

RURAL TRANSPORT PROGRAM

Country: Ireland

OVERVIEW

The Rural Transport Program was established in Ireland in 2002 to enable community-based groups to provide targeted mobility services in rural areas, primarily to overcome social exclusion. Originally 37 schemes of different size, the program was restructured in 2012 so that 17 LocalLink organisations provide national coverage.

The program provides a mix of services, including DRT for general use, scheduled fixed routes and special services for vulnerable users (e.g. to daycare facilities). In 2017, the services carried 1.9 million passengers on 150,000 services trips, operating 11.9 million kms. Services are operated through a mix of in-house operation and contracted local private operators.

All vehicles are wheelchair-accessible. Some of the LocalLink areas use computer-based scheduling and dispatch. They are increasingly being integrated with the National Transport Authority's multimodal traveller information and integrated ticketing systems.

Main aspect/issue addressed by the good practice

This good practice case focuses on the Program itself. A separate good practice file deals with a specific example (Ring a Link, Carlow/Kilkenny) at the operational level. The main issues of this good practice are:

A1: Transport Services addressing Target User Groups

A2: ICT for PT and Shared Mobility

B1: Systems and Solutions for Smart Rural Areas

B2: Strategies for Increased Ridership

B3: Community-Based Transport Services

The main gaps in service provision addressed is the lack of any mobility services (except school transport) in many villages and most rural areas.



Figure 1. Local Link

source: LocalLink.ie

Main objectives of the good practice

The core objectives of the RTP and of the schemes are invariably social- and community-oriented in nature rather than transportation-oriented. The primary targets of the RTP are (i) to offer at least a minimum level of mobility to people at risk of isolation and social exclusion; and (2) to improve opportunities to access employment for people in rural areas without use of a car.

There is a very wide range of service types, although all can be classed as "shared mobility". The services consist of a mix of services open to all users and services exclusively for specific groups.

The RTP can be viewed as a "self-contained" scheme, although it is complementary to the formal public transport and increasingly being integrated with it.

DESCRIPTION OF THE AREA

<i>Region</i>	<i>Target area</i>	<i>Population</i>	<i>Population density</i>
Throughout the Republic of Ireland, currently organised as 17 different areas	Varies for the 17 designated areas.	Varies for the 17 designated areas.	Varies for the 17 designated areas. [inhab. /Km ²]

Other

Ireland is by its nature a rural country, but has been steadily transitioning to a predominantly urban population. In territorial terms, more than 80% of Ireland is classed as Predominantly Rural and the percentage of population living in rural areas is now about 32%. The overall unemployment rate was 7,3% (Eurostat, 2016) and one point higher overall in rural areas. However, this masks quite substantial variations among and within the regions, even within counties, in particular between urban and rural areas. Proximity and access to employment opportunities in larger urban areas leads to higher levels of employment in rural areas in their hinterland, with corresponding higher levels of unemployment in rural areas that are not near a larger urban area, or whose urban area is itself in economic decline.

Rural areas in Ireland has been faced with many challenges over recent decades, notably through the decline of traditional industries and associated job losses; through the emigration of many educated young people; and through poor connectivity in terms of transport and

telecommunications infrastructure. While the so-called 'Celtic Tiger' boom years from the mid-1990's brought a substantial uplift in incomes and temporarily halted or even reversed these trends, they returned with the 2008 financial crash and subsequent austerity period. The recovery in recent years has been quite uneven, both in economy and population, with the Dublin region gaining the major share, the city areas around Cork, Galway and Limerick doing reasonably well. By contrast, many of the smaller towns and rural areas have static population and deteriorating economies, especially in the west of Ireland. While 70% of the Irish workforce is located outside of the Dublin region, a concentration remains on the Eastern side of the country and around Cork, Limerick and Galway. Nevertheless, Ireland's economy and heritage are heavily dependent on the contribution of rural regions, although these are challenged in many rural areas by the lack of broadband. Agri-food and Tourism – which are both crucial to rural economies – between them employ in excess of 363,000 people (18% of the workforce).

Target user groups and needs

Car ownership in rural Ireland is high (often by necessity), but those who do not have their own means of transport are very constrained. This most impacts the young, the elderly, homemakers (usually women) in low-income households, low-waged single men (typically farm or casual labourers) and people with physical or cognitive disabilities.

