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Local Link Rural Transport Programme Strategic Plan 2018 to 2022

March 2018



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Introduction and Background



1. Introduction and Background

This is the National Transport Authority's first strategic plan for the Local Link Rural Transport Programme and covers the period 2018 to 2022. This strategy is aligned with the Authority's Statement of Strategy for the same period.

The key priorities of the Programme continue to include addressing rural social exclusion and the integration of rural transport services with other public transport services.

The Programme mission statement is 'to provide a quality nationwide community based public transport system in rural Ireland which responds to local needs'

Background to Provision of Rural Public Transport Services Generally

Public transport in rural areas in Ireland is provided in the following ways:

- a) Iarnród Éireann provides rail services under contract with the National Transport Authority. Even though over 50% of Irish people live within the boundary of a settlement served by rail, the majority of rural Ireland would require a journey by another mode for that access. Therefore the existing rail network would not generally provide local rural services but would provide the onward connections to key towns and cities.
- b) Bus Éireann provide a variety of services through its commercial Expressway services that are licensed by the NTA and a network of subsidised public bus services under a Direct Award contract with the NTA. The subsidised services serve many rural towns with frequencies varying from several times a day to a weekly service. The commercial services also serve rural towns throughout the country. However, there has been some withdrawal of commercial services from rural towns as the cost of provision was greater than the revenue being accrued. The NTA has provided replacement bus services in many places where this has occurred.
- c) Other operators provide licenced local and inter-town bus services in rural areas on a commercial basis i.e. without a state subsidy.
- d) Bus services are provided under the Rural Transport Programme. These bus services are contracted by the NTA and are managed by seventeen Local Link offices throughout the state. The services are primarily demand-responsive services but an increasing number of regular public transport services are also provided under this Programme.

The Department of Transport Tourism and Sport provide the funding for both the subsidised bus and rail services and the funding to support the Rural Transport Programme.

The National Transport Authority continues to work with Bus Eireann and Iarnród Éireann to improve the subsidised services that they provide in local areas. Also, in response to the withdrawal of commercial Expressway services, the Authority has provided a network of replacement services.

These alternative services were provided by a combination of:

- a) an extension of existing services provided by Bus Éireann under the Direct Award contract with the NTA;
- b) newly procured services under contract to the NTA; and
- c) new rural transport services contracted by the NTA and funded under the Rural Transport Programme.

Challenges in Provision of Rural Public Transport Services

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

The OECD stated in its publication ‘The New Rural Paradigm’ (2006) that “the demographic structure of rural regions is often not appropriate to support provision of local public services. Because these regions have difficulty in establishing the necessary critical mass of facilities, producer services and infrastructure the economy does not generate employment opportunities and there are strong incentives for young people to move away.”

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

In OECD countries, rural areas account for 75% of the land mass but support only 25% of the population. Service delivery in rural areas is challenged by the following factors:

- Long distances.
- Low population.
- Low density.
- Ageing population.
- Diminishing subsidies.
- Few service providers.

Development of Rural Transport Programme up to 2012

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

The RTP was launched in 2007 to build on the success of the Initiative with a specific focus on responding to rural isolation and enhancing the mobility, accessibility and community participation of local people, particularly those at risk of social exclusion. The Programme was established to operate only in cases of market failure, in that services funded under the Programme should complement and not compete with the existing public transport services provided either by CIÉ Companies or by private transport operators.

Thirty-five Rural Transport Groups, covering 36 geographical areas nationwide, managed in the main by voluntary management committees, were funded under the Programme to deliver rural transport services.

On foot of a Government Decision in January 2012 national responsibility for the implementation of integrated local and rural transport, including responsibility for managing the Rural Transport Programme, was assigned to the National Transport Authority with effect from 1st April 2012. For a transitional period the programme was initially managed by Pobal on behalf of NTA and since 01 January 2014 is now directly managed by the Authority under a Service-Level Agreement with the Department of Transport Tourism & Sport.

Rural Transport Programme Restructuring

A restructuring strategy was launched in July 2013 following a Value for Money and Policy Review of the programme in 2011 which recommended organisational restructuring to achieve efficiencies and greater alignment with local authorities.

The objectives of the restructuring programme included:

- Protecting the provision of rural transport services into the future via a more efficient delivery structure.
- Maximising integration with other State funded transport services thereby making the Programme an integral part of the public transport system.
- Ensuring that the Programme operated within the public transport regulatory framework.
- That Rural Transport services would have a clear identity and brand.
- That the Programme would support relevant Government initiatives with a rural development focus.

