

RING A LINK KILKENNY

COMMUNITY MOBILITY SERVICES IN RURAL AREA

Country: Ireland

OVERVIEW

Short description of the Good Practice Case:

This GP is implemented in three adjoining counties, Kilkenny, Carlow and Wicklow, in the southeast of Ireland. The area consists of medium-sized and smaller towns, many villages and a dispersed rural population. Ring a Link was established in 2001 as a community-based provider of local transport services with focus on combatting social exclusion. Over time, the coverage and intensity of services has increased so that Ring a Link now functions as a Transport Coordination Unit. It directly operates 23 minibuses and contracts in a further 10 minibuses daily. Ring a Link provides primarily minibus-based DRT services and some fixed route services. All services are for general use, but the DRT services require to be pre-booked.



Figure 1. Ring a Link (source: www.ringalink.ie)

Main aspect/issue addressed by the good practice

The main issues addressed are:

- A1: Solutions usable by all the population and especially the disadvantaged;
- B1: New business concepts and solutions for improving the accessibility of rural areas;
- B3: Local initiatives involving the community to identify transport solutions.

The main mobility needs of the target rural area are (i) daily access to work and education from villages and rural areas; and (ii) access to essential services for vulnerable and isolated people.

The main gaps in service provision addressed by the GP is lack of a comprehensive public transport network and/or alternative mobility framework throughout the County.

Main objectives of the good practice

Key objectives of the Good Practice are:

1. Combat social exclusion by providing at least a weekly opportunity to travel for all people in the rural areas;
2. Improve access between villages and the main urban centres (Kilkenny, Carlow);
3. Optimisation of resources by efficient route and ride-matching and dispatching;
4. Increased emphasis on the integration of rural transport services with existing transport provision.

DESCRIPTION OF THE AREA

Region	Target area	Population	Population density
Carlow, Kilkenny and Wicklow Counties, Ireland	4.997 km ²	139.000 (rural) (297.000 less 158.000 in the designated towns)	60 (overall) 28 (rural) [inhab. /km ²]

Other

The three counties have a few large and many small towns and villages but lack a major urban centre. To the north, especially Wicklow, they are heavily influenced by Dublin to which many people commute daily. To the south-east there is the influence of Waterford City. The three counties are quite well served by intercity and regional public transport, both bus and rail. However, the internal public transport is not well developed. Towns and villages are heavily dependent on longer-distance routes passing through them, so that many villages are not served at all by public transport.

The national Schools Transport Scheme ensures comprehensive transport to/from schools for schoolchildren but is limited to term time and cannot be used by others. There are not special mobility services for out-patients, daycare or healthcare access, except where these are arranged privately. In this context, Ring a Link provides the "social safety net".



Photo from www.ringalink.ie/news

Target user groups and needs

- Originally, the main target groups were people at risk of isolation and social exclusion, as this was the priority of the Rural Transport Program.
- Over time, the main target groups have expanded to include persons in rural areas without car who need daily access to work and education; those in rural areas who need periodic access to training and other social activities; and an emerging target group is visitors/tourists to be able to access rural areas.
- Traditionally, the target groups would have been the elderly, people with disabilities and vulnerable persons. As the scope and service types increased, the target groups have started to encompass all segments of the community. At this stage, the main differentiators are living in a rural area (including villages/small towns) and not having the possibility to use car for the trip, for whatever reason.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PRACTICE

Timeframe(s)

Ring a Link began in Carlow, Kilkenny and South Tipperary in 2002-3 as part of the Rural Transport Program in Ireland. In this phase, it was providing Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) services, with a clear focus on combatting social exclusion. These were mostly door-to-door services, providing access to the main urban areas once or twice a week. From the outset, Ring a Link used ITS-based booking, reservation and dispatching systems. The number of areas served gradually increased over the following decade, as the available budget under RTP increased. In 2012, the Rural Transport Program and all its 35 Local Link entities were transferred from Pobal to the National Transport Authority (NTA). In 2016, the 35 Local Link entities were restructured into 17 Transport Coordination Units covering all the country, Ring a Link being one of these. In 2016, at about the same time as this restructuring, Ring a Link added County Wicklow and part of Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown (southern periphery of Dublin) to its area of operation, in effect absorbing their former counterpart in the area and taking over their service delivery. In 2017, Ring a Link absorbed the operations of North Fingal (northern periphery of Dublin) through a merger. In 2017, Ring a Link also began operating two internal bus routes in Kilkenny City, on an interim basis pending the establishment of permanent routes under Kilkenny County Council. In 2018, Ring a Link began operating selected evening services at weekends, as part of a national program to combat drink-driving.