In the initial phase, the target groups were primarily people in rural areas who were most at risk of isolation and social exclusion. The key target groups had been identified as elders and people of reduced mobility, especially those living alone and without their own means of transport.

Over time, and as additional funding could be accessed, more attention could be paid to more active users who needed to travel more often. The target groups then included younger people and the lower-waged who needed access to work and to homemakers who needed access to shopping, healthcare and administrative services that are invariably located in the towns.

When/if the scale and funding availability of RTP/ LocalLink can be at a higher level to provide daily day-long coverage, the main identified target groups would be people travelling to towns who would be willing to travel without their cars, and tourists travelling from towns outward to attractions and activities in villages and rural areas.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PRACTICE

Timeframe(s)

The Rural Transport Program was formally established in 2006, making permanent the Rural Transport Initiative that had been initiated in 2002 as a pilot action. A total of 37 schemes were accepted and funded under the RTP (a few of these were added subsequent the initial phase to ensure that each County in Ireland was part of some scheme). Some of the organisations and some of their mobility services predated the RTP, although these would typically have increased their level of formalisation in order to participate in this publicly-funded program. Over the subsequent decade, the various schemes typically expanded the number and scope of their services, strengthened their working relationships with various local stakeholders, and grew their ridership; all to the extent that they could access funding to do so. Periodic increases in funding for the program allowed this to occur.

In 2012, the RTP was transferred to the National Transport Authority (NTA), which itself had been established in 2009. In 2016, the RTP was substantially restructured at the organisational level. The 35 schemes, which had been of varying sizes and types, were rearranged into 17 Transport Coordination Units branded as “LocalLink” offices. The NTA’s “Statement of Strategy 2018-2022” notes that the LocalLink restructuring is “to provide enhanced services”. If this is followed through by action and additional funding, it could reasonably be expected that a new wave of expansion and/or adaptation of RTP-supported services would take place from 2019.

Bodies involved

The RTI was initiated by the Department of Transport (DOT) in 2002, following a call for proposals. The RTP was managed on their behalf by Pobal, a not-for-profit company with charitable status that manages programmes on behalf of the Irish Government and the EU.

In 2012, the RTP was transferred to the NTA (which is an agency of the national Department of Transport Tourism and Sport), who now directly manage it. In addition, NTA is the primary agency for all matters relating to passenger transport and rural mobility, including policy development, strategic planning, network planning, regulation of transport markets, allocation of PSO and

capital grant funding, management of the multimodal traveller information and integrated ticketing.

At the individual scheme level, each is managed by a community-led group with a high level of voluntary participation. In all cases, they have established a local not-for-profit entity for planning and delivery of the mobility services. Working relations are established with the local authorities, the local agencies responsible for social services and for social welfare.

In many local schemes, local private-sector operators are engaged as providers of some LocalLink services, or are at least consulted to ensure better coordination of services.

Mobility services provided/addressed

The primary characteristics of this Good Practice are (1) the establishment of a framework within which serious and widespread problems of isolation and social exclusion in rural areas could be addressed by ensuring a minimum-level of mobility; (2) building on a very broad range of community-based initiatives without undermining the community basis or leadership; (3) gradually expanding the scale and scope of the mobility services, plus the range of target users; and (4) gradually incorporating the rural mobility services within the formal framework for public transport and mobility services in Ireland.

The Rural Transport Program is a framework program and coordinating action. It does not provide any mobility services directly. The mobility services are provided through 17 independent LocalLink offices that collectively provided national coverage (please see separate Good Practice file on Kilkenny-based Ring a Link as an example of a LocalLink organisation and its services).

Mobility services provided under RTP/LocalLink are a mix of scheduled routes and DRT services.

The RTP services in the initial phases concentrated on people in rural areas who were at highest risk of isolation and social exclusion, primarily elders and people with disabilities living alone. It offered them at least once-a-week opportunity to access basic services such as shopping, post office (collect pension, send letters), or to meet other people; and in other cases providing daily

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PRACTICE

transport to daycare facilities and activity centres. Thus, the services tended to be of door-to-door nature, either general-purpose DRT or dedicated service, with a high level of customer support and driver training. Over time, the range of target users expanded, leading to more service types such as scheduled routes, DRT with less deviation, and shuttle services connecting with main public transport routes.

