



*Irish Rural Link*  
*Nasc Tuaithe na hÉireann*

**A VOICE FOR RURAL IRELAND**

# **Submission to Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport Statement of Strategy 2017-2019**

## **August 2016**

**Contact**  
**Seamus Boland or Louise Lennon**

## Irish Rural Link Submission to Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport on Statement on Strategy 2017-2019

### Summary

Issue	Recommendations
Rural Strategies	With the development of a Department on Regional and Rural Affairs it is imperative other Departments work closely with this Department to ensure a rural remit is included in policies and strategies.
Rural Transport Programme	Maintain and extend current supports to Rural Transport Programme. Re-organise the method of finance allocation under the free transport programme. As it is currently constructed, it fails to be of benefit to the vast majority of people on social welfare in rural areas who are entitled to it.
Bus Éireann	A rural protocol to include a socio-economic analysis of any cessation of change to Bus Éireann routes must be carried out and possible alternatives to closures are examined.
Inter-Town and Inter-Village transport	These services need to be maintained and even improved upon to coincide with the development of Small Town and Village Renewal Scheme. There needs to be cross departmental work between Department of Transport, Tourism & Sport and Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs on this.
Rail Service	Ancillary services must be in place in rural areas for people to be able to access rail services. More incentives are needed to encourage people to use rail services.
Regional Airports	Continue to implement the Regional Airports Programme 2015-2019. Any reviews that are undertaken of regional airports must look at the social benefits of these as well as the economic benefits.
Rural Social Inclusion	All public transport providers must have a rural social inclusion remit so that every person has equal access to public transport regardless of their location.

<p>Rural Proofing of Policies and Strategies</p>	<p>All policies/strategies development by any Government Department must encompass all aspects of rural life and work with the new Department of Regional and Rural Affairs to ensure their policy/strategy is rural proofed.</p>
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### Overview

Irish Rural Link (IRL) is the national network of rural community groups, representing over 600 groups and thousands of individuals committed to socially, environmentally and economically sustainable rural communities.

Transport in rural areas is very often seen as a lifeline to people and plays an imperative role in preventing isolation for people living in rural and sometimes very remote areas. However, people living in rural areas cannot access a widespread rural transport service or take advantage of free travel entitlements. Bus Éireann and Irish Rail services are often quite limited in rural parts of the country making it difficult for people to access other services such as health, education etc. Evaluation of these services is very often based on Value for Money with little consideration of the social impact it has on a community or people in that community if the service ceases to exist.

The Rural Transport Programme provides many benefits including helping to combat rural isolation. However, funding for the programme still remains at €9 million which is far short of the 2016 target of €18m.

The new Statement of Strategy 2017-2019 needs to be rural proofed and inclusive of all people in society.

### Overall Rural Strategies

Irish Rural Link welcomes the appointment of a Minister for Regional Development and Rural Affairs at cabinet level and will be charged with the implementation of CEDRA report and the Rural Charter.

The lack of any functioning overall strategy to inform Government policy on rural development has completely disadvantaged rural communities over the years. The demise of the white paper on rural development coupled with the ending of the National Spatial Strategy has meant that there is no overarching strategy that can inform all departments on rural policy. National policies are then rolled out without any analysis of the unintended consequences for rural areas.

The new Statement of Strategy for 2017-2019 by the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport must work with Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaelteacht Affairs to ensure that transport needs for all people living in rural areas are fully met.

### **Rural Transport Programme**

The many benefits of the Rural Transport Programme include the important role it plays in combating rural isolation, particularly for older people. It also represents value for money, carrying approximately 1.5 million passengers annually, and functioning on less than 1.2% of the total annual investment in public transport. The role of community groups and non profit organisations in delivering this programme has been instrumental in affordability, capacity building and community involvement. Rural transport was acknowledged in the Programme for Government and we urge the Government to be cognisant of the impact of any changes to existing routes will have on people in remote rural areas.

Irish Rural Link makes the following recommendations:

- Funding for Rural Transport needs to be increased from its current level of €9m, far short of the 2016 target of €18m.
- Maintain and expand current supports to Rural Transport Programme
- Improve integration of rural transport services, including the Rural Transport Programme, Bus Éireann rural stage carriage services, health related and school transport services.

- IRL supports the development of the National Positive Ageing Strategy to deal with issues around incomes, isolation and poor access to services for older rural dwellers.
- Re-organise the method of finance allocation under the free transport programme. As it is currently constructed, it fails to be of benefit to the vast majority of people on social welfare in rural areas who are entitled to it.

### Bus Éireann

Bus Éireann has a public transport remit because it is publicly funded. Public funds subsidise unviable routes. Many public services are unviable such as health but this does not mean that we cut all services that are not commercially viable. In 2015, Bus Éireann planned to cut almost 100 services in rural towns and villages; reducing their daily services from 198 to 105. Bus Éireann should have a social as well as an economic dimension to their remit. A public enquiry into how much public subsidy Bus Éireann receives, what routes receive subsidies and which routes are profitable should be made available.

