is a public good and therefore if examined purely from a private cost basis will always be uneconomic. It recognised that there are social benefits arising from better public transport provision in rural areas which include greenhouse gas emissions reduction, social inclusion, and rural development opportunities.

The report reasoned that it is unlikely that a door-to-door public transport service can be provided to every single household in rural areas and suggested that a combination of services at different levels of frequency is needed:

- High quality national transport services with pick-up points on national routes;
- Better integration of existing services (including bus stops with timetable information and Park and Ride facilities at pick-up nodes);
- Regular commuter services between towns and villages;
- Mobility management plans for work-places, schools and sporting activities.

It also considered that good quality information is needed to link transport systems and that local and regional authorities should have a role in transport planning.

### **3.6.5 Interdepartmental working group on rural transport (2001)<sup>22</sup>**

An Interdepartmental Working Group was set up in 2000 and chaired by the then Department of the Environment and Local Government. The Working Group was established to gather essential information in order to develop a more integrated national policy on rural transport. The Group carried out workshops in four pilot counties as part of the report. Some of the key findings included:

- A lack of information about existing scheduled services – especially by private operators;
- The important role of the community and voluntary sector in rural transport issues;
- The importance of planning and coordination;
- The need for door-to-door service for people with disabilities and older people;
- Problems of accessibility to public transport for people with disabilities; and
- The need to consider rural transport in the context of wider transport issues.

The report of the Working Group observed that:

- There is no one single delivery solution to rural transport in Ireland. Instead, a mix of solutions will apply to varying degrees both in individual counties and for individual groups.
- The need to link rural and other local transport services, with decisions about the location of housing, employment and services within counties. There was an explicit view

expressed that existing County Development Plans deal both with settlement patterns, and with the transport infrastructure network between these, thus making it a logical extension that it should also deal with the transport services utilising this transport infrastructure.

- While rural transport is an important contributor to easing rural isolation, it is not the only one.
- In relation to people with disabilities, this is an area of crucial national importance within social inclusion policy development.

### Section 3 key points

- An overarching policy on rural Ireland is now in place through the *Action Plan for Rural Development*.
- *Project Ireland 2040* places a major focus on rural areas with an emphasis on balanced regional development. Enhanced regional accessibility and strengthened rural economies and communities are amongst its key goals.
- The importance of land transport infrastructure and services to Ireland's economic and social development is recognised under *Project Ireland 2040*, and underpinned by almost €20 billion investment in sustainable mobility and roads projects under the *National Development Plan (NDP)*.
- More than €11 billion is earmarked for roads projects around the country under the *NDP* which is important given the high dependency on cars for mobility in rural areas.
- The main emphasis for investment in public transport in rural areas is current funding in subvention for services for the operation of Public Service Obligation routes in rural areas and the Local Link services under the Rural Transport Programme. This investment will continue over the lifetime of the *NDP*.
- The key issues emerging from the range of reports on rural communities and rural transport are:
  - There is a need for an integrated rural transport policy.
  - There is no 'one' solution to rural transport issues. A combination of services at different levels of frequency is needed.
  - There is a need to consider rural transport in the context of wider transport policy and other Government policies.
  - There is a need for good communication on the rural transport services available.
  - Meeting the needs of people with disabilities and older people is key in the delivery of rural transport.

## 4 Public transport services in rural Ireland

### 4.1 Introduction

Public transport in rural areas in Ireland is provided by way of bus and coach services primarily, with more limited rail and small public services vehicle (SPSV) services. This Section sets out details of the Local Link services funded under the Rural Transport Programme and an overview of other public transport provision in rural areas.

The National Transport Authority (NTA) has responsibility for securing the provision of public passenger land transport services. This includes the provision of subsidised bus and rail services by Bus Éireann, Dublin Bus and Iarnród Éireann, as well as a small number of private bus operators. The NTA also licences commercial public bus passenger services. It is also the regulator for the small public service vehicle sector (i.e. taxis, hackneys and limousines).

Each year, DTTAS provides funding for Public Service Obligation (PSO) bus and rail services, through the NTA. These are socially necessary but financially unviable public transport services. *EU Regulation 1370/2007*<sup>23</sup> creates the framework regulating how Member States award exclusive rights and pay compensation for PSO services by rail and by road. The purpose of the Regulation is to ensure transparency in the award of subvention for public transport services by requiring all PSO transport services to be subject to contracts. Further information on this issue is set out in *Background Paper 7: Regulation of Public Transport*. By definition, a PSO service is a service provided in cases where there is not enough revenue for routes to be profitable in a free market, but where there is a socially desirable advantage in this transport being available.

In 2019, the Irish Exchequer has allocated just over €300 million for PSO bus and rail services and Local Link services.

### 4.2 Local Link – RTP overview

The Rural Transport Programme (RTP), which is funded by DTTAS, developed out of the Rural Transport Initiative (RTI) 2002–2006. The RTI was a pilot project established to address issues of unmet transport needs from a social inclusion and community-based perspective. Pobal managed the RTI-RTP on behalf of DTTAS from 2002.

In 2006, the then Department of Transport commissioned Fitzpatrick Associates to provide a number of options for developing rural transport in Ireland. The consultants drew on the experience of the RTI pilot when formulating these options. The key findings identified by the Fitzpatrick Report were as follows<sup>24</sup>:

- Significant levels of unmet rural transport needs exist in rural areas, but particularly for certain key target groups;
- Social inclusion should be an important policy objective for rural transport policy;
- From a policy perspective, the need to establish “reasonable” rural passenger transport also has to balance both user needs and policy objectives against cost, management and delivery considerations;

- Transport services provided in rural areas need to be appropriate to the specific needs of people in rural areas, including the key target groups (e.g. by being accessible, demand-responsive);
- Delivering a mix of conventional and non-conventional services would provide an optimal solution in rural areas;
- The development of rural transport services needs to involve the local community, and it also needs the active involvement and co-operation of a variety of other key stakeholders.

The report identified lessons from the RTI pilot project that should be taken into consideration when further developing rural transport.

- **The importance of non-conventional services:** The RTI had pioneered a new kind of non-conventional rural transport service in Ireland. In particular, the door-to-door, semi-scheduled and-or fully demand-responsive nature of services had been a crucial success, which had given rural dwellers in key target groups a genuinely useful transport alternative;
- **Impact on quality of life:** The RTI had not just provided its users with a form of transport but had facilitated very real and tangible improvements in their quality of life, to the extent that it could be considered a social service as much as a transport service. This included reduced levels of isolation, greater opportunities for social interaction, improved levels of independence and self-sufficiency;
- **The benefit of a local approach:** The nature of the RTI had allowed for considerable local flexibility in deciding what type of service is appropriate to meeting the needs of a local area, and the direct involvement of the local community in the development of services had been crucial to this. This suggested that a “one size fits all” approach should not be applied across all of rural Ireland.

In 2007, the RTP was launched to build on the success of the RTI in accordance with the findings and lessons identified in the Fitzpatrick Report, and which would facilitate a gradual expansion of services that would develop over time into a comprehensive rural transport system.

The RTP was established to operate only in cases of market failure, in that services funded under the programme should complement and not compete with the existing public transport services provided either by CIÉ companies or by private transport operators.

Under the RTP, 35 Rural Transport Groups covering 36 geographical areas nationwide and managed mainly by voluntary management committees, were funded to deliver public transport services under the RTP. Each group identified demands for transport in its area and developed services accordingly.

#### **4.2.1 Value for Money and Policy Review (2011)<sup>25</sup>**

A *Value for Money and Policy Review* carried out on the RTP in 2011 found that the objectives (and principles for RTP groups) for implementation of the programme were aligned to the high-level policy objective of social inclusion. The review stated that a rationale for policy intervention to address unmet transport needs in rural areas under a social inclusion policy objective is supported

by the acknowledged market failure of public transport provision in rural areas. It further added that rural transport is a key consideration in a number of public policies for social inclusion, community and rural development, health and transport accessibility. It said that there is available evidence which suggests that there is a persistent problem of transport and access in rural areas for rural dwellers generally and in particular for older people.

Overall the findings of the review raised serious concerns over the value for money of the RTP. In particular, it identified the high administration costs of the programme and recommended organisational restructuring to achieve efficiencies in terms of both administration and operations.

#### **4.2.2 Restructuring of the RTP**

In 2012, following Government approval, national responsibility for integrated local and rural transport, including management of the RTP, was assigned to the NTA. This included responsibility for implementing the recommendations of the *Value for Money Review Report*.

A restructuring strategy for the RTP was launched by the NTA in July 2013. The objective of the restructuring was to protect the provision of rural transport services into the future. This would be achieved by ensuring a more efficient delivery structure that maximises integration with other State funded transport services and by making the programme a sustainable part of the public transport system. The restructuring strategy was also aimed at ensuring that the RTP operates within the appropriate regulatory framework, that the RTP services have a clear identity and that the Programme supports Government initiatives such as the *Action Plan for Rural Development*.

The restructuring programme resulted in the formation of 17 Transport Coordination Units (TCUs) from the 35 existing rural transport groups delivering RTP services up to that point. The 17 TCUs (recently consolidated to 15) have now been rebranded as “Local Link” offices. Essentially, the Local Link offices are hubs for local and community transport in their areas and the restructuring programme provides a solid base to expand and adapt services to meet current and future identified needs.

#### **4.2.3 Role of Local Link Offices**

The role of the Local Link offices includes the following:

- Manage the day to day requests for and delivery of public transport services;
- Report on transport service delivery and operator service performance;
- Ensure compliance with national legislation including in the areas of employment, health and safety, data protection, Children First and tax;
- Identify transport needs, including those at risk of social exclusion arising from transport deficits, and put forward plans to the NTA;
- Identify opportunities for improved coordination and integration of rural transport services with other public transport services; and
- Manage a voluntary community car scheme to meet rural transport needs.

#### **4.2.4 Governance**

The NTA works closely with Local Link offices to ensure that appropriate governance is in place. This ensures the implementation of all necessary procedures and controls to satisfy full compliance with all relevant regulations and law.

Local Link offices are independent charitable entities established for the prime purpose of serving their local community. They operate under the control of independent boards. Personnel are employed by the boards to carry out the necessary activities of the Local Link offices. The NTA contracts the management of rural transport services with the Local Link offices through a Grant Agreement. Under that Grant Agreement, the Local Link offices are obliged to comply with financial, governance and other guidelines from the NTA. The NTA applies a robust system of regular reporting by the Local Link offices. The reporting is based on an agreed programme of annual activities and related financial budgets. There is on-going communication with Local Link offices on an individual basis and regular meetings take place between NTA and Local Link offices as a group. In addition the NTA imposes a system of regular internal audit on the Local Link offices.

DTTAS has in place an annual Performance Delivery Agreement (PDA) with the NTA. This agreement specifies measurable targets, outputs and outcome indicators which supplements programme specific agreements with the NTA, including for the RTP.

#### **4.2.5 Procurement of Transport Coordination Units**

The 4-year grant agreements between the NTA and the TCUs expired recently. The NTA commenced a procurement process in September 2018 for the selection of TCUs to manage the delivery of Local Link services over the next four years, on behalf of the NTA. The procurement process was in line with EU and national procurement requirements, having regard in particular to changes in the EU procurement directives since 2014. It was open to all existing TCUs to tender for the new contracts. Arising from the procurement process the number of TCUs has reduced from 17 to 15. The NTA's 4-year contractual arrangement with the successful tenderers for the TCUs will run to end 2022. Review periods will be built into the contract. The TCU contracts focus solely on the management/administrative services provided by a TCU and do not include the provision of bus services funded under the RTP which are the subject of separate contracts between the NTA and bus operators.

#### **Local Link Mission statement**

The Local Link mission statement is '*to provide a quality nationwide community based public transport system in rural Ireland which responds to local needs*'. Its key priorities include the reduction of social exclusion and the integration of rural transport services with other public transport services.

#### 4.2.6 Local Link overview

The types of services that have traditionally been provided under Local Link are:

1. **Demand Responsive Transport (DRT)** – these services do not operate on a fixed route but respond to requests for services by passengers and operate by making specific trips to pick up and drop off passengers at the door. They can be operated by large public service vehicles, hackneys or community cars. Approximately 80% of the rural transport programme services are DRT services.
2. **Scheduled Fixed Transport** – services with a regular route, stopping places and timetable.
3. **Scheduled Flexible Transport** – timetabled regular departure points in either direction but deviates from route to pick up/set down passengers closer to their destinations.

The Programme also funds the provision of 'Once Off' trips for individuals and community/voluntary groups to help address the lack of transport as a factor in social exclusion.

Since 2016, the NTA in conjunction with the Local Link offices, has supported the expansion of Local Link services to include regular commuter bus services. Operating at least five times per day over a 5/6/7 day per week schedule, these services are specifically designed to ensure connectivity with other public transport services. This connectivity facilitates passengers to make onward journeys typically to access education/employment/health, recreational and other opportunities.

**Key features of Local Link services include<sup>26</sup>:**

- Completing 2 million passenger journeys per annum with 1 million of those journeys provided for Free Travel Passengers. These figures include 0.2 million passengers who required assistance.
- Providing an average of 0.15 million service trips annually.
- Travelling over 11.8 million kilometres annually.
- Over 400 private operators provide the services using almost 900 drivers.
- 80% of service trips are defined as either fully or partially accessible.

#### 4.2.7 Funding of Local Link services

Funding for rural transport increased incrementally during the pilot Rural Transport Initiative (2002 to 2006) from €3m in 2002, to over €5m in 2006, and increased to €9m with the launch of the Rural Transport Programme (RTP) in 2007. RTP funding increased to €11m in the years 2009 and 2010, and while funding for the Programme reduced by around 20% in the years 2011 to 2013, savings were made in the administrative costs of the Programme with minimal impact on services. From 2014 onwards funding levels have again increased which has enabled further development of Local Link services, including the development of new services. RTP funding amounts to €14.9m in 2019. In addition, PSO funding of over €6m is allocated for Local Link regular commuter services in 2019, bringing the total funding for Local Link services in 2019 to €21m.

Prior to the restructuring of the RTP, there were a number of funding streams supporting the provision of rural transport services. This has now been simplified to two main funding streams viz. funding through the NTA and the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP) funding under the Free Travel Scheme.

A number of Local Link offices provide transport services to other organisations such as the HSE and those services are funded separately by those organisations.

### **Free Travel Scheme**

The Free Travel Scheme funded and administered by DEASP is a benefit provided to all people living in the State aged 66 years or over. Some people under 66 who meet certain conditions also qualify. The DEASP provides a grant of €1.5m to the NTA as a contribution to the cost of Local Link services operating the free travel scheme. Further information on the Free Travel Scheme is included in *Background Paper 9: Statistics and Trends*.

#### **4.2.8 Procurement of services under Local Link**

The majority of Local Link services are provided under contract between the NTA and the operator. A retendering process of the existing 1,035 contracted services commenced in 2016 and, as of September 2019, 90% of services had been retendered. The pre-qualification process, where operators apply to be considered as potential service providers, was supported by the Office of Government Procurement and this process identified bus operators who would be eligible to tender for the operation of rural transport services.