The provision of services varies significantly by scheme. In the initial phases, the RTP schemes acquired vehicles and operated them in-house, sometimes using paid drivers, less often using volunteers. As services expanded and included scheduled routes, there has been greater use of contracting local bus operators to operate the services. This was partly on efficiency/effectiveness grounds, but also partly as a pragmatic means of maintaining good relationships and avoiding conflict.

there are differences. The urban public transport services in the main cities are provided under Public Service Obligation contracts. Intercity bus services are operated on commercial basis under light-touch regulation, by both state-owned and private companies. Rural public transport services are currently operated under a mix of (i) the direct award bundle to Bus Éireann; (ii) some PSO routes initiated by the NTA that have been put to competitive tender, and (iii) commercial routes under light-touch regulation.

The rural mobility services implemented by the 37 schemes under the RTP were, to a large extent, seen as being different to regular public transport, as being social rather than commercial, and thus had some flexibility in how they were viewed in regulatory terms. Although to the NTA in 2012, the social rural mobility services have not yet been fully formalised within the regulatory framework; this issue will have to be faced sooner or later to comply with EU regulations.



Photo from localink.ie

Legal Framework

The primary regulatory instrument is the Public Transport Regulation Act, 2009. This superseded the Road Transport Act, 1933 and subsequent Acts, amendments and their regulations. Under the 2009 Act, public bus passenger services in the Republic of Ireland may only be provided in accordance with a licence issued by the National Transport Authority. From 2011, the licencing of taxi services also came under the control of the NTA.

In regulatory terms, the same laws and regulatory instruments apply for all public transport in Ireland, whether urban, regional, intercity or rural. In practice,

The RTP/LocalLink schemes themselves originated in the original applications to the RTI around 2002, and then a subsequent restructuring/merging in 2016. It remains to be seen if the LocalLink entities will need to compete with commercial entities for this role in coming years.

The local schemes operate many of the mobility services themselves, on in-house basis using owned or hired vehicle assets. Other services, especially those that are routes in nature, are generally contracted in from operators using normal procurement procedures.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PRACTICE

Cost and Financing sources

The RTP is supported by central government grant, which is distributed by NTA to the LocalLink offices. The allocation for 2018 is €14.3 million across the 17 LocalLink offices. The forms only part of the funding for the individual local schemes, which also generate revenues from fares from the mobility services, and access whatever local funding sources they can.

Although the specifics vary from one scheme to another, all schemes view their core mobility services from a socially-essential perspective, thereby keeping tariffs low to maximise the availability to their target groups. Free Travel Passes (available to elders, disabled and certain socially-vulnerable categories) are accepted on all services, although they are not explicitly compensated per use. The Department of Social Welfare currently provides an annual allocation of €1.5 million.

from the communities served by the scheme. The Board of each scheme would include both community representatives and local development agencies (e.g. the local LEADER program), the local authority, local health, education and other agencies, etc.

Each LocalLink office consists of a small group of full-time management, operational and administrative staff, sometimes supported by additional paid or volunteer staff. In-house drivers are usually full-time or part-time paid employees.

Supporting technologies

Some of the local schemes implemented ITS tools for booking, reservation and dispatching - e.g. Kilkenny-based Ring a Link implemented the Mobirouter software in the mid-2000's.



Photo from locallink.ie

Organizational set-up

At the program level, the RTP is overseen by the NTA. The RTP is implemented through 17 Transport Coordination Units (LocalLink offices), which collectively provide national coverage.

At the individual scheme level, each is managed by a community-led group with a high level of voluntary participation. The composition of these groups varies substantially, but in each case the communities are the primary stakeholders. This is usually by the establishment of a not-for-profit organisation (some of which predated the RTI/RTP) with governance drawn

Since the RTP transferred to the NTA, there has been considerable deployment of their Integrated Transport Management System (ITMS) which provides a centralised system for the scheduling of routes and services as well as the booking of passenger on these services.