Bodies involved

Ring a Link is one of 17 designated Transport Coordination Units supported by the Irish National Transport Authority (NTA). It manages the booking and dispatch centre, direct operates about two thirds of its services and contracts in the remainder from local private operators.

The National Transport Authority (NTA) is, among other things, the transport authority for planning, regulation and PSO contracts for all public transport services in Ireland, and the regulator for all commercial PT services and taxis.

Kilkenny County Council, through its various planning, local development, economic and social activities and committees provide a framework and non-financial support for the rural mobility in County Kilkenny.

The County Councils of Carlow, Tipperary and Wicklow play similar roles, but have not been as directly active in relation to Ring a Link.

Kilkenny LEADER Partnership (KLP) has been active in promoting rural mobility. It has facilitated the formation of an ad hoc Transport Working Group which includes Kilkenny County Council, KLP, local agencies and stakeholders and Ring a Link. It arranged a conference on rural mobility in 2017 and subsequently produced a Comprehensive Mobility Plan for County Kilkenny during 2018.

Mobility services provided/addressed

Ring a Link is one of the 17 Transport Coordination Units under NTA. It is both a transport coordinator and a direct operator of mobility services. It currently owns and operates 23 minibuses. It contracts in a further 10 minibuses from private operators. Ring a Link fields about 30 vehicles daily (allowing for maintenance holdings).

A **Vision** for Ring a Link was articulated from its inception in 2001 and has evolved over time. The most recent version, adopted in September 2017 states: *"We aspire to provide quality rural services that link our service users to essential services, supports and people in their communities. We strive to reduce isolation for the dispersed rural individuals we serve through facilitating participation and connection with communities."*

A **Mission** for Ring a Link has been developed in response to the Vision as *"To work collaboratively with our service users and partners to provide responsive client-led transport in the rural communities we serve and thus facilitate enhanced socio-economic access, inclusion, participation and engagement"*.

The Strategic Priorities are set out as:

- Priority 1: Provision and expansion of needs-based DRT and other transport services;
- Priority 2: Ensure accessibility to Ring a Link services;
- Priority 3: Promote a programme of awareness in Ring a Link communities;
- Priority 4: Maintain robust systems to support quality service delivery.

The mobility services and the means of organisation are designed to reflect the Mission and Priorities.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PRACTICE

The Call Centre is available to the public from 09:00 to 17:00 Monday to Friday, for registration, booking, queries, etc. It remains staffed outside those hours and at weekends to provide operational and other support to drivers and to deal with any situations arising.

The Ring a Link Services consist of the following service types:

- **Fixed-route services**, mostly in County Wicklow and Fingal. This consists of 17 routes in County Wicklow and 6 routes in Fingal, for social inclusion purposes, that operate one day a week in County Wicklow; plus 5 routes that provide daily services in Fingal, primarily for commuters.
- **Demand Responsive services**, operating as flexible routes (i.e. there is a preliminary route structure which is then adapted to the demand on the day) and mainly oriented to social necessity in more remote areas. In total there are currently 21 DRT routes, mostly available on one day per week, in a few cases on two days per week. An exceptional route (505) is operated 5 times daily and connects with the intercity bus services.
- **City services:** Ring a Link provides an interim service on two routes in Kilkenny City, as a precursor to a permanent service that will be established in mid-2019.
- **Evening services:** As part of a national initiative to combat drink-driving, Ring a Link provides a number of evening services at weekends to/from Kilkenny City from the outlying villages.
- **Schools Transport:** Limited availability of places in schools in some areas has resulted in some students having to go schools in other towns, but then they are not eligible for the national Schools Transport scheme. In a few cases, Ring a Link has stepped in to provide transport to/from school in these areas. This currently consists of six routes operated during school term.
- **Social Inclusion Trips:** A small number of day excursion trips are provided for social groups, by prior arrangement. These are sponsored by the NTA under a specific budget allocation.

Ring a Link do not operate any healthcare, daycare or outpatient mobility services. To the extent possible, services are scheduled to connect with other scheduled bus routes.

Legal Framework

The primary regulatory instrument is the Irish 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.

There are no other relevant laws or regulations at regional or local level, since local government has no allocated mandate or authority in these matters.

