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IRELAND

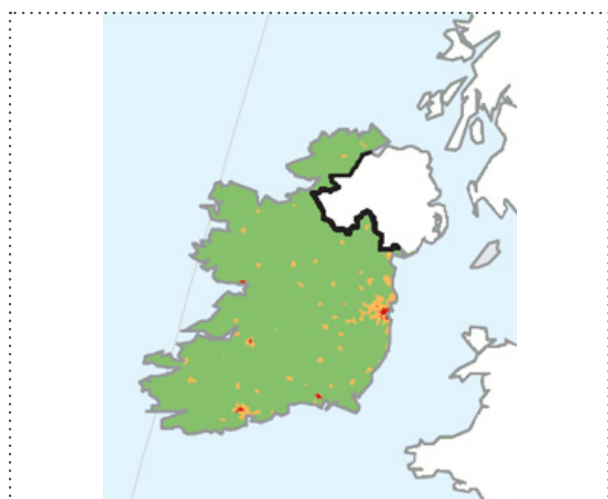
INSIGHT PAPER

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RURALITY (1)

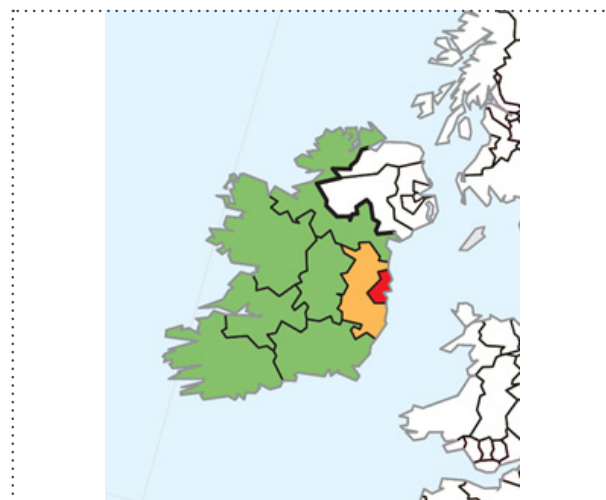
Degree of urbanisation for local administrative units level 2 (LAU2)



- Cities
- Towns and suburbs
- Rural Areas
- Data not available

Source: Eurostat, JRC and European Commission Directorate-General for Regional Policy, May 2016

Urban-rural typology for NUTS level 3 regions



- Predominantly urban regions
(rural population is less than 20% of the total population)
- Intermediate regions
(rural population is between 20% and 50% of the total population)
- Predominantly rural regions
(rural population is 50% or more of the total population)
- Data not available

Source: Eurostat, JRC, EFGS, REGIO-GIS, December 2016

DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION

44,6%

Share of people living in cities

23,5%

Share of people living in towns and suburbs

31,9%

Share of people living in rural areas

Source: Eurostat, 2016

GEOGRAPHY

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 have 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).

RURality (2)

22,4%

Share of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion in rural areas, **2016**

1,4%

Share of people aged 16 and over who reported unmet needs for health care in the previous 12 months due to expense, distance to travel or length of waiting list in rural areas, **2016**

8,5%

Unemployment rate, persons aged 15–64, in rural areas, **2016**

17,6%

Share of young people aged 18–24 neither in employment nor in education or training (NEETs) in rural areas, **2016**

Source: Eurostat

NATIONAL POLICIES RELATING TO RURAL MOBILITY AND PUBLIC TRANSPORT

There is not a specific Irish policy on mobility in rural areas that defines a set of outcomes which should be achieved, sets measurable targets, specifies the level of mobility that should be provided, mandates or specifies the basis and quantum of financing, or defines mobility rights of citizens or communities. The Department of Transport Tourism and Sport *“Statement of Strategy 2016-2019”* includes a commitment to *“better integration of rural transport services with other transport services”* but is silent on improving or diversifying the rural transport services themselves. There is a commitment 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”*, but without any commitment to actually improve or increase services or their associated funding.