LocalLink services are being increasingly incorporated into the NTA's national multimodal travel information system and journey planner. The NTA's national integrated fare payment system ("LEAP card") is not yet accepted for payment on most LocalLink mobility services, although it is inevitable that this will occur in time.

INNOVATION ASPECTS

ORGANISATIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES AND PARTNERSHIP WORKING ARRANGEMENTS

Community-led initiatives

'Not for profit' transport entities established with Board drawn from local communities and agencies

Restructured in 2016 as 17 Transport Coordination Units

Gradually being incorporated

LEVEL OF PUBLIC SECTOR FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Provided funding framework for community-led initiatives in rural mobility

Assured continuity of funding for what had previously been ad hoc schemes

INTERCONNECTIONS BETWEEN SHARED AND PUBLIC TRANSPORT SERVICES

Mix of fixed route and DRT services, as appropriate to the needs of individual areas

Services usually connect with the main PT hubs and routes, in some cases as connectors or shuttles

Schemes work with the local bus operators coordinate services and to avoid conflict

ICT CONNECTIONS AND IMPACTS OF THE TECHNOLOGICAL SOLUTIONS IMPLEMENTED

Some LocalLink schemes use ITS for booking, reservation and dispatch

Systematically being incorporated within the national multimodal traveller information system and journey planner

OTHER (E.G. SOCIAL INNOVATION, ETC.)

Primary goal is to combat isolation and social exclusion in rural areas, in particular for people living alone without cars

ASSESSMENT

Ridership and other key metrics/results (through key-indicators, where applicable)

As noted above, the Rural Transport Program itself is the framework, the mobility services are provided by the individual RTP/LocalLink schemes.

With that clarification, the total mobility services provided under the RTP consist of about 150,000 services trips in 2017, operating 11.8 million kilometres and carrying 1.89 million passengers. This represents gradual but sustained growth since the RTP was put on a permanent basis (following the initial pilot period). In 2005, the schemes operated 75,000 service trips and carried; in 2009, the schemes operated 157,000 service trips and carried 1.29 million passengers; in 2015, the schemes carried 1.76 million passengers.

At many levels, the RTP can be considered to have achieved a good outcome. The program has been evaluated on a number of occasions, from the various perspectives of societal impact, operational effectiveness and of value-for-money. Perhaps unsurprisingly, reviews conducted by agencies and groups with social and societal remit consider the scheme to be effective, essential and performing well within the various constraints it faces, while identifying a wide range of societal benefits; by contrast, reviews conducted by Government Departments tend to question the value for money, highlight lack of robust data to support either the need or the benefits, and make recommendations to cut costs and reduce the number of users allowed to travel free.

As a program, RTP has been effective to harness a set of very different and unconnected community-based initiatives within a common framework, and to maintain that framework over a period of 15 years. The various local schemes all succeeded to provide local services and endured, and have now been transformed into 17 Transport Coordination Units that appear to be quite stable. They continue to have a strong community-base, but are now being more integrated within the formal PT framework. The expectations for the future are that the TCUs would be given a stronger role through which they would increase their service provision and/or be given responsibility to coordinate additional mobility services provided by others. This is, of course, dependent on additional funding and continued government priority to rural mobility.

User opinion has been strongly positive from the outset, as the services provide a lifeline for the most socially-vulnerable people within rural communities. The services pay a high level of attention to their users, with many door-to-door services, careful selection and customer-care training of drivers, etc. However, this strong prioritisation of vulnerable members within society has often led other potential users to either think they cannot use them or to have a negative perception towards using them. It is recognised that this issue must be addressed if there would be more use by the general public.

Good Governance

Notwithstanding the difficulties and weaknesses described below, the RTP improved governance of rural mobility at both the national and local levels.

At national level, through the program, it brought a higher level of awareness of rural mobility challenges. It set the basis for a highly-centralised government to work with community-led initiatives, even in the absence of any framework that recognised any role for such groups. It also allowed a substantial degree of flexibility to introduce mobility services according to the needs identified by the local groups, very much in contrast to whether anyone else would have been allowed to establish such services through the regulatory mechanism. Since transferring to the NTA in 2012, and the subsequent restructuring in 2016, the basis has been set for a further evolution in direction and governance.