The restructuring programme resulted in the formation of 17 Transport Coordination Units (TCUs) from 35 existing rural transport groups previously delivering RTP services throughout the country. The 17 TCUs have now been rebranded as Local Link offices. The restructuring programme was implemented in 2014 / 2015 and now provides a solid base to expand and adapt services to meet current and future needs.

Rural Transport Programme from an Operational Perspective



2. Rural Transport Programme from an Operational Perspective

The two types of services most associated with the Rural Transport Programme are:

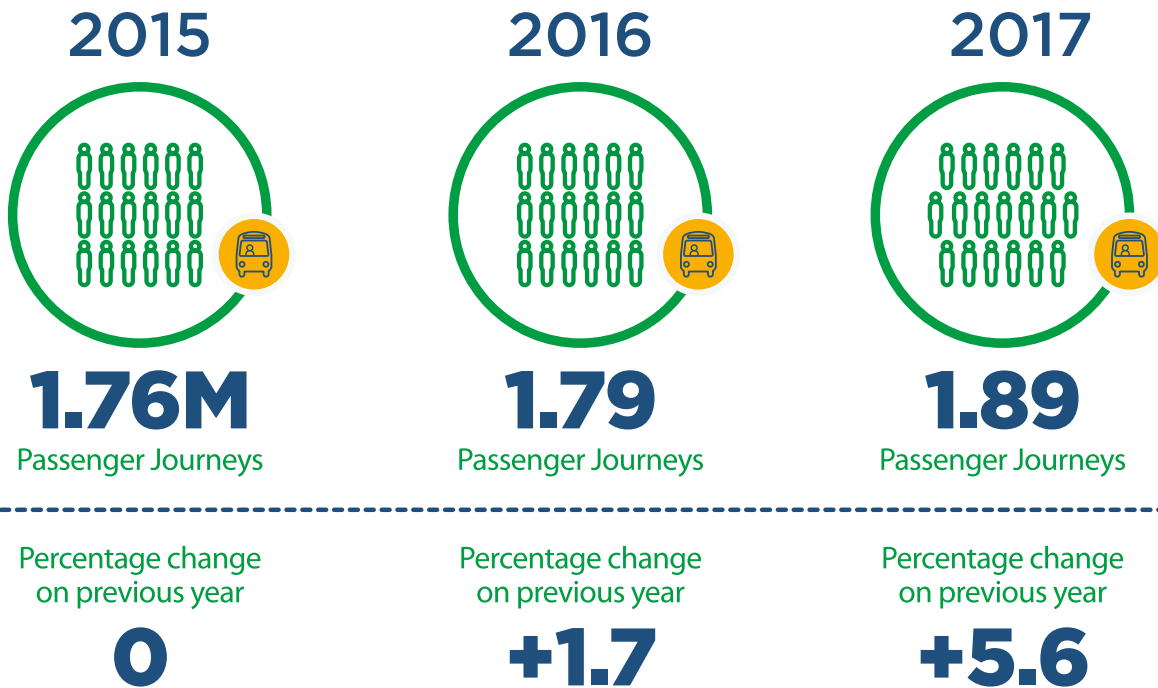
1. Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) – these services do not operate on a fixed route but respond to requests for services by intending passengers and operate by making specific trips to pick up and drop off passengers at the door. They can be operated by large public service vehicles, hackneys or community cars.
2. Scheduled Fixed Transport – services with a regular route, stopping places and timetable.

Since the Rural Transport Programme came under the aegis of the Authority the potential for hybrid services with both fixed and DRT elements has been explored and developed in several areas nationally. Additionally, the Authority has encouraged the development of a suite of transport options within the Rural Transport Programme including community car/voluntary car and car sharing schemes

The key features of the Rural Transport Programme include:

- * Completing of 1.9 million passenger journeys per annum with 0.9 million of those journeys provided for Free Travel Passengers. These figures include 0.2 million passengers who required assistance.
- * Providing an average of 150,000 service trips annually.
- * Travelling over 11.8 million kilometres annually.
- * Over 400 Private Operators provide the services using the services of almost 900 drivers.
- * Services provided include Conventional Regular Services and Demand Responsive Services. In addition the Programme funds the provision of ‘Once Off’ trips for individuals and community/voluntary groups to help address the lack of transport as a factor in social exclusion.
- 62% of service trips are defined as either fully or partially accessible.