There is not a specific Irish policy on the supply side of transport in rural areas. That said, there is a long-standing implicit policy (evidenced by sustained allocation of funding) to establish and support mobility in rural areas through (i) the continued provision of Public Service Obligation funding to the state-owned bus operator and now occasionally to other operators; (ii) through the long-established Schools Transport Scheme; (iii) through the Rural Transport Program established in 2002 (now LocalLink); (iv) through the Smarter Travel Program; and (v) through capital grant allocation for public transport facilities.

The Government’s transport policy for the period 2009 – 2020, *“Smarter Travel – A Sustainable Transport Future”*, focusses on the development and promotion of sustainable means of transport – walking, cycling and public transport – through the provision of funding for infrastructure as well as funding for behavioural change programmes to encourage the use of more sustainable transport modes. A broad goal has been set of reducing commuting by private car from 65% to 45%, but the comprehensive set of actions required to achieve such a major shift has not yet been developed or implemented. Action 14 contains interesting elements to improve rural mobility, but these have not been delivered to date. The policy stipulated that Local Authorities prepare Local Transport Plans including targets for modal change to more sustainable means of travel and a programme of measures to achieve these targets.

The recent *“National Planning Framework: Project Ireland 2040”* recognises the issues of Sustainable Mobility, Rural Development and Environmentally Sustainable Public Transport. However, improved mobility and accessibility and more sustainable travel are dealt with only in the urban and inter-regional context. *“Sustainable”* is viewed from the environmental perspective only and not whether the mobility services and accessibility can be sustained for people and communities over time. While recognising the need to improve the economy, opportunities and social fabric of villages and rural areas, the Framework is generally silent on specific actions and contains no stated Objective (although noted in National Strategic Outcomes 3 and 5) to improve mobility and accessibility within rural areas, to improve links from rural areas to public transport hubs, or on the potential role of shared-mobility in rural areas.

The National Transport Authority’s *“Statement of Strategy 2018-2022”* includes objectives to *“Integrate rural transport and small public service vehicle services into the wider public transport network”* and *“Continue to develop new and expanded services to better serve rural Ireland”*, while noting that the LocalLink restructuring is *“to provide enhanced services”*.

Policies on healthcare, education, social services, etc. invariably deal with the availability and distribution of facilities and services, with little or no consideration of how the target users should access them. The principal exception is the Schools Transport Scheme, which ensures access to primary and second-level education for all rural areas throughout the country.

“Realising our Rural Potential: Action Plan for Rural Development” consolidates policy and Government action plans relating to rural development. It recognises the issue of mobility in rural areas. However, the actions are limited to *“reviewing”*, *“work with communities”* and continuation of existing initiatives, without setting any new targets for improved mobility or committing to any increase or enhancement in rural mobility.

INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

There are two layers of Government in the Republic of Ireland: *the National Government*, that is the primary layer, being the executive arm of the Irish Parliament (Dáil Éireann), and *the Local Government*, that is organised at the level of *the County*, or of the City in a few cases. There are 31 County, City and City and County Councils in Ireland. It may be noted that there is no consolidated metropolitan or city government for Dublin, the capital and primary city.

Government in Ireland is very centralised in most matters. Policy formation, primary financial allocation, primary governance, main investment programs, program development and regulation are mostly carried out by National Government, its Departments (Ministries) and their Agencies and Authorities.

- *Department of Transport Tourism and Sport* has responsibility for all matters concerning transport planning, public passenger transportation and for sustainable mobility. It is responsible for the state-owned public transport company Córas Iompair Éireann (CIE) which comprises the national railway (Iarnród Éireann), the national bus company (Bus Éireann) and the bus company for Dublin (Dublin Bus).
- *Department of Education and Skills* has responsibility for the Schools Transport Scheme.
- *Department of Housing Planning and Local Government* has responsibility for spatial planning, urban and local planning, oversight of local government/development
- *Department of Health* has responsibility for some patient and outpatient mobility schemes.



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This trend continues as national agencies continue to be formed in areas such as water and housing, with transfer of powers, authority and functions from local government. This centralised structure also covers the public passenger transport services. Local Government has no statutory role in passenger transport, although it may be consulted. Local Government does have the primary role in local road and in traffic management (jointly with the Police (Garda Síochána).