### **Direct Award of Local Link Services**

The NTA currently has arrangements in place with six entities to which the NTA directly awards the provision of Local Link services under the *Dublin Transport Authority Act 2008*<sup>27</sup>. These entities (referred to as 'Direct Award' entities) provide rural transport services using their own bus fleet. The six entities comprise three Local Link offices which operate their own fleet of vehicles and three of the original 35 rural transport groups who also own their own vehicles.

They vary in size from a company with five buses in Sligo to a company in Meath (Flexibus) with about 20 buses, that have been providing services directly rather than by contracts with other operators. A total of 76 buses are involved and range in age up to 19 years. No replacement buses have been purchased in recent years by the fleet-owning companies due to a lack of funding. The companies had funded the purchase of vehicles from their own resources or through fund-raising, charitable donations or other funding. The current Direct Award entities pre-existed the restructuring programme. No new Direct Award entities have been formed and no expansion of bus fleets has taken place since NTA took over responsibility for the Rural Transport Programme in 2012.

The NTA is currently engaged in contractual negotiations with the six entities concerned in relation to entering into Direct Award contracts for a three year period from January 2020 to December 2022.

### 4.3 Bus Éireann PSO stage carriage services

Bus Éireann PSO services carried 35.2m passengers in 2018. This represents annual growth of almost 13% on 2017. The Bus Éireann (BÉ) subsidised services serve many rural towns with frequencies varying from several times a day to a weekly service.

BÉ provides bus services to rural areas predominantly through its stage carriage business, a network of subsidised public bus services run under a Direct Award contract with the NTA. Additionally, some rural areas are served by Bus Éireann's commercial Expressway services that are licensed by the NTA.

### 4.4 Bus Éireann Expressway

BÉ Expressway operates 18 routes on a commercial basis that do not receive a subsidy. BÉ Expressway services rural areas between stops on these routes such as the Dublin–Galway route.

By their nature, long distance inter-city services have a limited number of stopping points, usually in larger towns. The relevance to rural areas of these services lies mostly in their potential connection opportunities between rural areas and large towns and cities.

There has been some withdrawal of commercial services from rural towns as the cost of provision was greater than the revenue being accrued. However, in areas where commercial services have been withdrawn, the NTA has provided replacement services on a subsidised basis. The alternative services put in place were provided by a combination of:

- An extension of existing services provided by Bus Éireann under a Direct Award contract with the NTA;
- Newly procured services under contract to the NTA;
- New rural transport services contracted by the NTA and funded under the Rural Transport Programme.

### 4.5 Commercial (Private) bus services

Private bus operators also provide local and inter-town bus services in rural areas on a commercial basis (i.e. without a State subsidy). There are over 185 private operators who are running commercial routes some of which service rural areas. Under legislation, the NTA regulates competition in this sector in the public interest based on demand or potential demand for services.

### 4.6 Rail services

Iarnród Éireann provides rail services under contract with the NTA. Rail travel provides a vital link between rural areas and employment centres such as Dublin and the other cities. However, the majority of rural Ireland requires a journey by another mode to access a train station. Therefore the role of the existing rail network is not generally to provide local rural services but to provide

onward connections to key towns and cities. Total passenger journeys on the national rail network in 2018 were 48 million. This represents an annual increase of 5.4% from 2017.

Rail usage varies significantly across the nation. The *National Heavy Rail Census 2019*<sup>28</sup> gives an indication of the journey patterns across the network and is a good reference point for previous years' census data. Some key findings are as follows:

- The total patronage on the rail network on Census day was 178,058;
- Approximately 85% of daily journeys were undertaken in the Greater Dublin Area (GDA);
- 46% of all rail journeys nationally were on DART services;
- Regional services (i.e. those services that do not terminate in Dublin) combined passenger numbers accounted for only 2% of total passenger demand.

While there are a number of rural areas that are served by rail, the statistics above highlight that there is very little uptake of rail travel between these areas. Even though the rail network provides services from rural areas to employment centres, uptake on these services will remain low due to lack of proximity for most people, thus requiring another form of travel to simply reach the train stations.

## **4.7 Small Public Service Vehicle (SPSV) services**

SPSV services comprise six categories - taxi, wheelchair accessible taxi, hackney, wheelchair accessible hackney, limousines and local area hackney.

In 2018, there were 20,733 licensed SPSVs in operation. About half of these licences are based within Dublin. Across the full Greater Dublin Area (GDA), the number is 12,942 or 63% with the remaining 37% of taxis licensed outside of the GDA. Often taxi drivers will travel to urban areas to operate for business as demand there is generally higher. All this suggests that, as a component of the overall public transport offering, the level of taxis services across rural areas is lower than in areas of higher population density.

### **4.7.1 Local Area Hackney licence**

The *Taxi Regulation Review Group Report (2011)*<sup>29</sup> identified that the poor level of access to taxis and hackneys in rural areas was related to the economics of providing taxi or hackney services in these areas. It stated that given the level of taxis available nationally, it was likely that if the service was commercially viable it would be provided by the market. It noted that the limited nature of transport hiring activity in these areas meant that sufficient volume of business to justify the placement of a conventional taxi or hackney did not exist in many locations.

The Review Group recommended the introduction of a new 'Local Area Hackney Licence' for rural areas meeting certain criteria, with the objective of facilitating a low cost entry to the hackney market for transport provision in rural areas, that otherwise, would be unlikely to have such services.

The NTA introduced a Local Area Hackney Licence in 2013, features of which include: limited area of operation; drivers must be resident in local area; no SPSV Entry Test required (relating to area and industry knowledge) which applies to conventional taxi and hackney driver licences; low licence fees; and the vehicle standards are less than those required for general SPSV licences. Under the applicable legislation, the NTA is permitted to grant a licence if it is satisfied that the public transport needs of the area can only be met through the granting of a local area hackney licence.

There has, however, been very limited uptake of this initiative with only 10 Local Area Hackney licences currently active nationwide. The key barriers to entry to the scheme have been identified as the cost of insurance and the level of bureaucracy in the application process. While car insurance costs are more or less the same for all taxi and hackney drivers, the opportunity for recovering this cost is limited for local area hackney drivers, given the restricted area within which these drivers are permitted to operate (5-7km from the licence holder's normal residence) and the associated low customer base.

The NTA recently announced plans for piloting some arrangements that could help to address these barriers to the provision of needed services. These plans are outlined in Section 5.4.1.

#### **Section 4 key points**

- Public transport in rural areas in Ireland is provided by way of bus and coach services primarily with more limited rail and Small Public Service Vehicles (SPSV) services.
- The Rural Transport Programme (RTP) was launched in 2007 to address issues of unmet transport needs from a social inclusion and community-based perspective. The programme was developed from the pilot Rural Transport Initiative 2002-2006.
- The RTP was established to operate only in cases of market failure, in that RTP services funded should complement and not compete with the existing public transport services provided either by CIÉ companies or private operators.
- A 2011 Value for Money and Policy Review of the RTP identified the high administration costs of the programme and recommended organisational restructuring to achieve administrative and operational efficiencies.
- In 2012, national responsibility for integrated local and rural transport, including management of the RTP, was assigned to the NTA.
- The NTA launched a restructuring strategy for the RTP in 2013. This resulted in the formation of 17 Transport Coordination Units (TCU) from the 35 existing rural transport groups delivering RTP services. The TCUs have been rebranded as 'Local Link' offices.
- Arising from a recent procurement process the number of TCUs has reduced to 15. The Local Link offices manage day-to-day requests for and delivery of rural transport needs; report on the performance of these services, maintain compliance with national legislation and identify rural transport needs and opportunities.

#### Section 4 key points

- The RTP provides approximately 2 million passenger journeys each year.
- DTTAS funding for the RTP has increased in recent years with €21 million being provided in 2019.
- Outside of Local Link services, Bus Éireann provides bus services in rural areas through its subsidised stage carriage services and its commercial Expressway inter-city services.
- Commercial private bus operators also provide local and inter-town bus services in rural areas.
- Rail travel has a role in providing a vital link between rural areas and employment centres. The majority of rural Ireland requires a journey by another mode to access a train station.
- Only 37% of taxis in the country are licensed outside of the GDA.
- There has been a very limited uptake of Local Hackney Area licence mainly due to the high cost of vehicle insurance and the application process.

## 5 Development of Local Link

### 5.1 Introduction

This Section looks at the recent and planned future development of Local Link services especially in the context of the NTA's 5-year Strategic Plan.

### 5.2 Local Link Strategic Plan 2018-2022<sup>30</sup>

The NTA published its *Local Link Rural Transport Programme Strategic Plan 2018 to 2022* in March 2018. It is the NTA's first strategic plan for the RTP and it sits within the overarching framework of the NTA's Statement of Strategy 2018–2022. Under the *Strategy*, the key objectives for Local Link services are to continue to address rural social exclusion and the integration of rural transport services with other public transport services.

The main aim of the *Strategic Plan* over the next five years is to move the RTP from its restructuring phase to a period of further growth and development. The *Plan* identifies nine priority themes for the RTP over the period:

1. Sustaining the Rural Transport Programme
2. Route Development and Expansion
3. Integration with other Statutory Services
4. Accessibility of Services
5. Access for All
6. Ensuring the Rural Transport Programme delivers optimum Customer Experience
7. Children and Young People
8. Encouraging Innovation in Rural Transport Provision
9. Monitoring Progress of the Rural Transport Programme

The strategy contains key objectives and actions which address these priority areas.

### 5.3 Expansion of Local Link services

#### 5.3.1 Route development

From the early days of the Rural Transport Initiative, the level of services provided has risen significantly, with the number of passenger journeys increasing from 151,000 in 2003 to 2 million in 2018.

One of the key actions in the NTA's *Strategic Plan* under Priority Area 2 – Route Development and Expansion – is to ensure that each Local Link Office is directly involved with their local authority in the development of relevant plans/strategies, with particular note to be paid to the preparation of Local Transport Plans as it is evident that gaps remain in the provision of rural transport services across the State. Pursuant to this all Local Link offices have been establishing the unmet demand in their areas and putting forward plans to the NTA for new services to meet that demand.

While the delivery of Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) services remains the cornerstone of the RTP, in some areas, a local demand has been identified for higher frequency scheduled services. In 2016, with an increase in Local Link funding from DTTAS, 21 new regular commuter bus services were secured in the network following considerable development work by the NTA and the Local Link offices in Cavan-Monaghan, Donegal, Meath, Kerry, Waterford, Wexford and Sligo-Leitrim-Roscommon. These include the introduction of regular 5/6/7 day per week bus services.

More of this type of network development took place in 2017. Additional funding allocated to Local Link in 2017 enabled further improvements to existing services and the development of new routes. The Local Link offices continued to develop and enhance both DRT and scheduled services throughout the year. In total 27 new routes were developed with the Local Link offices in Carlow-Kilkenny-Wicklow, Cavan-Monaghan, Cork, Donegal, Kerry, Kildare, Laois-Offaly, Louth-Meath-Fingal, Sligo-Leitrim-Roscommon, Tipperary, Waterford and Wexford.

New regular scheduled Local Link services were launched in 2018 in Donegal, Sligo, Galway, Waterford, Cavan, Monaghan, Offaly and Kerry. Two new regular scheduled services were launched in the first half of 2019 in Limerick and Wicklow.

In total 66 new services have been introduced since 2016. Key features of these developments include greater integration with existing public transport services and better linkage of services between towns and villages. The development of core services to support initiatives aimed at the elimination of social exclusion in rural areas is a key consideration in all proposals.

### **5.3.2 New Local Link night services**

The Minister of Transport, Tourism and Sport met with key stakeholders in late 2017 to look at possible ways to address rural social isolation. The Minister then asked the NTA to examine the potential to extend existing RTP services into the evenings.

Based on feedback received from Local Link offices, the NTA issued a funding call for applications from all Local Link offices to deliver a range of pilot evening and night time services. The applications received were assessed by the NTA having regard to the following criteria:

- Evidence of need;
- Previous experience in delivering evening and night time services;
- Value for money;
- Geographical spread on a national basis;
- Range and mix of proposed modes of transport; and
- Connectivity/Integration with existing transport options whilst not representing a displacement risk to existing services
- Potential for mainstreaming of pilot projects

These new services, which are a mixture of extensions to existing services and demand responsive services, have been operating on a pilot basis since summer 2018 and 59 services are continuing until the end of 2019.

### **5.3.3 “Once-off” community transport services**

A need was identified during the review of routes process in 2016, for community transport services targeting the needs of specific service users from a social inclusion perspective, that are time bound and not repetitive.

The NTA provided funding of €250,000 to Local Link offices in 2016 for “Once-off” Community Transport Services across a number of categories viz. age-related, youth, integration & culture and education. A broad range of innovative rural transport services were funded under this scheme in 2016, 2017 and 2018 for this purpose and again in 2019.

### **5.3.4 Local Link and Fáilte Ireland partnership**

In 2018, Donegal Local Link and Fáilte Ireland announced a collaborative partnership aimed at improving public transport links between key attractions, while also promoting Local Link services on a county level. This new partnership presents opportunities to support the Wild Atlantic Way initiative and in turn support existing Local Link services on the Wild Atlantic Way.

## **5.4 Pilot initiatives to improve rural transport provision**

Although Dublin and most of the counties with cities are relatively well served by small public service vehicles (SPSVs), in rural counties without major urban areas, service provision is relatively poor. Ireland has one of the most dispersed populations in the EU and the population densities in some parts of rural Ireland are insufficient to support full-time taxi services.

The NTA recognises that there are gaps in the provision of taxis and hackneys in many rural communities. To address this, the NTA has developed two pilot schemes that will be both implemented in each of the 15 Local Link office areas later this year.

### **5.4.1 Pilot Local Area Hackney Licence Scheme**

The background to the introduction of a Local Area Hackney Licence in 2013 is set out in Section 4. Since its introduction, the take-up of the Local Area Hackney Licence has been low despite incentives such as reduced costs and lower standards that must be met compared to regular taxi or hackney operations.

To address the key barriers identified to entry to the scheme viz. the cost of insurance and the level of bureaucracy in the application process, it was announced in May 2019 that the NTA planned to:

- Simplify the administration involved in the Local Area Hackney application process; and
- Pilot a number of hackney services that will receive grant-aid in areas that have no hackney or taxi service operating currently.

There will be one pilot project in each of the 15 Local Link Office areas. The NTA launched the pilot scheme in August 2019, seeking applications for the provision of the local area hackney service in each of the 15 designated areas nationwide. The pilot specifically relates to those areas where a full time taxi or hackney service does not appear to be viable. The 15 designated areas are:

- Cork, Adrigole
- Donegal, Lettermacaward
- Galway, Dunmore
- Kerry, Glencar
- Kildare, Kilberry
- Kilkenny, Windgap
- Laois, Shanahoe
- Limerick, Martinstown/Ballinvrena
- Longford, Cullyfad
- Mayo, Louisburgh
- Meath, Cormeen
- Monaghan, Newbliss
- Tipperary, Annacarty
- Waterford, Knockanore
- Wexford, Ballyfad

Under the pilot scheme, the NTA is offering grant funding of €6,000 to individual drivers over a twelve month period. This funding is designed to contribute towards the costs associated with providing the service. Details of the scheme are available at [www.DLAH.ie](http://www.DLAH.ie)

The pilot scheme seeks to simplify the application process and make the provision of a service in rural areas sustainable. The pilot will enable the NTA to test this operational model and will help inform the NTA's local transport plans over the next five years.