In Ireland, there are no specific laws, regulations or guidelines for “non-standard” forms of mobility services such as DRT. The various forms of special service (e.g. transport to daycare or dialysis facility, patient discharge, etc) would not come under the general mobility services legislation or regulation.

Ring a Link procures the mobility services from local private operators. To date, this has tended to be done by local “shopping” procedures (i.e. get quotes from reputable suppliers).

Cost and Financing sources

Ring a Link is a not-for-profit entity that must balance its income and costs, as it does not have other lines of business that could cross-subsidise the mobility services.

Income is derived from four main sources:

- Customer receipts on the scheduled and DRT routes;
- NTA provides public financial support for scheduled and DRT services, which could not otherwise be sustained;
- Allocation of funds from the Department of Social Protection as partial compensation for participation in the Free Travel Scheme, channelled through NTA;
- Other sources for specific services, such as from Kilkenny County Council for the interim urban routes in Kilkenny City.

Fares are intentionally kept at affordable levels, reflecting that the services are still primarily aimed at

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PRACTICE

combatting social exclusion and isolation. Fares are a flat €3 per one-way trip for adults, €2 for under-16s, children under 5 travel free. Currently the fares are not aligned with or integrated with the general fare structure for PT. The services do not yet accept the national payment card (LEAP).

All routes accept the Free Travel Pass, which basically means that all elders, people with disability and certain other categories of vulnerable persons can travel for free on Ring a Link services.

Organizational set-up

'Carlow, Kilkenny and South Tipperary Rural Transport Ltd', trading as 'Ring a Link', is a company limited by guarantee with charitable status. Ring a Link was formed in August 2001. It is a not-for-profit, voluntary organisation providing mobility services for passengers living in rural locations across Carlow, Kilkenny and South Tipperary, assisting in the reduction of rural isolation and marginalisation. The company was supported in its formation by the local LEADER Company (BNS, now KLP) which had a long-standing interest in the rural transport field.

The need for Ring a Link's Service was identified via research carried out within the EU SAMPO project in 1996-7 and a follow up study in 2000 undertaken by each county development board. In addition, community consultation meetings were held in 2002, which identified and responded to the demand of local parishes, and this defined the original days, times and destination of services. This DRT model has been sustained through the consultation with working groups in each area feeding "bottom up" ideas for new routes.

In 2016 Ring a Link added the area of Wicklow and Dunlaoghaire/Rathdown to its operational area. In 2017, Ring a Link absorbed the North Fingal transport initiative (NiFTI) through a merger, thus expanding its operations to the northern hinterland of Dublin city.

The company is organised with a Board of Directors, a Management Sub-Committee and Transport Working Groups (TWG), one in each county council area, consisting of members from various community and statutory agencies. Until 2017, the Board comprised of 16 members, three are drawn from each of the four

Transport Working Groups, one member nominated from each of the four Local Authority areas.

Following merger with NiFTI, the board was expanded to allow for an extra four members, three from the existing board of NIFTI which then constituted the North Fingal TWG and an additional member designated by the Fingal Local Authority. This demonstrates an ability to maintain community ownership even as the coverage expands.

Ring a Link has 5 full-time staff, consisting of the Transport Manager and 4 people who handle customer-support and dispatching. All staff multi-task, so the "dispatchers" are also the resource for the core areas of operations and maintenance, finance, customer registration/database management and IT.

Supporting technologies

From the outset, Ring a Link has used ITS-supported booking and reservation software. The MobiRouter product has been, and remains, the core support to trip management and service optimisation. This decision was largely influenced by Kilkenny's involvement with the SAMPO and SAMPLUS projects, which demonstrated the use of ITS to support DRT in a number of European settings. It was also influenced by the substantial territory covered by Ring a Link (Carlow, Kilkenny and South Tipperary) and the possibility that the number of services and volume of bookings would exceed what could reasonably be managed without such support tools.

In addition, since 2015 Ring a Link has operated the Integrated Transport Management System (ITMS) which has been provided by NTA to all Transport Coordination Units since January 2015. The ITMS includes the following data management utilities:

Passenger Data Input – to contact the passenger by telephone, data protection declaration, name, address, contact numbers, male / female, dob, FTP holder and type, directions to house, additional passenger, assistance required, additional information, Next of Kin detail, and plot location.

Services Data Input – Details, service Type, Stops, destinations and service areas to be drawn (DRT) Schedule details etc.

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Fleet Details – Vehicle type, address, contact / fax no, email address, contact name, TCC, Safety statement, RPTOL, reg no, vehicle make, model, seating capacity.
Driver Details – name, contact no, address, licence details.