Responsibility for mobility in rural areas is spread over multiple Ministries.

- *Department of Rural and Community Development* has responsibility for promoting and facilitating long-term economic and social progress across rural Ireland.
- *Department of Finance and Department of Public Expenditure* have overall responsibility for budgets, allocation of finance by themes and by areas, approval of schemes and the rules for various taxes and exemptions.

Virtually all aspects of planning, regulating and implementing rural mobility is centralised in the National Transport Authority (NTA), under the aegis of Department of Transport Tourism and Sport.

REGULATORY 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, there are differences. The urban public transport services in the main cities are provided under Public Service Obligation (PSO) contracts. Intercity bus services are operated on a commercial basis under light-touch regulation, by both state-owned and private companies. Rural 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 operated under the LocalLink network were initiated in 2002 under the Rural Transport Program and were transferred to the NTA in 2012. To date, these rural mobility services have mostly not been formalised within the regulatory framework;

this issue will have to be faced sooner or later to comply with EU regulations.

Technically there is freedom of entry for mobility services relevant to rural areas. Any operator can apply to operate a scheduled service on a commercial basis; this is irrelevant in practice, since most bus routes in rural areas would be unprofitable. In the last few years, NTA have offered some PSO services on open competitive tender, which somewhat opens the market. It remains to be seen whether this will lead to a gradual opening to tender of all rural routes under the Bus Éireann PSO bundle.

Freedom of entry to the market for Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) services remains to be tested, primarily as to date they would not be seen as viable. Also, it is not clear whether the regulations have sufficiently foreseen various forms of flexible transport.

Likewise, it remains to be seen whether van- or car-based shared mobility services can be accommodated within the regulations for bus and/or taxi services, or whether NTA would grant licenses for such services. It should be noted that NTA has to date refused to allow transportation networks companies (TNCs) such as Uber to enter the Irish market.

ORGANISATIONAL FRAMEWORK

All towns in Ireland are served by intercity, regional and/or local bus services. This consists of services operated both by the state-owned operator and by private operators.

Most of the larger towns are served by the national railway network. However, this is now limited to six main lines connected to Dublin plus a few branch lines. Access to rail services from rural areas is thus highly variable, with many areas having no practical access.

Many villages are connected by local and regional routes, mostly served by passing-through town-to-town services, operated by the publicly-owned operator but

also some by private operators. However, many villages of similar size are not on such routes and thus are not served.

Rural areas have access to regular bus services only where local stopping services pass through the area. This is therefore highly variable, with some areas having reasonable access and many areas not having any access to public transport.

A long-established Schools Transport Scheme provides transport to and from schools (primary and second level) for children who live 3 km or more from the nearest available school.

ORGANISATIONAL FRAMEWORK

This is a well-regarded and effective system, although it has limitations for children who wish to engage in after-school activities.

LocalLink was established in 2002 as a rural mobility program primarily to combat social exclusion. It built on legacy and emerging community initiatives. It covers most of the country, providing a mix of fixed route, DRT and social services, although these are usually on low frequency (often just once per week). Thus, they provide a minimum level 'safety net' for vulnerable people, but often they do not provide every-day or day-long mobility in rural areas.

Limited patient and outpatient mobility services are provided by the health authorities. These are not available to other users and are not integrated with other social services, although a few pilot schemes have been tried.

- Smarter Travel services are generally organised at local level, and sit within a framework of the NTA.
- Mobility services for patients and out-patients are organised by the local office of the national Health Service Executive (HSE).
- Community and volunteer schemes are generally organised on an autonomous basis.

Bus Éireann is a publicly-owned operator which has the historic mandate to provide mobility coverage. However, there are no policy-based criteria to provide services, and pressures to reduce public financial support over two decades has reduced the coverage offered.

There is no designated mobility services manager or coordinator for a comprehensive set of mobility services for rural areas. The organisations within the LocalLink network have the potential to serve this purpose if allocated the mandate.



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Mobility services in rural areas in Ireland are organised as follows:

- All scheduled passenger transport in Ireland, whether commercial or under PSO Contracts, is regulated by the NTA.
- The schools transport scheme is managed by Bus Éireann (national bus company), but the majority of services are operated by private operators under contract.
- The LocalLink services are planned and organised by local groups (now restructured as 17 area-based organisations), which now sit under the NTA.