#### **5.4.2 Pilot Community Transport Service Scheme**

The Rural Transport Programme was built on the principle of communities taking a central role in identifying and meeting their own needs. Like other jurisdictions, Ireland recognises the important role played by volunteers and collective community action.

The second pilot scheme which the NTA is planning to implement later this year is aimed at supporting the introduction of a Community Transport Service in each of the 15 Local Link Office areas. This initiative will see the NTA offering grant funding to each of the fifteen Community Transport Service projects, at a cost of €5,000 per project over a twelve month period.

A Community Transport Service, as defined under the *Taxi Regulation Act 2013*<sup>31</sup>, is a transport service provided:

- (i) by a person concerned for the social and welfare needs of one or more communities;

- (ii) without financial gain for the person providing the service or another, and
- (iii) where the payment for a journey or in respect of passengers using the service does not exceed the cost of providing the services in respect of the journey.

Such a service may be granted an exemption from the requirement to be a licenced SPSV driver on application to the NTA. The grant aid under the pilot is designed to provide a contribution towards the overall costs of running the service. The provision of this funding should enable community services to be provided where they would otherwise be unsustainable.

## 5.5 Accessibility of Local Link services

As the NTA's *Strategic Plan* points out, the benefits of improved transport accessibility extend to all transport users, not just people with disabilities. A significant proportion of the population will experience disability at some stage in their lives, particularly as the population ages. Many accessibility issues relevant to people with disabilities are similar to those relating to older people.

In relation to vehicles used in the provision of Local Link services, the NTA's objective is to achieve at least 95% fully accessible trips by 2020 as set out in Priority Area 5 – Access for All – of their *Strategic Plan*.

Vehicles currently used in the provision of Local Link services provide a high level of accessibility for passengers. The NTA has invested in improving the wheelchair lifts on the vehicles of fleet owning 'Direct Award' entities. The recent re-tendering process of the existing 1,035 Local Link services includes a provision that all services must be fully wheelchair accessible within 2 years of contract award.

The DRT services provided by Local Link provide a high level of support to the public. There are also a number of other "whole-of-Government" strategies which include specific accessibility commitments relating to either the Rural Transport Programme/ Local Link services or to the provision of public transport services and infrastructure in rural areas. These include, but are not limited to, the *National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021*<sup>32</sup>, the *Comprehensive Employment Strategy (CES) for People with Disabilities 2015-2024*<sup>33</sup>, and the *National Positive Ageing Strategy*<sup>34</sup> (NPAS). Further information on this issue is included in *Background Paper 1: Public Transport and Accessibility*.

There are 5 specific commitments relating to Local Link services in the DTTAS Accessibility Work Programme, namely Actions 21-25 as set out in Table 5.1.

**Table 5.1: DTTAS Accessibility Work Programme**

No.	Action	Strategy Action comes from	Who	When
21	Develop the concept of <b>car-sharing</b> beyond the car sharing website and voluntary car schemes that currently exist and tailor that provision for those with a disability.	CES Action 2.11	NTA	Q4 2015
22	Develop the model of <b>door-to-door community transport</b> provision that is currently being provided in isolated rural areas.	CES Action 5.4	NTA	Cont.
23	Ensure that <b>Rural Transport Programme</b> vehicles are accessible, having regard to all passenger needs.	APRD Action 245	NTA	Cont. from 2017
24	Maintain and integrate the <b>Rural Transport Programme</b> with other local transport services as much as is practicable.	NPAS Action 1.5	DTTAS	Cont.
25	Enhanced availability of <b>local and rural</b> transport services for all.	DTTAS Sectoral Plan Action 15	DTTAS	Cont.

### Case Study of accessible public transport services – Local Link Cork

The mission statement of Local Link Cork is to:

- Provide safe accessible rural community transport in Cork prioritising older people, youth and people with disabilities;
- Provide a mechanism for enhanced coordination of existing transport services;
- Develop a social enterprise where community transport is provided and delivered more efficiently and cost effectively at a local level.

Local Link Cork employs up to 35 staff including administration, drivers, passenger assistants and supported employment positions.

Local Link Cork is well placed to meet accessibility needs through adaptive fleet management. By the use of a flexible fleet with various wheelchair lift options, it maximises the catchment population's service that needs accessible vehicles through a combination of door to door and vehicle compatible service delivery.

Accessibility is not just about the physical infrastructure of accessing vehicles. Through intense training of staff and passenger assistants, the Local Link Cork ensures that passengers have a team of staff to support their access needs and can manage their transport in a dignified manner.

## **5.6 Improving customer experiences of Local Link services**

### **5.6.1 Local Link branding and marketing**

Under Priority Area 6 of its *Strategic Plan*, the NTA commits to continued investment in promotional/marketing campaigns to support both new and existing Local Link services at local, regional and national level, under the Local Link and Transport for Ireland brands.

The NTA's aim in developing the 'Local Link' brand for the RTP is to create a standardised and recognisable brand for RTP services nationally and at local level. The Local Link brand was formally launched at the 2017 National Ploughing Championships. Local Link marketing and brand guidelines have been developed by the NTA and rolled out to the 15 Local Link offices. There is now a standardised approach to the presentation of logos, timetables and route information leaflets, as well as the branding of buses.

A key objective for the NTA is that local communities are aware of the rural transport services provided in their area. As new services are developed, the NTA and the Local Link offices arrange media advertising to promote new and existing services. This includes local advertising through leaflets, press coverage, local radio coverage and in some cases television coverage.

### **5.6.2 Technology supporting Local Link services**

Since the NTA assumed management of the RTP, there has been significant investment in technology to develop an Integrated Transport Management System (ITMS). A working group including representatives from the Local Link offices worked with the NTA in the development of the ITMS to provide a centralised system for the scheduling of routes and booking of passengers on services. Further work in the development of the system continues, including the rollout of a Driver App designed to improve Data Protection while simultaneously enabling drivers to move from written records to on-line recording of journey details, passenger numbers etc. This App replaces the 'Driver Log' that presented both a data breach risk and was vulnerable to recording errors.

The Transport for Ireland (TFI) National Journey Planner is a door to door journey planner that provides service information, directions, and time estimates for taking a journey on all public transport providers across Ireland. The Journey Planner can be used through the online TFI journey planner or through the TFI Journey Planner App. It provides plans for trains, buses, Luas, ferry and taxi services and combines them into easy to read journey plans. The NTA National Journey Planner has been updated to include Local Link routes, including new routes.

### Case Study in the use of technology – Local Link Louth Meath Fingal (LMF)

Local Link LMF employs up to 55 staff including administration, drivers, passenger assistants, supported employment positions and more.

Local Link LMF has a well-established record of using technology to provide efficient and effective community transport. They have experimented with various “off-the-shelf” systems but have progressed to a bespoke Community Transport system. This system is a combination of fleet management and booking systems. The system includes the use of both on-board App technology and maintenance management. Their system incorporates Health and Safety controls and operates in conjunction with the NTA’s Integrated Transport Management System.

### Section 5 key points

- The NTA’s first *Local Link Rural Transport Programme Strategic Plan* is operating from 2018 to 2022.
- The 5-year strategy identifies 9 priority themes and its main aim is to move the RTP from its restructuring phase to a period of further growth and development.
- The Local Link offices have been establishing the unmet demand in their areas and putting forward plans to the NTA for new services to meet that demand. In total, 66 new regular commuter services have been introduced since 2016.
- The NTA also provides funding since 2016 for “once-off” Community Transport Services across a number of categories.
- In 2018, Donegal Local Link and Fáilte Ireland announced a collaborative partnership aimed at improving public transport links between key tourist attractions, while also promoting Local Link services on a county level.
- In summer 2018, a number of pilot evening and night time Local Services were introduced to address rural social isolation. These new services are a mixture of extensions to existing services and demand responsive services and 59 services are continuing until the end of 2019.
- The NTA aims to ensure that at least 95% of Local Link trips are fully accessible by 2020.
- There has been significant investment in recent years in technology to develop an Integrated Transport Management System for Local Link.
- The NTA recently announced a pilot scheme to grant aid a small number of local area hackney services in areas that have no hackney or taxi service operating currently and to simplify the application process.

## **6 Local Link – Integration with other transport services**

### **6.1 Introduction**

This Section looks at the involvement of the Local Link offices in the development of relevant local and regional plans and strategies. This includes co-operation in the provision of bus stops and shelters in rural areas. The Section also examines integration with other State-funded transport services such as health related transport and the work of the National Integrated Rural Transport Committee in this area.

### **6.2 Integration with Local Authorities and Regional Assemblies**

A key objective of Local Link is ensuring connectivity with other public transport services. This facilitates passengers seeking onward journeys across the State. The process of assessing the benefits of existing routes and the establishment of new routes includes consideration of how best to facilitate interconnectivity of services.

Local authorities have a key role in the planning of rural transport services given their local knowledge and multi-functional involvement in local services. As already noted, a key action under the NTA's Strategic Plan for the Local Link RTP is to ensure that every Local Link office is directly involved with their local authorities in the development of relevant plans/strategies, with particular note to be paid to the preparation of Local Transport Plans.

It also envisages Local Link offices inputting to Local Area Plans, County Development Plans, and Local Economic and Community Plans. This creates opportunities to develop greater area coverage as well as integrating rural transport services with other public transport services and other suitable State funded transport services. It also facilitates greater input by the community and voluntary sector into transport provision and planning.

Ideally, new Local Link services connect to bus stations, rail stations or other town stops, facilitating onward travel. The NTA identifies a requirement to provide good interchange facilities at these connecting points.

Currently the remit of local authorities in relation to transport relates primarily to road infrastructure, rather than public transport service provision. Over the years, a number of reports have called for local authorities to become more involved with the provision of public transport services. The establishment of the NTA and its management of the Rural Transport Programme have superseded some of these recommendations. However, other recommendations in relation to a potential role involving local authorities in the provision of public transport services have been made, including:

- 1) A Local Transport Coordinator should be appointed by each local authority who would work closely with both the Directors of Transportation and Community & Enterprise in developing a transport strategy for the county with a particular emphasis on rural transport services<sup>35</sup>.

- 2) The Rural Transport Network (RTN) is the representative body of the 15 Local Link offices around the country. A 2018 Position Paper of the RTN proposed the creation of a statutory Framework for Local Transport Planning and Delivery. The RTN also supports the creation of specific regional transport strategies, similar to the Greater Dublin Area *Transport Strategy*.

The NTA has statutory responsibility for preparing a Transport Strategy for the GDA. The present *Transport Strategy for the Greater Dublin Area 2016-2035* provides a framework for the development of transport infrastructure in the GDA over the next two decades. Under the Planning and Development Act 2000 (as amended), the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy for the Eastern and Midland Region is statutorily required to be consistent with the *Transport Strategy for the GDA* – thus ensuring that land use planning and transport planning for the area are appropriately aligned. Local Area Plans and Development Plans in the GDA must also be consistent with the *Transport Strategy*.

The statutory requirement for mutual consistency between the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy and the *Transport Strategy* is unique to the GDA and is not a statutory requirement in any other part of the country. That said, in recent years the NTA has worked successfully on an administrative, non-statutory basis to assist several local authorities across the other cities in preparing transport related strategies or implementing transport related projects. This includes the *Galway Transport Strategy*<sup>36</sup> and the draft *Cork Metropolitan Area Transport Strategy*.<sup>37</sup> Work is underway on the development of the *Limerick Shannon Metropolitan Area Transport Strategy* and work will begin by end 2019 on the development of the *Waterford Metropolitan Area Transport Strategy*. *Project Ireland 2040* commits to extend the NTA's statutory responsibilities for transport planning in the GDA to the other cities. Further information on this issue is included in *Background Paper 6: Land Use Planning and Transport Planning*.

### **6.2.1 Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies (RSES)**

The three Regional Assemblies are tasked with coordinating, promoting and supporting the strategic planning and sustainable development of the regions. The primary vehicle for this is the preparation and implementation of Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies (RSES). The Strategies are statutorily underpinned by the Planning and Development Acts. Under the RSES, local authorities will be required to prepare Local Transport Plans (LTPs). As part of the consultation process the three Regional Assemblies undertook for their respective Strategy, DTTAS sought that each Regional Assembly will ensure that Local Link offices are formally consulted in relation to the development of local transport plans. Further information on this issue is included in the *Background Paper 6: Land Use Planning and Transport Planning*.

LTPs are based on the Area Based Transport Assessment (ABTA)<sup>38</sup> produced by the NTA and TII. LTPs will include the transport priorities for each settlement in terms of public transport infrastructure and services; cycle investment; improvements to the pedestrian environment; and road enhancements. The policies, objectives and measures which emerge from the LTPs will be incorporated into the relevant statutory land use plans pertaining to each settlement.

### 6.2.2 Bus infrastructure in rural areas

One area in which local authority co-operation is critical is in the provision of bus stops and shelters in rural and regional areas. The NTA has developed a prioritisation framework to determine appropriate numbers and locations for the installation of bus shelters in metropolitan areas and in towns and rural areas. The NTA's prioritisation framework sets out the following criteria:

- a) One bus shelter in each direction at the busiest stop in all towns that have a population size exceeding 1,000 people;
- b) A bus shelter at the two busiest bus stops in each direction in towns that have a population size exceeding 3,000 people;
- c) A bus shelter at the three busiest bus stops in each direction in towns that have a population size exceeding 10,000 people; and
- d) In locations other than (a), (b) and (c) where such stops are served by 10 or more PSO services per day.

In addition, the NTA has committed to the installation of 86 accessible bus stops in 43 towns nationwide, each with a population of over 5,000 (one stop in each direction.) This accounts for half of such towns in Ireland and is an Action under the new *Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities (CES)* three year Action Plan 2019-2021.

### 6.3 Integration with other State-funded transport services

There is a strong policy impetus from a transport network planning perspective to pursue the implementation of greater levels of integration across a range of Exchequer funded local transport services.

In 2011, the Rural Transport Network (RTN) proposed that the multiple streams of public subsidies of transport - for example CIÉ Group subvention, Free Travel Pass, School Transport Scheme, HSE non-ambulance patient transport - be better integrated at central level by DTTAS<sup>39</sup>.

According to the RTN the potential benefits of a more coordinated national and local passenger transport system are:

- Immediate and real cost savings to the Exchequer;
- Benefits for customers in terms of better service choices, more integrated services, better information and easier inter-modal travel;
- Potential for extensive services by achieving greater value for money;
- Improved environment and sustainability via reduced car usage;

The *Value for Money and Policy Review of the RTP* (2011) noted that there were a range of other publicly funded transport providers operating in local areas and suggested that a greater integration of these services could reduce the need for State provision without necessarily reducing the current levels of services.

### 6.3.1 Publicly funded local transport schemes (2011)<sup>40</sup>

The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER) produced a cross cutting paper on *Publicly Funded Local Transport Schemes*, as part of the 2011 Comprehensive Review of Expenditure. This paper focused on transport expenditure across the education, transport and health sectors. The type of efficiencies envisaged through integration were set out in the paper and include reduction in duplicate routes and services, aggregation of buying power, reduction in administration costs, maximisation of existing capacity and increasing demand (productivity).