IRL continue to call for a rural protocol which outlines steps to be taken before services are lost in rural areas whether they are bus services or other vital public services. The protocol would include a socio economic analysis of the services and look at possible alternatives to closures.

### Inter-Town and Inter-Village Transport

With the revitalising of towns and villages as one of the key priorities of the new Government and the development of a Town and Village Renewal Scheme, the importance of inter-town and inter-village transport cannot be overlooked within the scheme and within the DTTS Strategy 2017-2019. Inter town and inter village transport is important to help people living in rural areas with no access to a car travel from one town/village to another to do their daily business or for social events. This service will help to bring economic activity

back to the main streets of small towns and villages and to restore these as a platform of creating a vibrant rural hinterland.

Cross departmental work between Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs is now needed to maintain and improve inter town and inter village transport to help rejuvenate small towns and villages.

### Irish Rail

Better use of Irish Rail services could be made, especially by people living in rural areas, if ancillary services were in place to get people to the train station. There is an opportunity for Irish Rail to link in with Bus Eireann, Rural Transport and Inter Village/Inter Town transport to ensure that there are regular services to train stations so people can avail of rail services and that timetables coincide with one another as much as possible.

More incentives are needed to encourage people to use rail services, whether for business or leisure.

### Regional Airports

The economic role regional airports play in terms of tourism and business cannot be overlooked. However, they also play a role in terms of connecting some of the most isolated and remote areas to the rest of the country and Europe and can be seen as a lifeline for social services such as health and education<sup>1</sup>. Exchequer funding for regional airports in Galway and Sligo ceased in 2011 following a Value for Money Review. Any future reviews carried out in the other existing regional airports must include a social analysis of the airport to the region.

The implementation of Regional Airports Programme 2015-2019 must continue; with continuous evaluation of the programme and outcomes taking into account the social benefits of these airports.

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<sup>1</sup> About Donegal Airport <http://www.donegalairport.ie/index.php/about>

## Rural Social Inclusion

Transport is the one means of connecting people and communities. Having some form of transport available can be the difference between a person becoming isolated from or actively involved in society. The car is the main mode of transport for the majority of people living in rural areas but for many others, they do not have access to a car and have to depend on public transport to attend appointments, do their daily business, etc. However, Bus Eireann or Irish Rail Services are not available in all rural areas which can isolate people. The Rural Transport Programme has alleviated some of the problems of isolation and social exclusion. However, as mentioned above this programme needs to be adequately funded and resourced, with social inclusion being the main focus of the programme. The main purpose in establishing this programme was to ensure that all people in rural areas; older people, people with disability have their travel needs met that existing train and bus services were not able to meet. This needs to continue to be the focus of the programme.

With wheelchair accessibility only available on a limited number of Bus Eireann coaches and routes, this excludes many wheelchair users in rural areas from accessing this service. Many rural areas would not be served by rail service either. Public transport must have a social inclusion remit in their strategies and continuous improvements made to ensure that their services are accessible to all.

## Rural Proofing of Policy

With the development of a Regional Development and Rural Affairs Minister and Department, IRL call for any policies/strategies developed to encompass all aspects of rural life and work with other Government Departments, including Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, to rural proof any policy being developed that can impact on people living in rural Ireland.

As the primary national economic policy tool, the annual budget should contain a commitment to regional equity and the prevention of urban bias, which compromises not just the social and environmental pillars of

sustainability, but also the capacity of regional economies to utilise their potential and adapt to current and future challenges.

## **Irish Rural Link the Organisation**

Irish Rural Link (IRL), formed in 1991, is a national network of organisations and individuals campaigning for sustainable rural development in Ireland and Europe. IRL, a non-profit organisation, has grown significantly since its inception and now directly represents over 300 community groups with a combined membership of 25,000.

The network provides a structure through which rural groups and individuals, representing disadvantaged rural communities, can articulate their common needs and priorities, share their experiences and present their case to policy-makers at local, national and European Level.

Irish Rural Link is the only group represented at the national social partnership talks solely representing rural communities' interests.

***'Our vision is of vibrant, inclusive and sustainable rural communities that contribute to an equitable and just society'***

Irish Rural Link's aims are:

- To articulate and facilitate the voices of rural communities in local, regional, national and European policy arenas, especially those experiencing poverty, social exclusion and the challenge of change in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- To promote local and community development in rural communities in order to strengthen and build the capacity of rural community groups to act as primary movers through practical assistance and advice.
- To research, critique and disseminate policies relating to rural communities including issues such as sustainability, social exclusion, equality and poverty
- To facilitate cross-border networking between rural communities

***'Our mission is to influence and inform local, regional, national and European development policies and programmes in favour of rural communities especially those who are marginalised as a result of poverty and social exclusion in rural areas.'***