Shared-mobility services such as LocalLink are not formally integrated with general public transport. However, they usually arrange to connect with local transport hubs, bus stations, bus stops, etc.

The intercity and scheduled local bus markets are operated by both public and private operators, with substantial increase in private operators in recent years. The Schools Transport services are now operated primarily by private operators. The LocalLink services are either provided in-house or by contracting local private operators.

FINANCIAL FRAMEWORK

The main means of providing public financial support to mobility services in rural areas in Ireland are the following:

- Public Service Obligation contracts awarded by the NTA. This consists primarily of the direct award route bundle to Bus Éireann and the individual routes awarded under competitive tendering.
- LocalLink services, financed under the Rural Transport Program, which is administered by the NTA.
- Schools Transport Scheme, financed by the Department of Education and Skills, which is administered by Bus Éireann.
- Patient and outpatient mobility services, which are funded by the Department of Health, through various mechanisms within the HSE.

Although not receiving any specific compensation to do so, the LocalLink services have always accepted free travel passes on their services as they considered doing so as core to their primary objective of combatting social exclusion. In turn, a certain amount of funding is made available to the program and is divided among the LocalLink entities.

All of the public financial support ultimately comes from National Government, through the Exchequer allocation to the Departments whose agencies organise the mobility services. The exception is the rural mobility services under LocalLink, who use a blend of funding from Central Government, Leader programs, local programs, social services and any other source they can access.



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Other than the Rural Transport Program, there is no dedicated funding for mobility services in rural areas; it is included in more general provisions.

The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection administers and finances a Free Travel Scheme for all residents of the State over 66 years of age as well as various categories of socially-vulnerable people. These allow free travel on all public transport services operated by the state-owned companies, including the services of Bus Éireann, on PSO routes operated by private companies, and on some qualifying commercial private operator routes.

To date, funding for rural mobility services has not been consolidated and remains dispersed across multiple funding sources and channelled through multiple delivery agencies. It remains to be seen whether all organisation and finance will eventually be consolidated within NTA, and/or whether the LocalLink agencies would become the designated channels for all mobility services within their geographical area.

OTHER INFORMATION

- Bus Éireann (state-owned bus company) has a historic general obligation to provide national, regional and local bus services. This obligation has diminished over the years. Private operators now provide a greater proportion of the services. Some villages and rural areas no longer have regular bus services.
- The long-established Schools Transport Scheme provides bus services to/from school for children living >3.2 km from the nearest suitable school, thus ensuring daily access to education in almost all rural area.
- The Rural Transport Program provides some additional socially-necessary services in rural areas, through a network of 17 LocalLink offices that have high level of community governance.
- The National Transport Authority established and now manages a comprehensive national multimodal travel information and journey planner, covering all public mobility services. It also established and now manages a national public transport payment card.

which were often improvised and harnessed such resources and funding as could be found in the local areas. While the LocalLink organisation and services have become more formalised, they nevertheless still have some freedom to innovate, experiment and pilot services and mobility types that might not be permitted to others. This appears to be more of a tacit acceptance, within limits, than an explicit exemption from regulations. It should be noted that, over the years, the LocalLink organisations have taken great care not to implement services that would be seen to intrude on the formal bus or taxi operators, and often give local operators first option to run new services. In this way, they have avoided complaints or confrontation that could have led to restrictions on their activities.

In general, there appears to be considerable flexibility for volunteer and community minibus and car-based mobility initiatives for closed user groups, among neighbours, etc. Any restrictions would mostly be in terms of insurance or taxation matters.



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In most respects, mobility services in Ireland are quite strongly regulated. Operating licences are required for all services open to the public, and these are issued only by National Transport Authority under a clearly-defined regime. That said, the market has been opening in recent years, first for services operated on a commercial basis (i.e. no subsidy) on the inter-city and regional routes, and more recently by putting some subsidised regional/local routes out to competitive tender. It remains to be seen how far this liberalisation of the market and unbundling of PSO services will go in the coming years.