The paper included a case study carried out in County Westmeath to assess the scope for integration of transport services in the area. Overlapping of HSE and RTP routes was observed in the case study and it was noted that over half of the contractors for RTP services also supplied services for school transport. Primary recommendations made in the paper include:

- Combine funding streams for transport services.
- Manage transport services through one organisation (NTA).
- Tender local transport services on a regional or grouped county basis.
- Continue work on the Local Integrated Transport Services projects but improve the quality of project appraisal.
- Use the opportunity of transport integration to devise a robust transport policy framework balancing the priorities of different client groups, planning local networks and services accordingly.

The Local Integrated Transport Services (LITS) project referred to above was a pilot initiated to examine the potential for increasing transport integration within local areas. The project was progressed through a partnership approach involving Bus Éireann, Rural Transport Programme/Pobal, the HSE, Department of Transport, Department of Education and Skills and the Irish Wheelchair Association. The primary aim of the initiative was to examine potential synergies that could be achieved in the coordination and provision of public transport services, meet identified local transport needs and deliver increased value for money for the Exchequer.

An external review of the LITS project noted that the initiative had made beneficial steps towards the future development of transport services with Bus Éireann, RTP, Irish Wheelchair Association and HSE sharing operating and timetable information<sup>41</sup>. However, the report also refers to the fact that there was no opportunity in the process to pilot integrated school transport services. It was further noted in the evaluation that while a number of pilot projects were undertaken relating to integration with health services related transport, the LITS pilot project was unable to sufficiently demonstrate how this integration could be furthered with a view to mainstreaming. Therefore, while the LITS process helped to demonstrate the potential synergies that could be achieved, it was recognised that there was a need to establish and formalise a national approach to local transport integration as an on-going policy objective.

## 6.4 National Integrated Rural Transport Committee

In light of the *Value for Money Report*, the DPER cross cutting paper and the LITS Evaluation Report referred to, a Government decision in January 2012 assigned national responsibility for integrated local and rural transport services, including management of the Rural Transport Programme, to the NTA. In line with that decision the National Integrated Rural Transport (NIRT) Committee was established. The NIRT Committee replaced the original Local Integrated Transport Studies (LITS) Steering Committee which was set up to oversee the pilot integration project process and associated work.

Membership of the NIRT Committee was drawn from organisations representing key stakeholders in the transport integration process and it was chaired by the NTA. In broad terms, the role of the NIRT Committee was to oversee and manage a partnership approach to implementing integrated local and rural transport in order to achieve greater synergies, better meet identified transport needs and deliver increased value for money for the Exchequer.

Four sub-groups were established to inform the work of the Committee and look at school transport integration; health service related transport integration; and structures and logistics to support integration. Each group identified the barriers to integration and recommended actions to commence integration where possible.

### 6.4.1 School transport integration

The School Transport Scheme comes under the auspices of the Department of Education and Skills. Since its introduction in 1967, the scheme has been operated by CIÉ/Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills. Bus Éireann transports approximately 113,000 children on over 6,500 routes to some 3,000 schools, including children with special educational needs. The School Transport Scheme is not open to the general public but is a restricted transport system with defined criteria governing all aspects including eligibility requirements that must be satisfied. The school transport scheme does not come within the scope of EU *Regulation 1370/2007* on public passenger transport by rail and road, due to the fact that the scheme does not provide public passenger transport within the definition of the terms of the regulation.

The NIRT committee examined the integration potential of schools transport with regular rural transport services and the key difficulties identified were:

- Lack of coherent accurate and up-to-date data that can be shared across providers.
- Late applications to the school transport schemes making it harder to plan services.
- Operational and regulatory issues e.g. licensing, tax and insurance. There are licensing and tax implications if a bus is used other than solely for the provision of school transport services.
- Child Protection – the impact of the child protection legislation and Garda vetting of drivers depends on how open the service is i.e. the current ‘closed’ schools transport service fall within the Child Protection legislation whereas an ‘open’ public transport service does not but still requires the provider to have a duty of care towards children and vulnerable adults.

- Seasonal nature of school transport provision.

Four pilot rural transport schemes were initiated in counties Waterford and Sligo in recent years where the 'return leg' of a school transport service was used as an open public transport service. Some efficiency was achieved in the costing of the pilot services as the return leg was going to be operated by the school transport service anyway. It was difficult to get any more pilots around the country for a number of reasons:

- The schools had to be located remote from towns or villages so that the return leg could be from remote areas into the town;
- Some of the school transport operators had other demands on their bus following the school journeys;
- Some operators were part-time drivers with other work commitments e.g. farming and did not have the time to do additional bus services, and
- School transport is seasonal and therefore could not be relied on if all-year round service is required.

Two of those schemes were implemented as permanent schemes while two others did not continue as the schemes did not prove viable.

#### **6.4.2 Health service-related transport integration**

Health related transport services are provided by a number of organisations including the HSE, charitable bodies and others and are funded by the Government through the HSE. The HSE 'Policy on Non-Ambulance Patient Transport Services' states that "*there is no statutory requirement for the HSE to provide Patient Transport Services (PTS). PTS are provided by the HSE on a discretionary basis*". The NIRT Health Related Services subgroup concluded that there appeared to be a wide variance in compliance with this policy across sub-divisions of the HSE.

The sub-group considered that there are many circumstances where the integrating of such services with regular rural transport services would present opportunities for greater efficiencies, improvements in value for money and most importantly an improved service for the passenger.

The subgroup examined how non-acute health transport is organised in the different HSE regions, the HSE policy in the provision of those services and the categories of health related transport that would not be suited to the integration process. The group also examined the voucher system used by the HSE, which RTP groups are engaged in health related transport and the related funding.

The report of the sub-group included the following points in relation to the integration of rural and health related transport:

- Major health facilities are generally located 'out of town' which makes serving them difficult for network planners. There is also a lack of permeability of health facilities to public transport i.e. reduced access to hospitals, clinics and other facilities for public transport passengers as a result of being unable to get close to the entrance. Operating

facilities such as terminus turning circles, are rarely provided 'on-campus', or paths from one side to the other through the campus made available. The effect of these factors is to reduce the attractiveness of regular public transport to mobile users of health facilities, because of long walking times and waiting times on roads that do not cater for pedestrians.

- Planners of non-acute transport for patients are frequently unaware of the existence, coverage and capacity of regular public transport, and its potential to meet the needs of mobile users of health services. Therefore the decision is made too quickly to develop 'bespoke' services, overlooking the potential of open public transport to contribute to addressing the transport needs of health service users.
- On the other hand, there have been missed opportunities by planners of regular public transport services to better serve health facilities - both spatially through a lack of liaison with HSE planners and temporally through the lack of coordinating timetables with shift times, visiting times, clinic times, etc.
- There can be resistance by HSE patients, their families/carers, and health facility managers due to changes in routines and reductions in levels of services (e.g. longer journey times) that are occasionally a by-product of changes to services required in order to achieve well coordinated and efficient services.
- The pressure on the HSE to rapidly divest itself of the onus of providing/procuring transport for its patients and the consequential pressure on Bus Éireann and RTP Groups to serve the increasing transport deficit that is accumulating, with no increase in PSO/Free Travel Pass subvention, is also an obstacle to integration.

The key barriers identified to integration of those services with other transport services are summarised as:

- Difficulty quantifying at a national level the transport services provided, given the number and diversity of such services, locations and medical conditions;
- Level of engagement by HSE differs throughout the country;
- No common understanding of the term 'integrated transport';
- Location of major health facilities 'out of town' reducing the potential to serve them on an integrated basis;
- Planners of non-acute transport services unaware of capacity and location of regular public transport which could serve patients' needs;
- Regular public transport may not be serving health facilities.

The report of the sub-group identified the following obstacles to integration experienced by RTP groups already providing services for the HSE:

- Multiplicity of funding streams difficult to manage;
- Reimbursement for Free Travel Pass does not reflect usage - putting the viability of RTP services in jeopardy;

- Finding a 'champion' within HSE to drive the integration process forward;
- Lack of appreciation by HSE of transport planning required and lack of confidence in RTP group's ability to deliver the service;
- Lack of universal IT supports;
- Lack of national accessibility policy and standards applicable to vehicles;
- Lack of transfer of funding from HSE to other subsidised transport services.

There are some good practice examples of Local Link offices procuring and managing services on behalf of the HSE. Some Local Link offices have their services fully integrated with the general 'open' public transport services while others provide bespoke 'closed' services for health facilities.

#### **Case Study in integration of Local Link and HSE services – Local Link Donegal**

Local Link Donegal (LLD) is an example of good practice regarding integration of Local Link and HSE services.

LLD was established in 2002 and employs up to 27 staff to include administration, passenger assistants/escorts for intellectual disability services, supported employment positions and more.

LLD coordinates and manages:

- Rural transport services throughout Donegal;
- HSE Primary Community Cared Centre transport throughout Donegal including Arranmore and Tory Islands;
- All non-emergency acute transport for Letterkenny University Hospital including renal dialysis, hospital discharge and private ambulances;
- Contracts with approximately 50 operators involving 120 drivers;

The vehicles employed include buses, taxis and non-emergency ambulances.

Cost-saving measures applied to ensure sustainability include:

- Carrying HSE passengers to services on existing rural transport routes where possible;
- Integrating routes and using return journeys of existing routes;
- Netting of charges of €3 per return journey against costs;
- Synchronising transport to match appointments thereby reducing DNS (Do Not Show) occurrences;
- Tendering for the most economically advantageous provider;
- On-going monitoring of quality and value for money;
- Providing transport coordination and planning expertise freeing up HSE staff to undertake their core work.

### 6.4.3 Further development of health service transport integration

In its 2011 submission to Government<sup>39</sup>, the Rural Transport Network stated “The HSE is also to date a significant spender on patient transport of a non-ambulance nature. However, no firm data are available on this and (depending on how they are done) estimates can range from €25m to €100m annually.

In its *Strategic Plan* for the RTP, one of NTA’s priority areas is integration with other statutory services, with the key objective to integrate non-emergency transport services provided by the HSE with those provided by the RTP by 2022. Key actions to deliver on this objective are:

- To establish an interdepartmental working group, comprising relevant Departments and agencies, to examine this issue further.
- In partnership with the HSE, to seek to involve the Local Link offices nationally in providing these non-emergency transport services.
- To carry out a scoping exercise in relation to current HSE funded fleet ownership in the health charity sector and explore the potential for improved integration of service delivery by the RTP.
- To continue to work with the Office of Government Procurement to identify the most appropriate way for Local Link groups to provide non-emergency health related transport services on behalf of the HSE.

According to the NTA, significant progress was made in 2018 in terms of developing strategic initiatives between Local Link and the HSE. Key areas of activity included:

- Drafting of a research proposal to potentially undertake a nationwide survey of disability transport services funded by the HSE including the collation of routing and timetable information. The purpose of this research is ultimately to identify opportunities to integrate these transport services, where compatible, with public transport services.
- To identify opportunities where Local Link offices can tender for relevant HSE contracts where the focus is on managing the delivery of transport services for HSE clients.

Work is also continuing at a local level to integrate HSE non-emergency transport services with Local Link services to build on those provided by the Local Link offices in counties such as Donegal, Mayo and Sligo-Leitrim-Roscommon.

#### Section 6 key points

- A key objective of Local Link is providing connectivity with other public transport services.
- A key action of the NTA’s *Strategic Plan* for the Local Link RTP is to ensure that every Local Link Office is directly involved with their local authorities in the development of relevant plans/strategies.
- An issue on which local authority cooperation is critical is in the provision of bus stops and shelters in rural areas. The NTA has developed a prioritisation framework to determine the appropriate number and locations for the installation of bus shelters including in rural areas.

### **Section 6 key points**

- Work in 2012-2014 by the National Integrated Rural Transport Committee (NIRT) examined the potential scope for better integration of local and rural transport and identified the various difficulties or limitations in making this happen.
- The NTA is concentrating on working with the HSE to improve transport integration, as it identifies the health sector as having strong potential for improved transport integration and efficiency.

## 7 Population patterns and travel trends in rural areas

### 7.1 Introduction

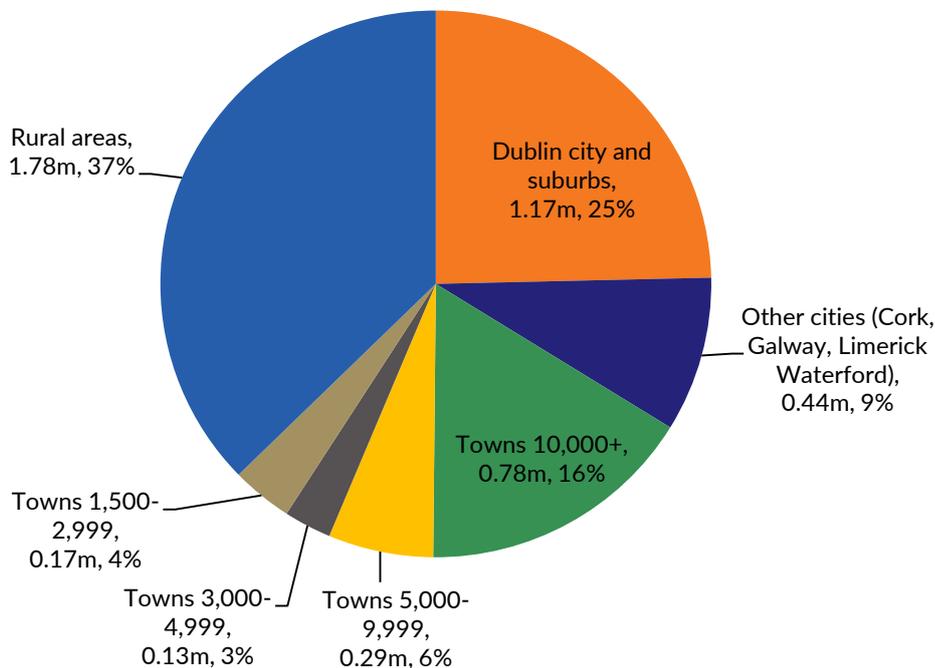
This Section looks at population patterns in Ireland and the geographical distribution in urban and rural areas. It also looks at urban-rural differences in car ownership and commuter journeys. Further information on these issues is also included in *Background Paper 6: Land Use Planning and Transport Planning* and *Background Paper 9: Statistics and Trends*.

### 7.2 Population patterns

The population of Ireland has been gradually increasing, both in urban and rural areas. Census 2016 found that 62% of the population lived in urban areas and 37% lived in rural areas. This figure represents an increase of 2% of people living in rural areas since 2011. In 2017, the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht reported that 80.6% of rural residents live in open countryside, whereas just under 20% reside in small villages<sup>42</sup>. In terms of electoral districts, 40.8% of the entire population live in electoral districts which are defined as “rural”.

Figure 7.1 illustrates the geographical distribution of the Irish population based on Census 2016. Figure 7.2 shows the population densities of people per square kilometre<sup>43</sup>.