Rural Transport Programme: passenger journeys and revenues



Funding of the Rural Transport Programme

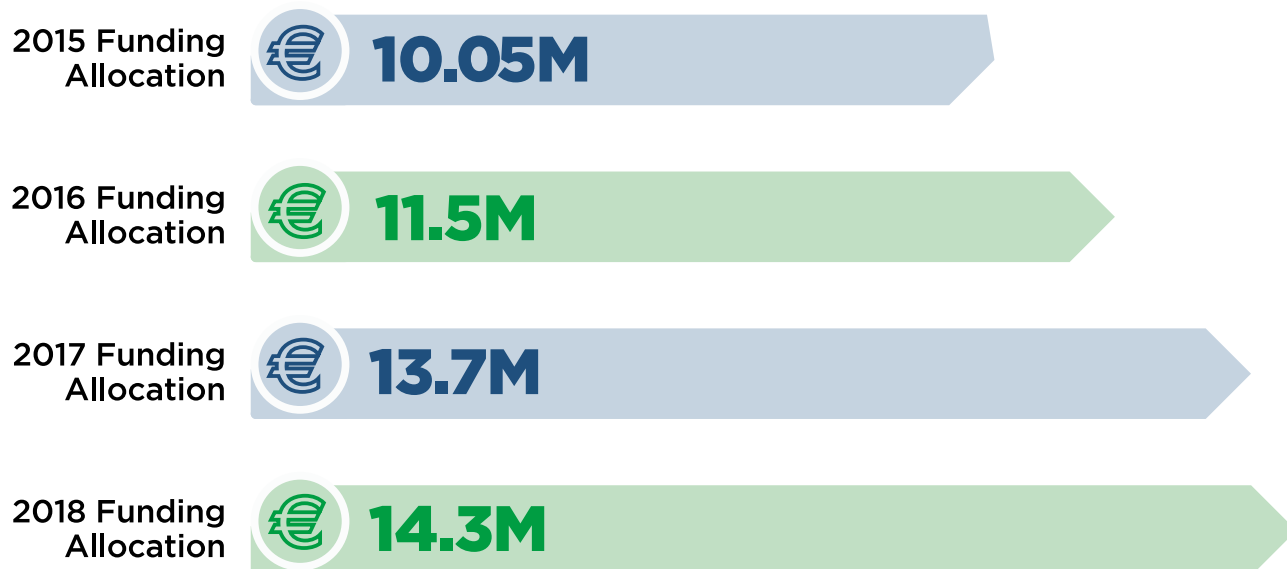
Prior to the restructuring of the Programme, a myriad of funding streams supported the provision of rural transport services. Post restructuring, there are now two main funding streams from the Department of Transport, Tourism & Sport and the Department of Social Protection (Free Travel Pass Scheme).

As with other areas, funding for the Programme reduced significantly during the economic downturn. In recent years the funding allocation has continued to increase which will enable further improvement and expansion of services.

The Department of Social Protection provides an annual funding allocation of €1.5 million under its Free Travel Scheme towards the cost of the Programme. The Free Travel Scheme is a benefit provided to all people living in the State aged 66 years or over. Some people under 66 also qualify who meet certain conditions.

The Authority estimates that there is an under-provision of at least €1.5m by the Free Travel Scheme to the Rural Transport Programme. Discussions are on-going between the Department of Social Protection, the Department of Transport, Tourism & Sport and the NTA on the appropriate funding model for free travel on subsidised public transport services.

Rural Transport Programme Funding (Current) from the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (DTTAS)

**Other sources of income to the Rural Transport Programme include:**

- * Fare income.
- The provision of transport services to other organisations such as the Health Service Executive which are funded separately by the relevant organisations.

Governance

The Authority works closely with Boards and staff of the Transport Co-ordination Units (brand name -Local Link) to ensure compliance with all relevant legislation and to promote best practice in the delivery of the Rural Transport Programme. The majority of the Transport Co-ordination Units are independent “not for profit” entities established to provide a range of local transport services. The Boards of the Transport Co-ordination Units are independent, voluntary Boards who employ staff to carry out the specific functions of the Units. The NTA contracts the management of rural transport services to the relevant Transport Co-ordination Unit through a Grant Agreement. Under that Grant Agreement the Units are obliged to comply with financial, governance and performance monitoring requirements from the NTA who apply a robust oversight reporting system. The reporting is based on an agreed programme of annual activities and related financial budgets. There is on-going communication with the Units on an individual basis as well as the hosting of regular meetings between the NTA and Board and staff representatives. In addition the NTA imposes a system of regular internal audit on the Units.

Role of the Transport Co-ordination Units (Local Link offices)

The role of the Units includes the following:

- * Manage the day to day requests for and delivery of public transport services.

- * Report on transport service delivery and operator service performance.

- * Manage and ensure compliance with national legislation including Employment, Health and Safety, Data Protection, Children First and Tax legislation.

- * Manage the public transport needs of socially excluded people in rural areas.

- * Identify opportunities for improved co-ordination and integration of rural transport services with other public transport services at local, regional and national level.

- Identify gaps in rural transport service provision and plan how best to address unmet needs in a rural transport context.