Sub-Contractor Details – name, address, contact no, e mail address, vehicles type, seating capacity, reg no, vehicle insurance and indemnity, safety statement, TCC and sub-contractor driver details.

The Ring a Link services do not yet accept the NTA's national transport payment card (LEAP).



Photo from www.ringalink.ie/news

INNOVATION ASPECTS

ORGANISATIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES AND PARTNERSHIP WORKING ARRANGEMENTS

Representative Board structure drawn from voluntary sector, suited to expansion of coverage area. Includes elected representatives.

Close working relationship with Local Authority and Local LEADER Partnership.

Lean multi-tasking organisation, with mix of on-house operation and contracted services.

Expansion through partnership and merging with other agencies.

LEVEL OF PUBLIC SECTOR FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Utilisation of different financing streams for consolidated service contracts.

Leveraging opportunities as they arise.

INTERCONNECTIONS BETWEEN SHARED AND PUBLIC TRANSPORT SERVICES

DRT services timed to meet with scheduled/ fixed route services.

Some services designated as feeders to longer-distance routes.

ICT CONNECTIONS AND IMPACTS OF THE TECHNOLOGICAL SOLUTIONS IMPLEMENTED

Implementation of IT-based customer management, booking, dispatching and administrative platform.

Participation in EU projects, including FLIPPER and SUNRISE.

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

Not-for-profit organisation with local voluntary-sector Board, deeply-rooted in the local community.

ASSESSMENT

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

Total annual ridership across all services in 2017 was 143,000, and is expected to be about 150,000 in 2018. Ridership in the original Carlow-Kilkenny-South Tipperary areas grew from 22,000 in 2005 (when the Rural Transport Program was put on a permanent footing) to 81,000 in 2015. This growth generally reflected the gradual increases in funding available to Ring a Link through the RTP, which enabled additional services to be implemented. The significant increase in 2016/17 arises from the absorption of the Wicklow and North Final operations.

User satisfaction was identified as being high in various market research and user attitudinal surveys carried out in the first decade of operations. This included studies in collaborative EU projects such as FLIPPER and SUNRISE. However, there have not been any recent market research or customer satisfaction studies that would indicate if the satisfaction levels have been maintained, or if new issues have arisen as the coverage area and service mix has evolved.

This Good Practice has strong potential for transferability within Ireland, and indeed there are similarities with some of the other Transport Coordination Units. Over the 15 or so years of the Rural Transport Program, there has been periods of strong interaction and experience exchange among the various rural transport schemes. This level of interaction tends to fluctuate with individual organisations being willing to take the initiative to bring everyone together, e.g. by organising a forum or workshop.

This Good Practice should be reasonably transferrable elsewhere in Europe, as the main requirement is good engagement and organisation at the community level, sustained over time, rather than any complex technical or operational capacity.

The main strong and potential weak points associated with the GP are described in the following sections.

Expectation for the future is that the services will continue and be further consolidated. Demand continues to grow and there remains much unmet need for mobility in rural areas. Further, Ireland's limited progress to meet GHG reduction targets will make it

increasingly important to provide alternatives to those who currently use car, rather than just serve those who don't have access to cars. To date, Ring a Link has shown the ability to expand both in coverage and in scale of service.

Good Governance

Ring a Link was designed from the outset to be deeply-grounded in the community. Unlike its counterparts elsewhere in Ireland which needed to ensure a reasonable representation of the communities they serve, Ring a Link had the added complication of a coverage area that spanned three adjacent counties. The voluntary sector tends invariably responds to local needs and interacts with the local agencies, so there is not a tradition of inter-county working. Ring a Link solved this by structuring the Board to have a number of voluntary sector representatives from each county, plus one elected Councillor from each county.

This structure proved particularly useful as Ring a Link expanded its coverage area, first into County Wicklow and then into North Fingal. Additional Board Members from these counties were co-opted without having to make any change to the core structure or constitution of the entity.

The voluntary sector representatives are typically people who also participate in the Public Participation Networks (PPNs) and/or the Local Community Development Committees (LCDC), which are mechanisms under the County Councils (local government) to ensure public participation in planning and programs. In this way, the Ring a Link voluntary sector Board members usually have a good appreciation of local government activities, and in a good position to present to the Council the mobility and social needs of rural areas.

As with many other RTP entities in Ireland, over the 15 years or so, Ring a Link has become a well-established, trusted and experienced organisation with the capacity to deliver locally. The nature of the organisation means that it is close to the ground with a good understanding of local needs and of local mobility deficits, and is motivated to continually improve the mobility service range.