**Figure 7.1: Geographical distribution of population**

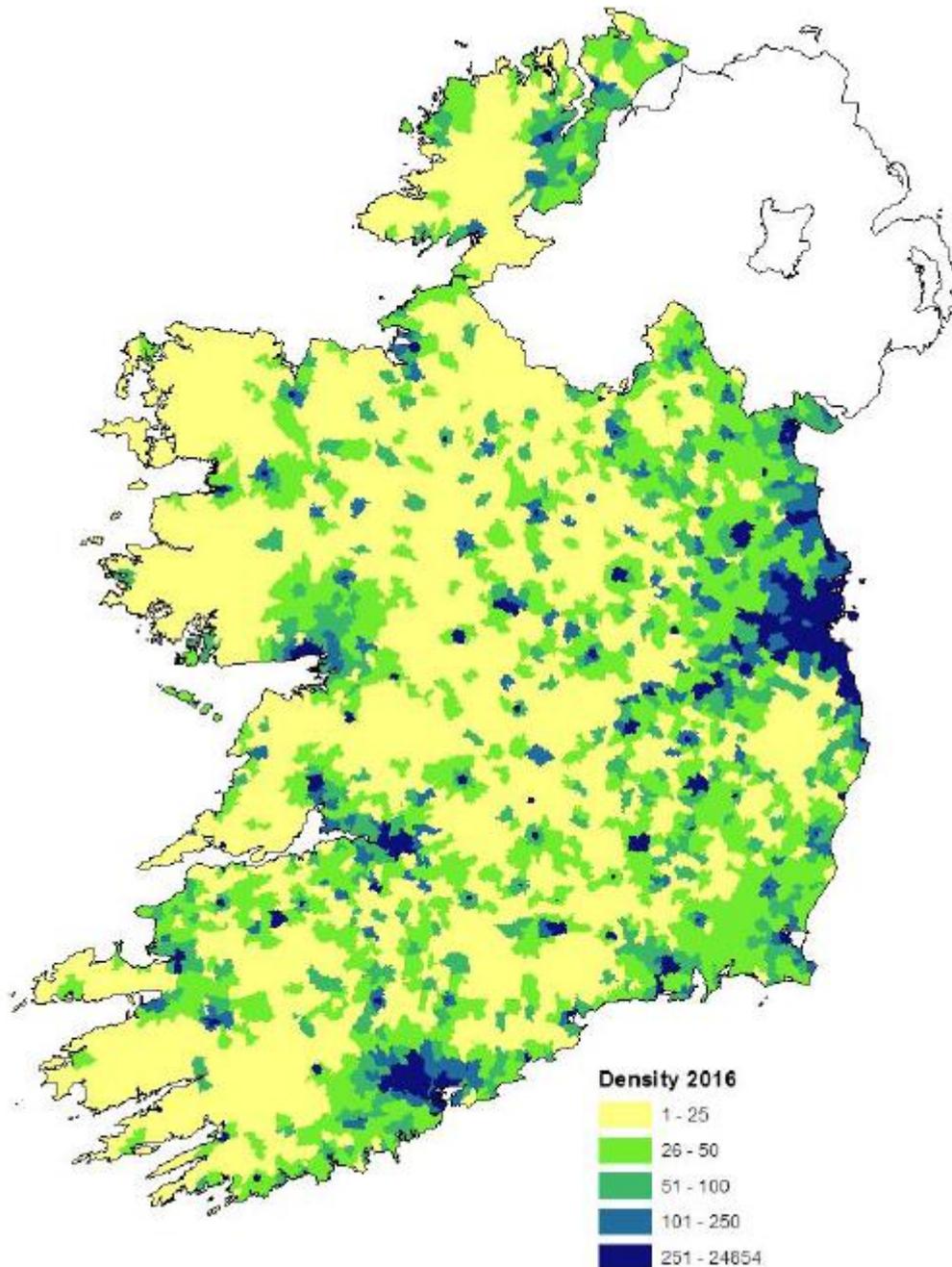


Source: CSO

As outlined earlier in this paper, some of the key objectives of the *National Planning Framework* relate to the regeneration of rural Ireland. The *NPF* aims to achieve more balanced population growth throughout the country and is targeting the five cities for 50% of overall national growth

between them, with Ireland's large and smaller towns, villages and rural areas accommodating the other 50% of growth.

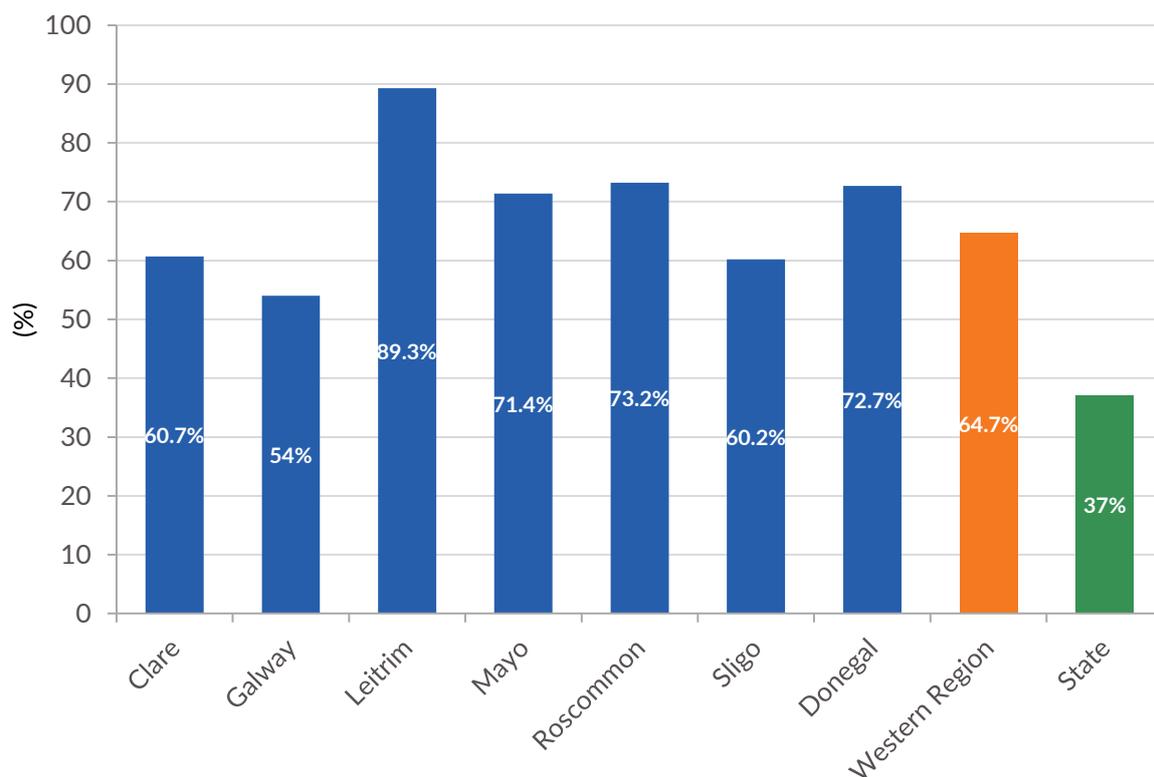
Figure 7.2: Population density, 2016



Source: ESRI

The Western Development Commission (WDC) has produced some reports and information which highlight the low population densities in the western side of the country<sup>44</sup>. Figure 7.3 shows the percentage of people living in rural areas in the Western counties.

**Figure 7.3: Percentage living in rural areas in Western counties, 2017**

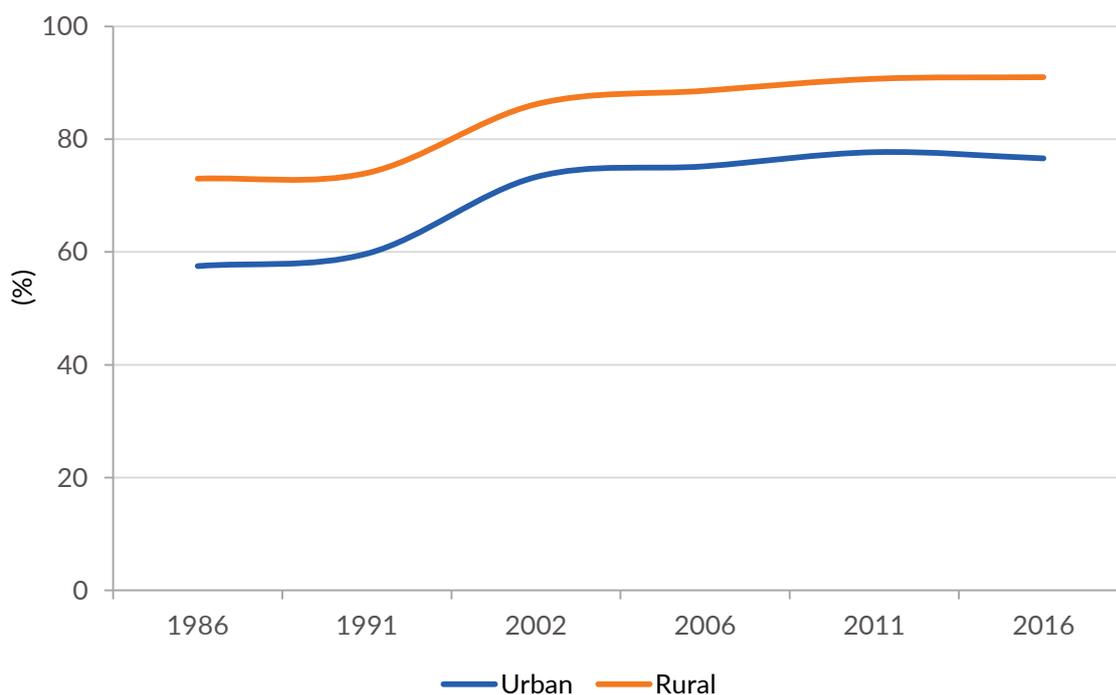


Source:WDC

### 7.3 Car ownership

Census 2016 has shown that car ownership has continued to rise nationwide with 1.39 million households owning at least one car in 2016 which is 30,000 more than in 2011. There was a sharp disparity between urban and rural areas in terms of car ownership, with 91% of households in rural areas owning at least one car, compared with 76.6% of households in urban areas, as shown in Figure 7.4. This was mainly due to much lower car ownership rates in the cities, for example 33.7% of households in Dublin City do not have a car. This urban-rural split is also seen clearly in the case of Cork where 29.7% of Cork City households do not own a car compared with just 8.8% in Cork County. Rural households were also more likely to have more than one car as 54.5% had two or more cars in 2016, whereas 33% of urban households had two or more cars.

Figure 7.4: Household car ownership rates in urban and rural areas, 1986-2016



Source: CSO Census

## 7.4 Percentage of journeys which are rural

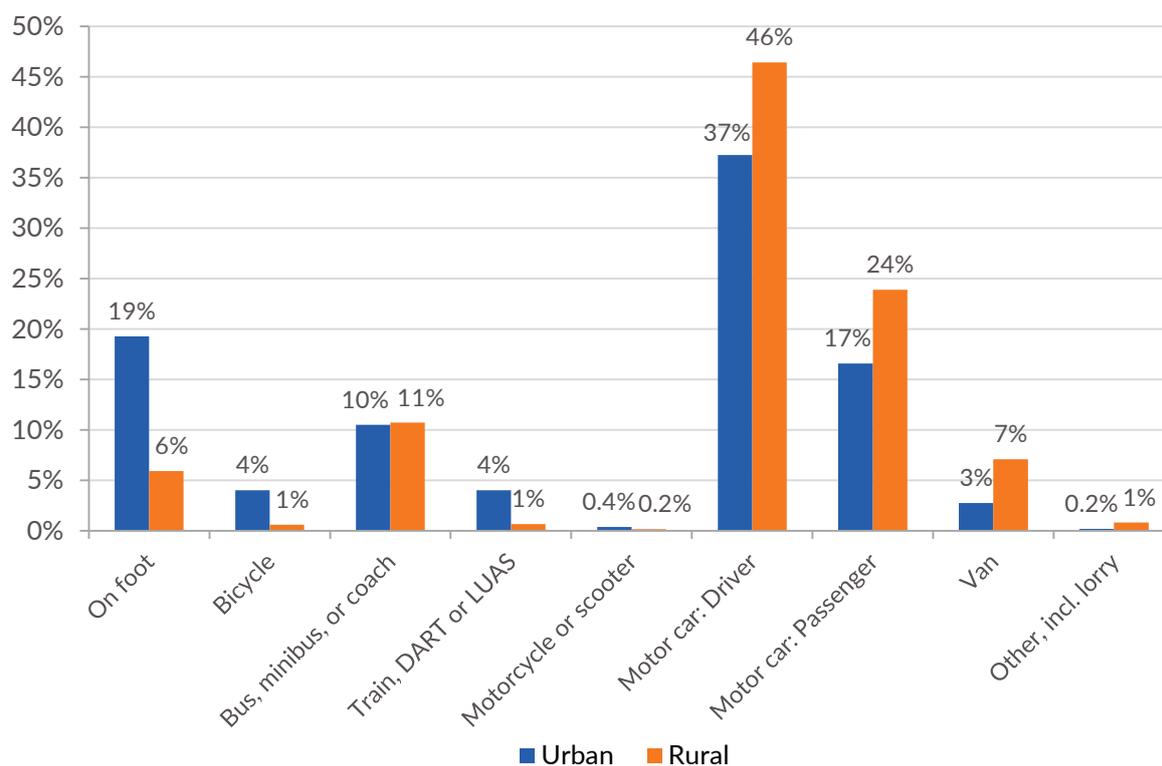
Census 2016 found that almost three million people commute to work, school or college daily. Over 1.08 million of these commuters, 36.5% of the total, live in rural areas compared with 1.88 million or 63.5% who live in urban areas.

### 7.4.1 Modal share of commuter journeys

There are marked differences in the modes of transport used by rural and urban commuters, particularly when it comes to active modes (walking and cycling), car and train use as seen in Figure 7.5.

As already mentioned, the majority of people commuting in all areas travel by car, but this is far more pronounced in rural areas (70%) than urban areas (54%). Furthermore, the proportions using the bus are slightly higher in rural areas at 11% versus 10% in urban areas, a difference largely explained by the number of school pupils travelling by bus in rural areas.