At the local level, community-based groups that had previously been quite informal and often driven by strong personalities were required to become more formalised. At the corporate level, they all established Boards of management, suitable transport companies or equivalent entities, established formal and transparent accounting and decision-taking processes, etc. All were required to prepare business plans and to revise them periodically. At the operational level, the level of professionalism increased as they invariably hired transport managers, coordinators, trained drivers, and improved their operational and technical systems. Over time, capacity improved to make value-for-money decisions. All LocalLink schemes now have strong working relationships with other local actors including the local authorities, community groups,

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health agencies, tourism boards, education and training groups, social welfare agencies and the local bus, taxi and other mobility providers.

The Program itself has facilitated the various schemes to interact regularly, sharing experiences, problems, good practice, etc. and to develop a substantial knowledge base over time.

Success factors/strengths

The primary success factor for the RTP could probably be identified as the depth of the problems of isolation and social exclusion in rural areas, for those who do not have the availability of a car. The problems and their consequences for both people and communities are deep and have not diminished. A large amount of research and highlighting the issues led to the establishment of the RTI on a pilot basis, and then to the retention and extension as a permanent Program, as awareness increased of the problems and the effectiveness of the RTP mobility services.

The key strengths of the RTP could be summarised as: (1) The community basis, which leads to strong support and acceptance within the operational areas; (2) Knowledge and understanding of local need, leading to better decisions on where and when to allocate resource; (3) clear focus on the main goal and target groups; (4) a high level of customer support and training of all personnel; (5) cost effectiveness;

Difficulties encountered/weakness

The primary difficulties and weaknesses can be summarised as follows. It is worth noting that all of the weaknesses are directly linked:

1. Lack of specific policy at any level in relation to rural mobility, along with lack of specific targets or obligations. The NTA's latest Statement of Strategy 2018-2022 has begun to address the issue with some interesting statement, but these are general aspirations without specific targets. It remains to be seen how far NTA will go during this period to strengthen rural mobility.

2. Lack of authority for rural mobility at the local level (whether in law or delegated) such that the local authorities or other stakeholders can neither develop the mobility plans nor determine the mobility services in their area. Again, it remains to be seen whether the NTA will develop new models for working with local stakeholders to develop local plans, and/or whether they will give greater role to the 17 LocalLink offices following the restructuring.
3. Scale of the activities and funding in relation to the magnitude of the challenges and overall need for mobility in rural areas. It is clear that, as currently functioning, the RTP can only deal with the most pressing needs and ensure a minimum level of service that is often just once a week. The RTP is not in a position, for example, to ensure adequate mobility for all users to live a normal daily life without a car.
4. The administrative burden of participating in and complying with a national publicly-funded program, which is quite substantial for community-based organisations.
5. Vulnerability of the entire program, in the absence of a formal statement of policy or a permanent place in the institutional framework. This was most evident during the economic crisis in 2009 when the body tasked with reforming public finances recommended to completely cease funding the Rural Transport Program. Part of the justification was the high level of car ownership in rural areas, revealing a mindset that a return to extreme isolation and social exclusion for many individuals would be acceptable as long as the community as a whole would get by. As it happened, the political backlash for such small savings meant that the RTP survived the cuts. Nevertheless, it showed how easily the entire program could disappear when it is not formally embedded.

FEATURES THAT ARE CONSIDERED TO BE GOOD PRACTICE (LESSON(S) LEARNT)

A national program with very modest budget was able to harness a wide range of community-based rural mobility schemes into a common framework. Over time, the range of mobility services, the professionalism of the scheme operators and the use of technology have all increased. The program is now on a permanent footing and is becoming embedded in policy.

Key references

- RTP: Rural Transport connecting Rural Ireland: Performance and Impact Report 2008-9
- Rural Transport Forum: Rural Transport Program Strategy 2011-2016
- DTTAS: Value for Money and Policy Review of the Rural Transport Programme (2011)
- NTA: LocalLink Rural Transport Programme Strategic Plan 2018-2022 (2018)

Websites

- www.nationaltransport.ie/public-transport-services/rural-transport-programme
- www.locallink.ie
- www.ringalink.ie