The services operated under the Rural Transport Program have been an exception to the otherwise strict application of the regulatory framework. This mostly reflects their community-based origins (both prior to the program commencing in 2002 and the restructuring in 2014-15) and the wide range of service types offered,

Anything that would take on commercial characteristics is more likely to face restriction under taxi regulations than under general public transport regulations.

Organised shared taxi services are not present in Ireland, nor have they been encouraged to date. It remains to be seen whether they would be accepted by NTA and, if so, how much flexibility they would be permitted. It also remains to be seen whether the taxi stakeholders would accept or strongly oppose such services. NTA has refused to permit TNC-style services (e.g. Uber) in Ireland, but they may view genuine shared-mobility services (i.e. multiple passengers as well as the driver) in a different light. NTA manages a comprehensive national multimodal travel information and journey planner. It would not seem to be a challenge to include shared-mobility services.

KEY STAKEHOLDERS AND MINISTRIES ADDRESSING RURAL AREAS

TITLE	ROLE
Department of Transport Tourism and Sport	All matters relating to policy, planning, regulation, management and allocation of public finance to passenger transport services in Ireland. Responsible for the state-owned public transport companies.
Department of Education and Skills	Responsible for the Schools Transport Scheme.
Department of Rural and Community Development	Responsibility for promoting and facilitating long-term economic and social progress across rural Ireland
National Transport Authority	Authority for all aspects of policy, planning, regulation and financing of all public passenger transport services in Ireland. Regulator for the taxi sector. Manages the Rural Transport Program. Manager of the national integrated ticketing and traveller information systems.
Bus Éireann	State-owned company with responsibility to provide inter-city, intra-city (except Dublin), regional, local and rural bus services throughout Ireland on a non-exclusive basis. Manager of most bus terminals throughout the country. Manager of the Schools Transport Scheme.
LocalLink	Set of 17 local organisations with responsibility to plan and manage local and socially-necessary mobility services connecting rural areas to identified towns, hubs and facilities.

LINKS TO WEBSITES

- Department of Transport Tourism and Sport: www.dttas.ie
- Department of Education and Skills: www.education.ie/en/Parents/Services/School-Transport
- Department of Rural and Community Development: www.drcd.gov.ie
- National Transport Authority: www.nationaltransport.ie
- Bus Éireann: www.buseireann.ie
- LocalLink: www.locallink.ie
- Ring a Link (example of LocalLink organisation): www.ringalink.ie
- Kerry Community Transport (example of LocalLink organisation): www.locallinkkerry.ie
- Smarter Travel: www.smartertravel.ie

REFERENCES

Relevant national policy documents include the following:

- National Planning Framework: Project Ireland 2040 (2018), available at <http://npf.ie/wp-content/uploads/Project-Ireland-2040-NPF.pdf>
- Smarter Travel: A sustainable Transport Future: A New Transport Policy for Ireland 2009-2020, available at http://www.smartertravel.ie/sites/default/files/uploads/2012_12_27_Smarter_Travel_english_PN_WEB%5B1%5D.pdf#overlay-context=content/publications
- Department of Transport Tourism and Sport: Statement of Strategy 2016-2019, available at <http://www.dttas.ie/sites/default/files/content/corporate/english/general/statement-strategy-2016-2019/statement-strategy-english-version-2016-2019.pdf>
- "Realising our Rural Potential: Action Plan for Rural Development", available at <http://actionplan.ruralireland.ie/Rural-Ireland-Action-Plan.pdf>
- Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Rural Development Division, "Ireland - Rural Development Programme", available at <https://www.agriculture.gov.ie/media/migration/ruralenvironment/ruraldevelopment/ruraldevelopmentprogramme2014-2020/3rdAmendmentSFCAppVersion231017.pdf>
- Local Link Rural Transport Programme Strategic Plan 2018 to 2022, available at https://locallink.ie/media/1351/ll_rural-transport-programme_online.pdf
- National Transport Authority, "Statement of Strategy 2018-2022" https://www.nationaltransport.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/NTA_Statement_of_Strategy_2018-2022_ENGLISH.pdf