**Figure 7.5: Proportion commuting to work, school and college by mode, 2016**

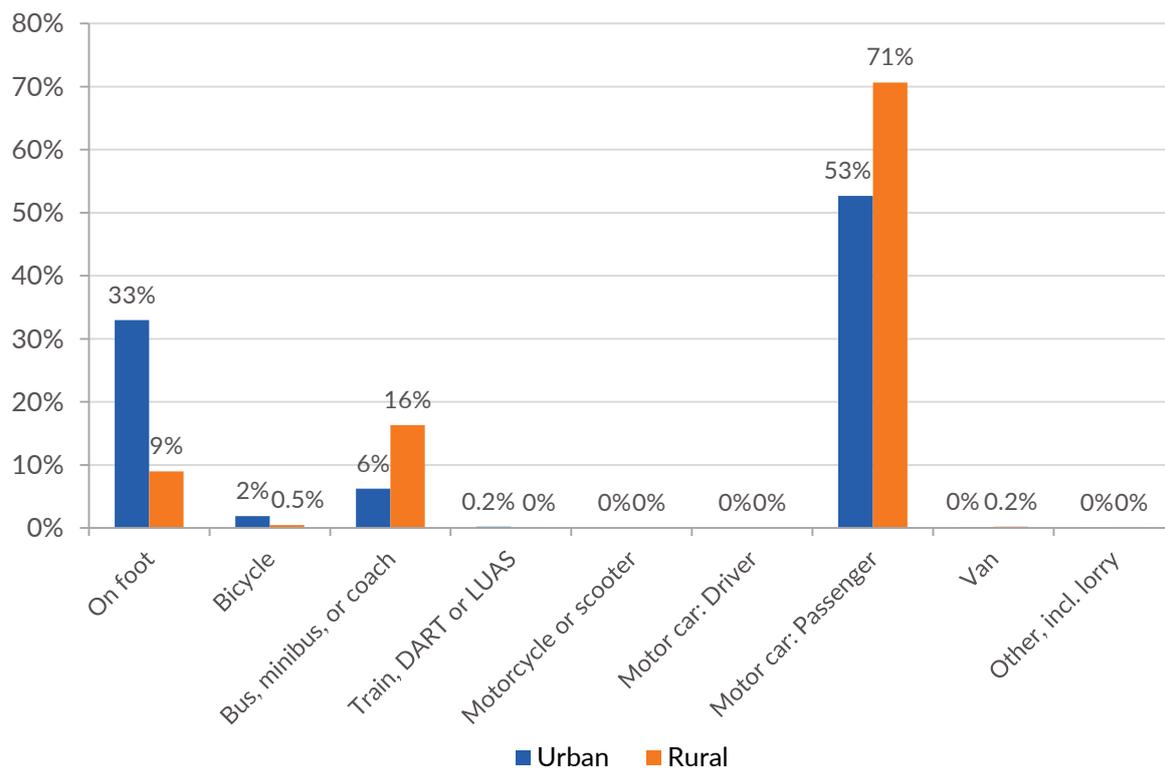


Source: CSO Census

#### 7.4.2 School and college travel patterns

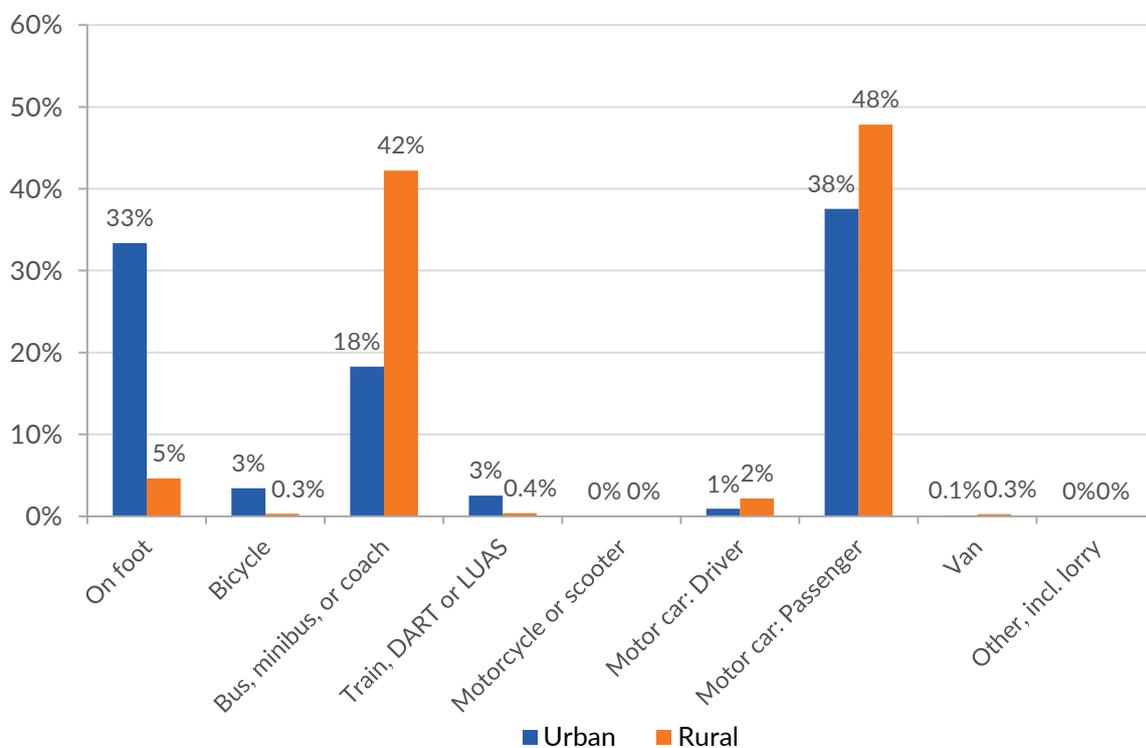
Looking at the travel patterns of rural-dwelling school and college students, figures show that car dependency reduces from over 70% at primary school to around 50% at secondary and third-level age. Bus use among rural-dwelling pupils increased from 16% of primary pupils to 42% at secondary, presumably through use of the school transport scheme, before declining again to 17% for third-level students. This contrasts with the pattern seen in urban areas where bus use increases from 6% at primary to 18% at secondary and 27.5% in college. Train use is very low amongst rural school-goers, increasing to just under 4% of college students. The differences in modal choices between primary and secondary school children and third-level students are outlined in Figure 7.6, Figure 7.7 and Figure 7.8.

**Figure 7.6: Mode of transport used by children aged 5-12 years, 2016**



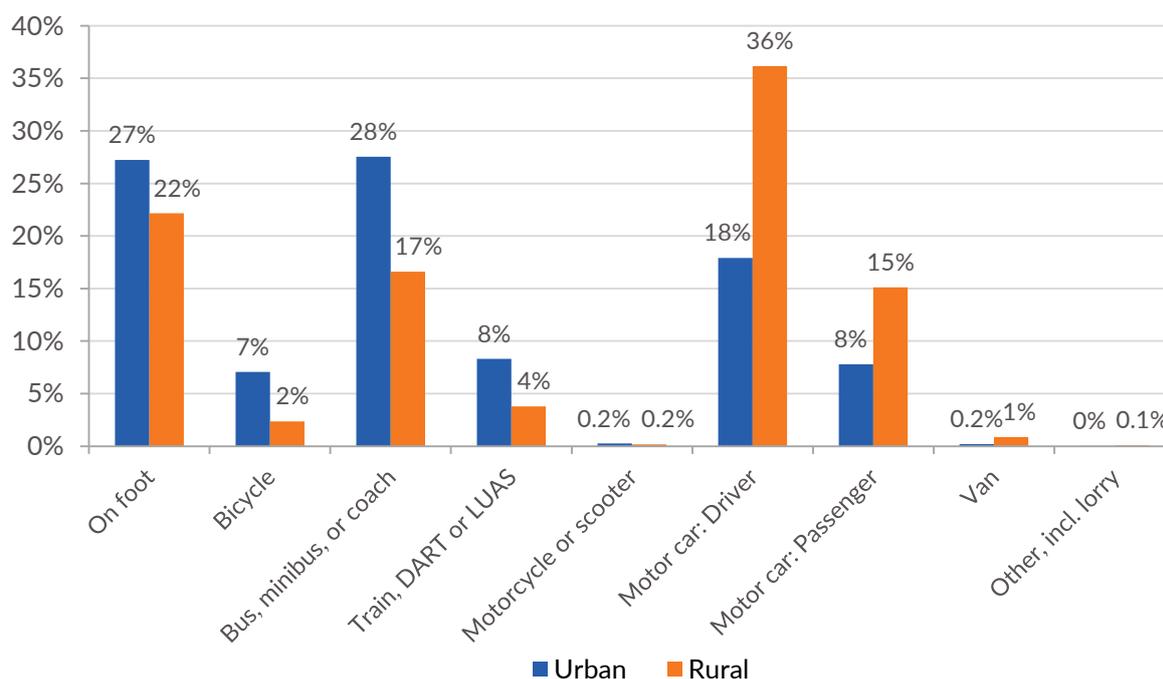
Source: CSO Census

**Figure 7.7: Mode of transport used by students aged 13-18 years, 2016**



Source: CSO Census

**Figure 7.8: Mode of transport used by students aged 19 and over, 2016**

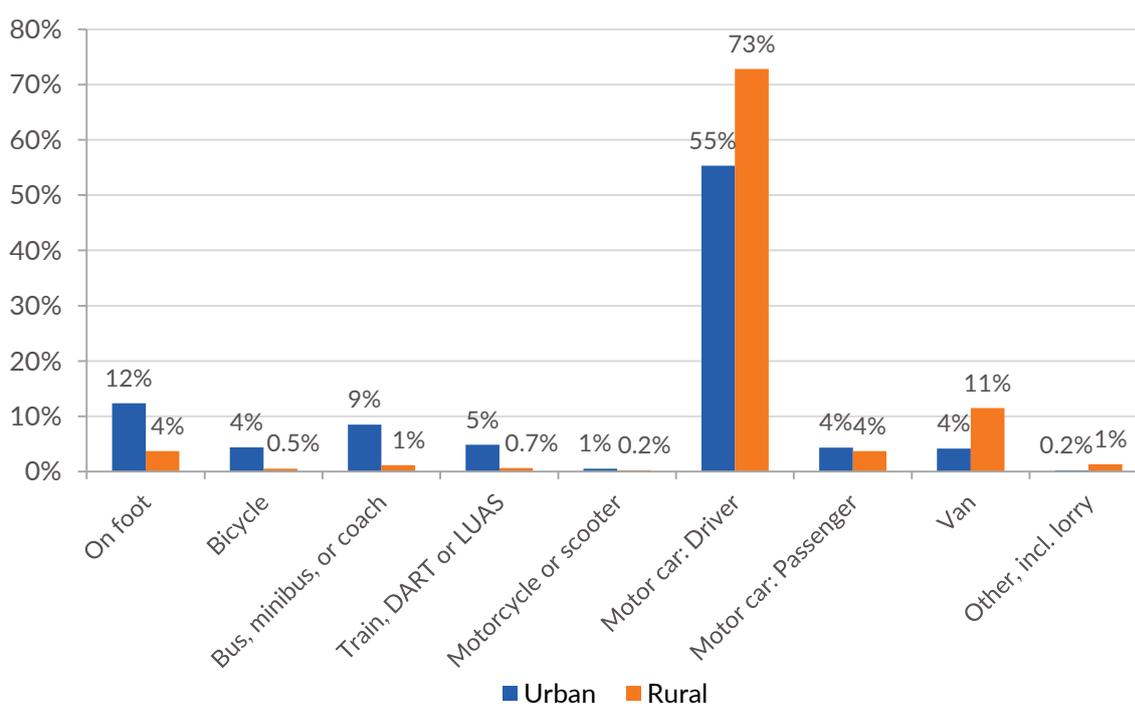


Source: CSO Census

### 7.4.3 Work commute

As shown in Figure 7.9 the car is the dominant mode of transport by most work commuters. Furthermore, there is an evident disparity between the percentages of urban commuters using public transport, compared to rural commuters.

**Figure 7.9: Work commute by mode of transport, 2016**



Source: CSO Census

### Section 7 key points

- The population of Ireland has been gradually increasing, both in urban and rural areas.
- The majority of rural residents live in the open countryside, with a smaller proportion living in small villages.
- The *National Planning Framework* is targeting 50% of overall national population growth for towns villages and rural areas.
- There is a sharp disparity between rural and urban areas in terms of car ownership, with 91% of rural households owning at least one car, compared to 76.6% of urban households.
- In tandem with the high levels of car ownership in rural areas, the majority of commuting journeys to work, college and school are car dependent and are higher than those in urban areas.

## 8 Public transport in an ageing society

### 8.1 Introduction

This Section identifies the importance of public transport in Ireland as the population gradually gets older. It also outlines details of a number of Irish and international reports on the perceptions of public transport among older people in rural areas.

### 8.2 Ireland's ageing population

Ireland's population has been getting steadily older since the 1980's. In Census 2016, 12.6% were aged 65 and over, compared with 11% in 2006 and 11.4% in 1996. Furthermore, 33.2% of the population was less than 25 years old in 2016 and this has been steadily declining since the late 1970's when 47.9% of the population were in that age cohort. There was also a reduction in the population of the 25-44 age group – 29.5% in 2016 compared to 31.6% in 2011. The Census recorded 456 centenarians, an increase of 17.2% on 2011<sup>45</sup>.

*Project Ireland 2040* estimates that the population aged 65 and over will more than double to 1.3 million, or to 23% of the total population by 2040. As the demographics of Ireland changes, the need for public transport to adapt is necessary. As previously mentioned, public transport can help reduce social exclusion and isolation which can be experienced by rural dwellers, especially elderly people with limited mobility or no access to a car.

### 8.3 Positive ageing in age-friendly cities and counties (2018) - HaPAI<sup>46</sup>

This report presents the first results of a survey carried out by the Healthy and Positive Ageing Initiative (HaPAI) and Ageing Friendly Ireland. The survey was carried out in 20 local authorities in order to provide evidence about the experiences and preferences of older people and to identify gaps in services. The HaPAI survey targeted people aged 55 years and older in each local authority who lived in "private households".

A section of the survey was dedicated to transportation, and asked participants about their use of transport and the accessibility of public transport. The urban-rural divide can be seen in terms of how people rate the provision of public transport services in their area. According to HaPAI, 67% of those in the "countryside" rated public transport as "poor or very poor" compared to only 41% in "villages". In terms of accessibility, 37% of 55-69 year olds expressed difficulties accessing public transport.

### 8.4 Transport patterns in community dwelling adults aged 50 years and over in Ireland (2017) - TILDA<sup>47</sup>

The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA) is carried out by Trinity College Dublin and is a large-scale nationally representative, longitudinal study on ageing in Ireland. In relation to rural public transport, some of the key findings in this TILDA report were as follows:

- 58% of adults living in rural areas rate the public transport services in their area as poor or very poor compared to 7% in Dublin.

- 25% of adults living in Dublin city/county rely mainly on public transport compared to just 2% of adults in rural areas, reflecting the vast difference in transport services available.
- Adults whose main mode of transport is driving themselves or travelling by public transport report greater participation in social activities and volunteering compared to those who rely on lifts from others.
- As the population ages, there is an increasing need for improved transport networks and services that meet the specific needs of older adults, especially in rural areas.

TILDA found that in relation to the effects of lack of transport in rural areas:

- 19% of adults aged 75 years and over and living in rural areas indicate that the lack of local transport facilities affects their lifestyle.
- 12-18% of the same age group indicate that reduced frequency of driving or no longer driving affects their ability to socialise, attend business-related appointments and health/social care appointments.

TILDA also reported that:

- Recurring themes for those in rural areas include lack of bus routes, closure or threatened closure of existing bus routes and the need to walk long distances to catch a bus.
- Those in rural areas also have issues with the timing and frequency of their local public transport, in particular mentioning village buses which only pass once a week, inconvenient timetables for shuttle buses into local towns, or transport options which stop running after a certain time.