From the outset, the Board articulated a Vision and strategic priorities for Ring a Link, with time-

ASSESSMENT

bound Strategy/Plans. These have evolved and been periodically updated over time. Ring a Link is currently working to the “*Ring a Link Strategy 2017-2019*”.

A very effective working relationship has been established with the local LEADER partnership (CKP), which has taken an ad hoc role to establish a Transport Working Group covering all of the relevant agencies, as a means to strengthening rural mobility services in County Kilkenny and adjoining areas. Likewise, a constructive working relationship has also been established with the Kilkenny County Council, for whom Ring a Link has provided the interim local bus service within Kilkenny City.

Success factors/strengths

The Board structure has provided a strong and enduring connection to the local communities. The representative arrangement has facilitated Ring a Link to expand into new areas and ensure that they have comparable representation.

The Transport Working Group arrangement ensures that there is a good understanding of needs and priorities in each area. This has worked particularly well when additional funding became available and allowed new services to be set up. The stakeholders were able to identify and agree where there was greatest need and potential, and avoid situations where each sought to get more resource for his/her own area.

Setting a Vision and Mission, updating this from time to time, and developing periodic Strategic Plans have all helped to maintain good business practices at Ring a Link.

Continuity of the Rural Transport Program and stability of funding has been an important factor. The initial approach at Ring a Link was to hire a competent Transport Manager, acquire a good ITS platform for booking and dispatching, and gradually build up its own operating capacity (vehicles, drivers). This established a high level of operational competence, which has been maintained.

Participation in EU projects, such as SUNRISE and FLIPPER, were important for know-how transfer. It also gave local stakeholders and elected representatives exposure to how rural transport is organised in other

countries and to good practice, and built confidence that Ring a Link should be supported.

The long-standing support of the LEADER Partnership and its continued interest is important to getting national and local government to give higher priority and support to developing rural mobility services.

Difficulties encountered/weakness

There is no mandated or formal structure for rural mobility at the local level, local government does not have any official mandate for mobility services, and there is neither a formal policy nor specific targets for rural mobility. Ring a Link must work by persuasion rather than by any authority or rights.

Ring a Link must work within the funding allocated to it. Thus, the quantum of service that it can provide is a matter of what it can do with the available funds rather than the identified needs of the communities.

Ring a Link works within a “grey area” about its status and the status of its services. Care must always be taken to avoid competition or confrontation with the established bus operators. The original core product of Ring a Link was mobility services for the most vulnerable in rural areas to combat isolation and social exclusion. The services were mostly door-to-door, given the needs of the original target groups. However, that set quite high expectations for such a convenient service. Over time, it has been less practical or affordable to provide such a personalised service to all users, but the expectations remain and users are reluctant to change to services that are not door-to-door.

The transfer to the NTA has various advantages, but it brings Ring a Link into a more formal and “top down” structure, in which the service expectations are set in accordance with national policy and guidance. This is a significant change from the previous arrangements, where all decisions about how funding would be used and the services to which it would be allocated were made by the Board, reflecting the consensus among the local stakeholders. There is an emerging risk that Ring a Link (and other TCUs around Ireland) would increasingly become “agents” of the national authority and their connection and accountability to the local communities would be weakened.

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As EU Regulation 1370/2007 works its way deeper and deeper into all forms of mobility services that receive any type of public funds, perhaps even beyond its original intent, mobility organisers such as Ring a Link fall within its ambit. There is now a risk that the services provided by Ring a Link must be put to the market through open competitive tender.

While on one hand this is naturally compliant with an open market for services, on the other it risks replacing community-based entities with market-based entities. The long-term risk is that these schemes will eventually fail or be withdrawn, leaving the communities without the current services that were developed with community and volunteer effort.

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

Starting from scratch as a grassroots organisation and leveraging various funding opportunities, Ring a Link established a range of community and social mobility services and the enabling booking and reservation capacity. It has subsequently developed daily and regular DRT and scheduled services, expanded its coverage area, and developed into a comprehensive transport coordination unit with operations in five counties.

REFERENCES FOR FURTHER DETAILS

Contact of the operator and of relevant stakeholders

Organization: Ring a Link

Person contact: Jackie Meally

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Websites

- Ring a Link: www.ringalink.ie
- Kilkenny County Council: www.kilkennycoco.ie
- National Transport Authority: www.nationaltransport.ie