## 8.5 Public and community transport for older people in rural Ireland (2014) - CARDI<sup>48</sup>

This report by the then Centre for Ageing Research and Development in Ireland (CARDI), and now the Ageing Research and Development Division within the Institute of Public Health in Ireland, made five policy recommendations:-

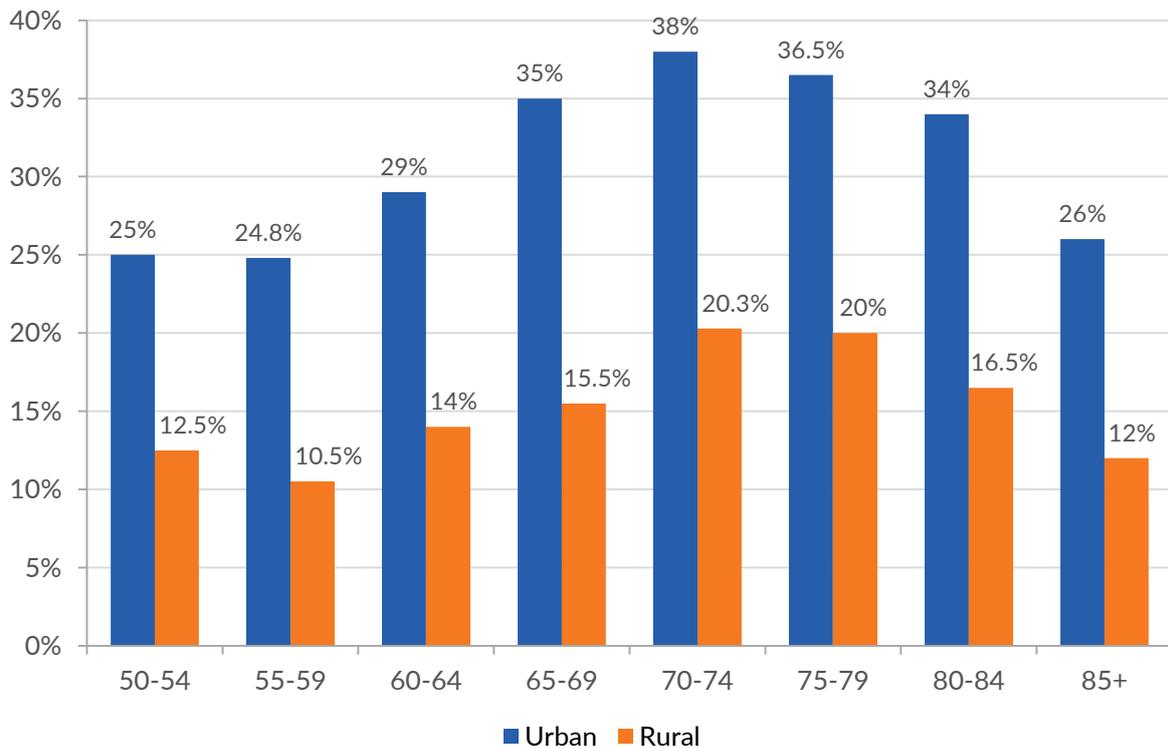
1. **Integration of existing services.** Integrate existing rural transport services, including health transport, home-to-school transport and social services transport with services offered by community transport and other organisations.
2. **Integrate information, payment and accessibility in rural transport.**
3. **Working partnerships at government and local level.** In planning and policy-making for transport services, greater cross-sectoral working between government, business, and the voluntary and community sector is required.
4. **Community and passenger involvement in planning of services.** Public and community transport in rural areas should be designed to meet the needs of the people who do not drive. Local transport plans which take account of the needs of local communities could be developed in order to match the demand for services with the supply.

5. **Clear analysis and alignment of transport budgets.** The full budget spent by all government departments, agencies, community associations and voluntary and community organisations should be collated and analysed. This will facilitate a plan to target duplication and inefficiencies, transferring money to where it can most effectively build public and community transport in rural areas.

## 8.6 International research – older adults and public transport

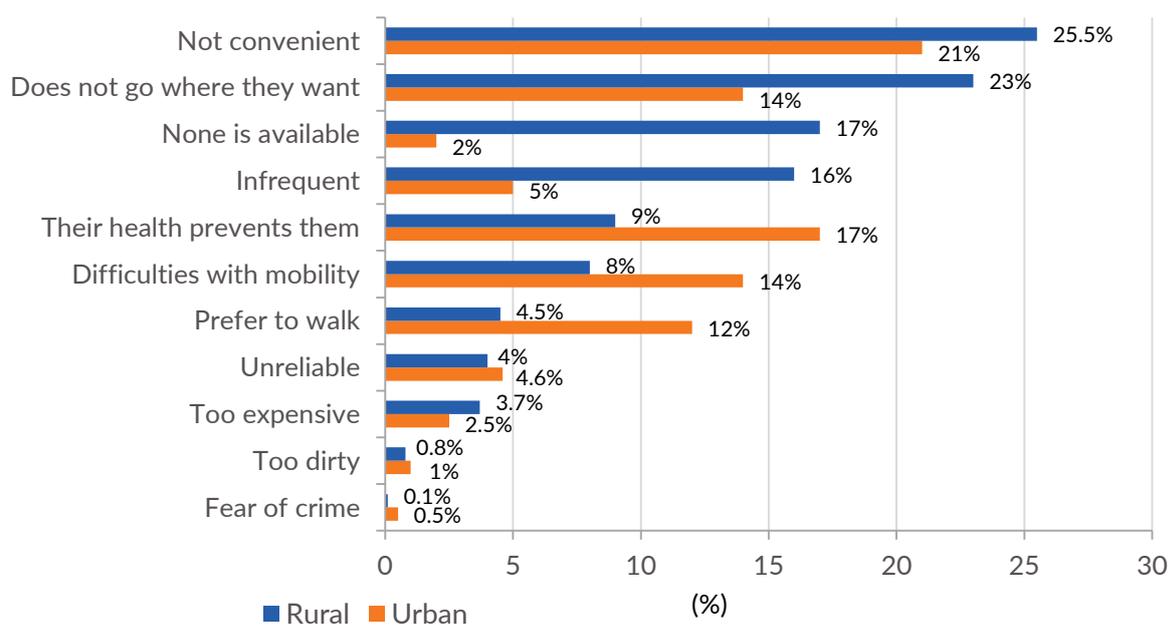
In the UK, older adults would appear to face similar difficulties to those in rural areas of Ireland. *The Future of Transport in an Ageing Society*<sup>49</sup>, noted that 38% of those aged 70-74 who live in an urban area use public transport at least once a week compared to 20% of those in the same age group living in rural areas. Figure 8.1 shows a breakdown of age groups who use public transport at least once a week in urban and rural areas in the UK. Figure 8.2 shows the reasons cited by participants aged 65 and over for not using public transport.

**Figure 8.1: Percentage of people aged 50 and over using public transport**



Source: English Longitudinal Study of Ageing wave 6, 2012-13

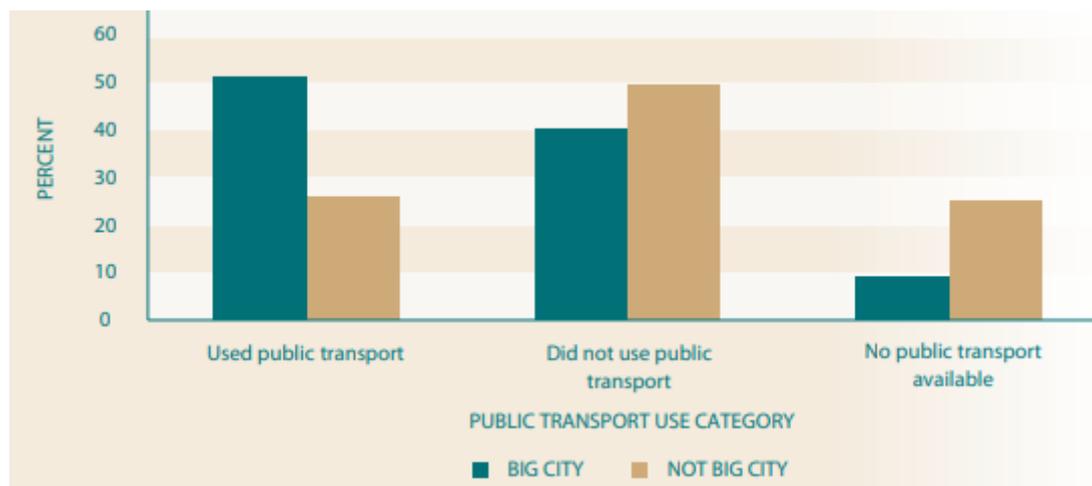
**Figure 8.2: Reasons cited by older adults for not using public transport**



Source: English Longitudinal Study of Ageing wave 6, 2012-13

In New Zealand, the *Positive Ageing Indicators Report (2007)*<sup>50</sup> found that half of elderly people who lived in one of the 12 big cities (e.g. Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch) used public transport in the previous year, compared to only one quarter of those who lived in smaller towns or rural areas. The report identified that almost three times as many people living outside the big cities had no access to public transport, compared to those living in the big cities at 25% and 9% respectively, as shown in Figure 8.3.

**Figure 8.3: Use of public transport by people aged 65 years and older**



Source: New Zealand Positive Ageing Indicators 2007

### Section 8 key points:

- *Project Ireland 2040* estimates that the population aged 65 and over will more than double to 1.3 million, or to 23% of the total population by 2040.
- The perceptions of public transport among older people in rural areas of Ireland are poor. Common issues identified are limited bus routes, threatened closure of existing routes, inconvenient schedules and low frequency of services.
- Adults whose main mode of transport is driving themselves or using public transport are more likely to be involved in social activities within their communities, thus highlighting the need to provide services to prevent social exclusion for those without a car or good public transport.
- International reports identify similar issues for older people in rural areas around the use of public transport.

## 9 International case studies

### 9.1 Introduction

This Section looks at rural transport in a number of other countries. In order to get a broader understanding of some international experiences of rural public transport services, it combines research of international reports and studies as well as information provided by other countries.

The Section explores the comparisons which can be drawn between Ireland and other countries including the challenges to providing rural transport. Research carried out has demonstrated that similar issues arise in other countries around the provision of rural transport. European Union (EU) Member States especially have highlighted the importance of transport in reducing social exclusion as well as improving economic growth. Initiatives such as flexible DRT, door-to-door services and good integration services have been used in European countries to great success.

### 9.2 Public transport in rural areas – research in the UK

Most of the UK's bus services are provided by commercial private sector companies, although Local Government can subsidise services and routes which are deemed to be unprofitable but socially necessary. This Section investigates research undertaken by the UK Parliament into the provision of rural transport and innovative community initiatives carried out by areas with similar characteristics to regions of Ireland.

#### 9.2.1 *Health of the bus market inquiry (2018)*<sup>51</sup>

The House of Commons Transport Committee announced this inquiry into how bus services are run in England outside of London, against the background of a sharp decrease in bus use outside of London over the past 25 years. The areas the inquiry sought to look at included the provision of services to isolated communities in rural and urban areas and the effectiveness of these services.

The submission from the UK Department for Transport stated<sup>52</sup>, in relation to “Rural and Isolated Communities”, that:

- People living in the most rural areas rely more on the car, which accounted for 76% of all their trips in 2016/17. By comparison, only 53% of trips by residents of urban cities (and 36% of trips by London residents) were made by car in 2016/17.
- Given the reliance of most rural households on car travel, providing for people without access to a car is difficult.
- Consequently, rural areas are served by a mixture of commercial services, local authority supported services, and services provided by the community sector.
- In the longer term, it is possible that new technology, particularly developments in electric and autonomous vehicles may greatly reduce the cost and increase the availability of public transport in rural areas.

### 9.2.2 *Passenger transport in isolated communities (2014)*<sup>53</sup>

This report by the House of Commons Transport Committee recommended that the UK Department for Transport draft a definition of “isolated communities” that captures isolated urban, rural and island communities. The Committee heard that that any community risked isolation if it did not have passenger transport that fulfilled four criteria, namely availability, accessibility, affordability and acceptability.

### 9.3 **CallConnect service – Lincolnshire**

The CallConnect Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) service in Lincolnshire is regularly referred to as an example of best practice in the UK. CallConnect is run by Lincolnshire County Council. As Lincolnshire is one of the largest and most sparsely populated counties in England, it would appear to be a good fit with similar areas in Ireland. CallConnect is primarily aimed at reducing rural isolation and improving access to local services. This is similar to the objectives of Local Link. CallConnect services are run by a variety of operators including TransportConnect Ltd which is a wholly owned company of Lincolnshire County Council. The network and its services are subsidised by Lincolnshire County Council.

Without duplicating mainline bus services, it serves more than 700 rural communities and carries hundreds of thousands of passengers every year. The service is designed to improve transport opportunities in rural communities and market towns where conventional bus services are limited or infrequent. Unlike a conventional bus service, CallConnect does not have a set timetable along a fixed route; it is passenger requests that determine where and when the bus goes each day.

There are two kinds of CallConnect services:

- 1) entirely demand-responsive 'dial-a-ride' services which serve an area with no fixed route or timetable;
- 2) semi-flexible services which run to a timetable but which deviate off the route to serve smaller villages.

#### **Features of CallConnect services include:**

- Journeys must be booked in advance over the telephone, by text message or online up to a week in advance and with as little as 1 hours' notice on the same day, subject to availability.
- Operates 6 days a week from 7am to 7pm.
- Each bus operates within an area of up to 12 miles.
- CallConnect buses are designed to meet the fixed InterConnect services at designated 'interchange' points in the larger towns and villages.

InterConnect is a network of 10 timetabled inter-urban buses operating throughout Lincolnshire. A number of InterConnect-branded interurban bus routes with fixed timetables are complemented by the CallConnect services.

The benefits of CallConnect include:

- 27 routes now cover over 90% of Lincolnshire.
- Online booking available 24/7, 365 days a year.
- Vehicles fitted with low-floor steps and tail-lifts for easy access - one fixed wheelchair per bus.
- CallConnect replaced expensive 'DialaRide' service<sup>54</sup>.

#### 9.4 Bwcabus bus service<sup>55</sup>

A DRT service called Bwcabus (book a bus) was introduced in 2009 funded by the Welsh Government, the European Convergence Fund and Carmarthenshire and Ceredigion County Councils. The aim of Bwcabus is to improve public transport and accessibility to key services for rural communities in West Wales.

Bwcabus is designed to provide rural communities with a local bus service which is integrated with strategic public transport services, offering connections onwards. The service integration is combined with through-ticketing to offer seamless travel between Bwcabus services and strategic routes.

Bwcabus is a fully accessible local bus service. Passengers with reduced mobility or those in particularly remote locations can request to be picked up and set down at or near to their home address, provided it is safe and practical to do so. Bwcabus operates within a specific zone providing both fixed route services and pre-booked demand responsive journeys, allowing passengers the possibility to travel where and when they want, in comparison with a conventional bus service. The Bwcabus service enables people to travel between local towns and villages or connect to main line bus services to travel further afield.

At the heart of the Bwcabus operation is the scheduling system designed and built by the University of South Wales. The complete system includes journey scheduling, booking management and public transport information import and management. Bwcabus utilises several information and communications technologies to manage bookings and to send and receive information. Vehicle tracking is also used to provide information and monitoring of buses.

According to the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD)<sup>56</sup>, the lessons learnt from the Bwcabus service are:

- Bwcabus has proved that it can deliver a cost-effective user-focused local transport service.
- The project highlights the need for local targeted services to link in with mainline bus or train services to travel further afield.
- It shows that a sustainable transport network can support connections between rural and other areas in both directions, benefitting both local people and local businesses.

## 9.5 EU projects and research

### 9.5.1 INTERREG IVS Flipper Project<sup>57</sup>

This project highlighted the challenge throughout Europe of providing a cost effective integrated public transport system which is seen as an essential prerequisite to reducing pollution and congestion whilst encouraging sustainable economic growth. The traditional fixed route services is ideal for clustered travel demand areas but the changing of habitation patterns and nature of work activities in today's society have created different mobility needs to which the conventional transport has become neither suited nor cost-effective.

In the last few years Flexible Transport Services (FTS) have proved to be an advantageous solution to the provision of public transport services. By providing various forms of intermediate services, FTS are complementary to the conventional passenger transport and usually serve mobility needs, either in low demand time periods and in weak demand areas. Given this flexibility, FTS are suitable to serve niche market customers and different citizens' groups (e.g. disabled, elderly, students, tourists.) One of the examples of Good Practice in Ireland was Ring a Link which provides Local Link services in Carlow-Kilkenny-Wicklow areas<sup>58</sup>.

### 9.5.2 Social inclusion in EU public transport (2015)<sup>59</sup>

In its *Social inclusion in EU Public Transport* study, the European Parliament noted that public transport has an important role in exacerbating or mitigating the social exclusion of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, affecting their access to services as well as employment and social relationships. The study also noted that public transport is important for people who do not own or cannot use a car and live in peripheral urban areas, with good public transport helping to improve their quality of life and social inclusion. The study stated that recent initiatives have been introduced in the EU to improve transport in rural areas and include flexible DRT services, door-to-door services and integration of transport services.

The study concluded that, in the near future the transport challenges represented by demographic ageing, poverty, migration and geographical disadvantage will be increasing and made suggestions relating to rural and community transport:

- New transport technologies may support public transport policies in mitigating social exclusion and provide flexible cost-effective services.
- Increasing involvement on the part of private providers (e.g. car owners, rural or collective taxis), non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and voluntary work may represent low-cost solutions to specific needs.

## 9.6 The Netherlands

In 2018, the Netherlands Government published *Public Transport in 2040: Outlines of a vision for the future* which sets out various statements regarding its intentions for future public transport, including in rural areas<sup>60</sup>.

The following key issues in relation to public transport in the Netherlands are particularly relevant to the Local Link service in Ireland.

- *Public Transport in 2040* aims to coordinate and optimise public transport provision. This includes issues such as future network development, integration of demand driven and innovative mobility concepts, financial arrangements and the transition to a more sustainable mobility system.
- Specific forms of public transport, e.g. for mobility-impaired individuals are arranged and funded separately. However, the stakeholders involved are pursuing an action plan to see how more integration can be achieved. This involves the bundling of the transport demands of people with disabilities and other forms of response-driven public transport to encourage people with disabilities to make more use of regular transport modes.
- The challenges encountered include level of service of public transport (frequency and distance to scheduled lines) and affordability.
- Various regions are piloting alternative forms of demand-driven forms of transport, which do not necessarily fall within the definition of “public transport”. The Dutch Ministry is involved in introducing a number of regional Mobility-as-a-Service initiatives with the aim of identifying potential barriers, opportunities and effects (e.g. changes in travel behaviour, patterns, overall costs).
- In the Dutch context of local authority, the devolution of public transport policies to the Provinces and regional authorities and the introduction of a more market-based system (tenders and concessions) has been considered successful by the Federal Ministry.

### **9.6.1 Regional public transport**

In 2010, the then Ministry of Transport, Public Works and Water Management produced *Public Transport in the Netherlands*<sup>61</sup>. The aim of the document was to provide a broad range of information on policies, the organisation and the operation of public transport in the Netherlands.

As in Ireland, the car is the dominant means of transport in the Netherlands. Rural areas in the Netherlands are characterised by a great deal of small-scale development and according to the Dutch Ministry, public transport plays a small but important role in rural areas. Most rural areas in the Netherlands are served by rail and bus services. Key concepts are coordination and smart contracting.

In the Netherlands, responsibility for the provision of regional public transport rests at regional level. The 12 provinces and 2 regional transport authorities tender out regional public transport concessions. Local government and municipalities have responsibility for more local infrastructure such as bus stops, within the overall policies set by the national and provincial/regional governments.

Regional public transport is provided by private companies under concessions (exclusive contracts awarded through a competitive tendering process). Some of these companies offer a service

guarantee which provides alternative (taxi) transport when a transfer is missed, to ensure that the customer still reaches his/her destination.

The 2010 document noted that in the rural areas 'hybrid forms' of regional taxi and public transport are also emerging. In the section on Public Transport in Rural Areas, it concluded that:

- In order to realise public transport with a sustainable future perspective, more is needed than just the use of more efficient transport systems. Equally important is achieving a high-quality, customised mix of different transport systems;
- Efficiency improvements are feasible when the use of bus, train and regional taxi is optimised; however, the scope of these improvements is determined mainly by regional conditions and possibilities; and
- Customisation is therefore the determining principle.

### **9.6.2 Neighbourhood Bus (Buurtbus)**

Buurtbus is a community based transport service, and included 155 services in 2010. The neighbourhood bus consists of taxi vans (for up to 8 passengers) or eight seater minibuses and has a fixed schedule and route. The main difference between the Buurtbus and a normal bus is that the former is driven by volunteers which eliminate personnel costs. The bus is made available by the regional transport company, which is also responsible for its maintenance, as part of a concession to provide mainstream transport. The exact routes, timetable and driver rosters are coordinated between the neighbourhood bus association and the transport company.

### **9.6.3 Regional Taxi (RegioTaxi)**

This is a national brand which provides DRT bus services for both mainstream passengers and passengers with mobility difficulties. These buses, which are fully accessible, go to destinations where regular public transport does not. The price of regional taxis is between public transport and regular taxi fares; although in most areas people with a disability pay the standard public transport fare, while people without a disability pay a higher rate. There are certain regional differences in the way the service is operated, with the service only available to elderly people and people with a disability in some regions. The cost to the regional authority for providing a RegioTaxi can be up to 7 times more than a comparable journey on public transport. The services are run by groups of local bus companies and taxi firms.

The RegioTaxi service is different to a normal taxi service as trips can be combined with multiple people being collected in one journey, which may result in longer travel times. The price of a trip is fixed which provides cost-saving incentives for passengers to share their journeys.

## **9.7 Australia**

### **9.7.1 Access to transport for seniors and disadvantaged people in rural and regional NSW (2016)<sup>62</sup>**

This Parliamentary report considered issues related to transport needs for senior and disadvantaged people in New South Wales (NSW), the accessibility of public transport services and strategies to improve access. The main findings of the report that are of interest include:

- Poor coordination of rural and regional transport – need for a coordinated, collaborative approach across government to improve transport by making better use of existing assets.
- The need for more flexible transport options –
  - Services with fixed and limited timetables often don't meet the needs of people in rural and regional areas.
  - Poor transport connections and timetabling have a significant impact on seniors and disadvantaged people in rural and regional NSW. Such poor transport limits rural residents' access to medical treatment, and reduces education, employment and training opportunities.
  - New technology should help to provide more flexible, better coordinated transport in rural and regional areas.
  - More accessible transport infrastructure – some rural areas have very few wheelchair accessible taxis.
  - The high cost of transport in rural and regional areas and the need for better information about services and transport concessions.

## 9.8 New Zealand

New Zealand does not have any formal national programme of rural public transport services that is similar to the Local Link service offered in Ireland. Public transport services in rural areas may be provided by:

- A regional council, as part of their wider public transport network. These are fixed route / fixed schedule services;
- A regional council as part of its Total Mobility Programme, which is a subsidised taxi scheme for people with disabilities.
- The New Zealand Ministry of Education, through its school transport programme which is provided for school children living in rural areas to get to and from school.

It is not uncommon in New Zealand for individual communities to set up their own informal public transport service. In these cases, community groups tend to approach local businesses or charitable trusts for funding to purchase a van, which is then operated by volunteers within the relevant community of interest.

### 9.8.1 *The social impacts of poor access to transport in rural New Zealand (2012)*<sup>63</sup>

This report outlined some of the ways in which increased access to passenger transport in rural areas of New Zealand could be achieved. Those of relevance to Ireland include:

- Combine the funding from multiple sources to enable sharing and achieve better integration of existing passenger transport services, e.g. public buses, school buses, hospital taxis.
- Improve the timing, flexibility and/or geographical coverage of existing services by shifting to more demand-responsive transport.
- Increase the comfort and physical suitability of existing services to better meet the needs of the users (e.g. more accessible vehicles for the elderly and disabled).

## 9.9 International experiences on public transport provision in rural areas (2015)<sup>64</sup>

Research by the International Transport Forum (ITF) at the OECD found that international experiences on providing public transport services for rural and sparsely populated areas are similar around the world. The report summarises experiences with public transport service provision in rural areas of Finland, the UK, Norway, France, and Japan and identified the following challenges:

- Low and dispersed population combined with strong competition from private cars make it difficult to operate profitable commercial public transport services, leading also to higher unit costs for providing these services.
- Ageing societies and increasing population concentration in cities are further contributing to the increase in the unit cost of providing public transport services.
- Rising operating costs for bus services and constraints in public funding have reduced the ability of authorities to subsidise public transport at previous service level, leading to increased fares, increased subsidies or cutting back on existing service levels.
- In rural areas, it is difficult for conventional public transport to meet different accessibility needs of different user groups.
- Many different authorities are responsible for the administration, procurement and planning of various passenger transport services, leading to concerns over increasing costs and attempts to increase coordination amongst different authorities to gain savings.

The report concluded that there is a need to find alternative transport supply solutions to address these changing mobility issues. It considers that one approach is not sufficient and that a broader range of solutions are needed, including innovative transport services.

The report provided five policy perceptions in respect to rural public transport which may be summarised as follows:

- (1) **There is major change in the perception of 'public transport'** - Development of open data and mobile information platforms are changing the way consumers conceive public transport services. Car-sharing and ride-sharing have increased in popularity in recent years, especially in urban areas, and are being considered as real options for public transport service provision. While not a new concept, ride-sharing has found renewed popularity in some countries, spurred by new information and communications technologies. It is considered a real alternative to provide accessibility and mobility to citizens in sparsely populated areas. Carpooling offers a real growth potential, as a form of mobility without significant cost to the public.

Volunteer-driven minibuses have also been emerging as a solution for rural areas but they are not necessarily comprehensive in their coverage. Voluntary approaches are often constrained by lack of sufficient number of volunteers to cover broader areas and services.

Current legislation needs to be reconsidered in the light of these new services, enabling innovation while ensuring privacy and safety, among others.

- (2) **Demand-responsive transport is seen as one of the key options to meet public transport challenges in rural areas** – Demand-responsive transport (DRT) is suitable for rural areas because of its flexibility, and ability to adapt to local needs. These forms of transport usually serve dispersed mobility needs, either during hours of low demand, in areas of low population, or where the target users are dispersed among the general population (e.g. disabled and elderly, students, tourists). As an important element of a larger intermodal service chain, DRT can provide both local mobility, as well as connections to other conventional forms of transportation (e.g. regular bus network, railway services). DRT should be developed in consultation with users as success is dependent on the involvement of the local community. However, unit costs per trip (and public expenditure) may be high. Density of demand will affect unit costs.
- (3) **Significant scope still exists for ‘conventional’ public transport** – New forms of public transport provision do not diminish the importance of ‘conventional’ public transport. DRT alone will not fulfil all public transport needs in rural areas. International experiences show that improving service quality, marketing and information provision can increase number of passengers and reinforce the commercial viability of the industry e.g. improving service reliability, providing real-time travel information with mobile applications. While conventional public transport is not suited for all links and public transport provision in rural areas should be part of a broader transport strategy, it is important to identify the critical links (minimum service levels) regionally and locally. New forms of transport provision should complement the conventional transport providing feeder traffic to strategically defined critical links. For example, publicly funded transport services should not necessarily provide direct access from a rural area to city centres but to the closest travel centres or a collection point.
- (4) **Better coordination between different types of services is required** – Transport services are administered, purchased and financed by different authorities. There is a need for better coordination of transport services in rural areas. This includes coordinating different types of publicly funded transport services provided by public authorities, especially special transport services, which deliver several efficiency gains through grouping passengers together, improving the utilisation of existing vehicle stock and more generally, through economies of scale.

As different authorities contract with different companies, this limits the ability to coordinate. In addition to institutional barriers to better coordination, different management systems and concerns regarding rights of certain user groups are limiting possibilities for improved efficiency.

Flexibility in school and work hours, including, teleworking, can help in aligning users need and availability of transport services.

**(5) Relaxing quantitative taxi regulation can enable new innovative solutions** - Taxis are an important complement to regular scheduled public transport services in many countries. Taxi services are particularly valuable to less mobile groups living in rural areas. International evidence suggests that restricting taxi numbers through quantitative regulation constitutes an unnecessary restriction on competition and reduces economic welfare. However, quantity and quality regulation should be clearly distinguished. There is a clear case for maintaining quality regulation in the taxi industry, including vehicle standards, driver requirements and service standards. These qualitative regulations should, however, be designed to enable development of innovative services and market structure that benefit from reforms.

#### **Section 9 key points:**

- Research shows that the challenges and difficulties in the provision of rural transport are similar across other jurisdictions, for example, given the high levels of car ownership in rural areas, providing public transport for people without access to a car is difficult.
- Likewise those members of society who are most affected by such difficulties, for example, older people and people with disabilities, are similar.
- Flexible Transport Services including DRT, door-to-door services and integrated services have been shown to be beneficial across communities in different jurisdictions.
- Examples of these community initiatives in rural areas include CallConnect in Lincolnshire, UK and Buurtbus in the Netherlands.
- In other countries, there are a number of different authorities in the one country responsible for providing public transport services.

## Acronyms

APRD	Action Plan for Rural Development
ARTS	Actions on the integration of Rural Transport Services
BÉ	Bus Éireann
CARDI	Centre for Ageing Research and Development in Ireland
CEDRA	Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas
CES	Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities 2015-2024
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DEASP	Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection
DPER	Department of Public Expenditure and Reform
DRT	Demand Responsive Transport
DTTAS	Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport
EU	European Union
FTS	Flexible Transport Service
GDA	Greater Dublin Area
HaPAI	Healthy and Positive Ageing Initiative
HSE	Health Service Executive
IRL	Irish Rural Link
ITF	International Transport Forum
ITMS	Integrated Transport Management System
LITS	Local Integrated Transport Services
LTP	Local Transport Plan
NDP	National Development Plan 2018-2027
NIRT	National Integrated Rural Transport Committee
NPAS	National Positive Aging Strategy
NPF	National Planning Framework
NTA	National Transport Authority
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PSO	Public Service Obligation
PTS	Patient Transport Services
RSES	Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy
RTI	Rural Transport Initiative
RTN	Rural Transport Network
RTP	Rural Transport Programme
SPSV	Small Public Services Vehicle
TCU	Transport Coordination Unit
TFI	Transport for Ireland
TILDA	The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing
WDC	Western Development Commission

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