Essentially the Transport Co-ordination Units have overarching responsibility for the development, co-ordination and management and implementation of community and local transport in their areas.



Minister Ring with Local Link service users at the National Ploughing Championships 2017

Legislative and Policy Context of the Rural Transport Programme



3. Legislative and Policy Context of the Rural Transport Programme

As referenced previously, responsibility for managing the Rural Transport Programme was assigned to the National Transport Authority with effect from 1st April 2012. The NTA is a statutory non-commercial body, which operates under the aegis of the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport.

Since 1 January 2014 the Rural Transport Programme is now directly managed by the NTA under a Service-Level Agreement with the Department of Transport Tourism & Sport. As per this SLA, the Department will allocate funding on an annual basis for the Programme within the overall resource envelope available for transport. Additionally, the Department will keep the Programme under review having regard in particular to its coherence with developments in wider transport policy and Government policies relating to rural development.

This is therefore the first strategic plan prepared by the Authority with regard to the future of the Rural Transport Programme post its restructuring. This plan sits within the overarching framework of the Authority's Statement of Strategy 2018 -2022.

In addition to national policy as it relates to public transport provision a number of other policy documents which focus on sustainable rural development have informed the preparation of this strategy including:

- 'Programme for a Partnership Government' (2016).
- Ireland 2040- Our Plan –the National Planning Framework (draft as of Nov 17).
- The Action Plan for Rural Development.
- CEDRA- Energising Ireland's Rural Economy (Report of the Commission for Economic Development in Rural Areas).
- 'Programme for a Partnership Government'.

Programme for a Partnership Government (2016)

'A Programme for a Partnership Government' was agreed by the new government in May 2016.

Contained within this Programme for Government, is a recognition of the value and benefit of rural transport to many communities, in particular for older people vulnerable to social exclusion. It further states that the government will examine how best to improve integration of services in the rural bus network within regions, including public buses, school transport and the Health Service transport networks.

As part of the Programme for Government monitoring process, the Authority produces reports from a Rural Transport perspective addressing a range of issues including how existing routes can be made more sustainable and accessible to the public, the potential for new routes, and reflecting international best practice.

Ireland 2040- Our Plan –the National Planning Framework

The National Planning Framework is the Government’s plan to cater for the extra one million people that will be living in Ireland, the additional two thirds of a million people working in Ireland and the half a million extra homes needed in Ireland by 2040. The Framework focuses on:

- Growing the regions, their cities, towns and villages and rural fabric.
- Building more accessible urban centres of scale.
- Better outcomes for communities and the environment, through more effective and coordinated planning, investment and delivery.

As a strategic development framework, Ireland 2040 - Our Plan sets the long-term context for the country’s physical development and associated progress in economic, social and environmental terms and in an island, European and global context. Ireland 2040 will be followed and underpinned by supporting policies and actions at sectoral, regional and local levels.

To address rural decline, a significant proportion of national population and economic growth will be targeted at building up the fabric of Ireland’s network of smaller towns, villages and rural areas with much of that happening by redeveloping derelict and under-utilised lands inside small towns and villages.

Realising our Rural Potential – the Action Plan for Rural Development 2017

The Action Plan is the first ever whole-of-government strategy aimed at delivering real change for people living and working in rural Ireland. The objective of the Action Plan for Rural Development is to unlock the potential of rural Ireland through a framework of supports at national and local level which will ensure that people who live in rural areas have increased opportunities for employment locally, and access to public services and social networks that support a high quality of life.

The Action Plan acts as an overarching structure for the co-ordination and implementation of initiatives right across Government which will benefit rural Ireland. It is the first plan of its kind to take a cohesive and coordinated approach across the whole of Government to the implementation of both economic and social policies that impact on rural communities.

The five key pillars of this action plan are:

- Supporting Sustainable Communities.
- Supporting Enterprise and Employment.
- Maximising our Rural Tourism and Recreation Potential.
- Fostering Culture and Creativity in Rural Communities.
- Improving Rural Infrastructure and Connectivity.

CEDRA- Energising Ireland's Rural Economy (Report of the Commission for Economic Development in Rural Areas) – 2014

The primary task given to CEDRA was to identify strategic initiatives that would ensure rural areas contribute to sustained and sustainable national economic growth and development in the future.

The research undertaken by the Commission established that many of the key issues confronting rural communities are part of a long term economic and social transformation. Addressing that transformation is challenging as the nature of many rural communities has been fundamentally changed through the decline of traditional rural industries and growing connections between rural and urban areas. This is reflected in the increasing numbers commuting from rural areas to employment in towns and urban centres.

These developments mean that rural economic development is not amenable to simple or single sector strategies. New integrated approaches to rural economic development are therefore required.

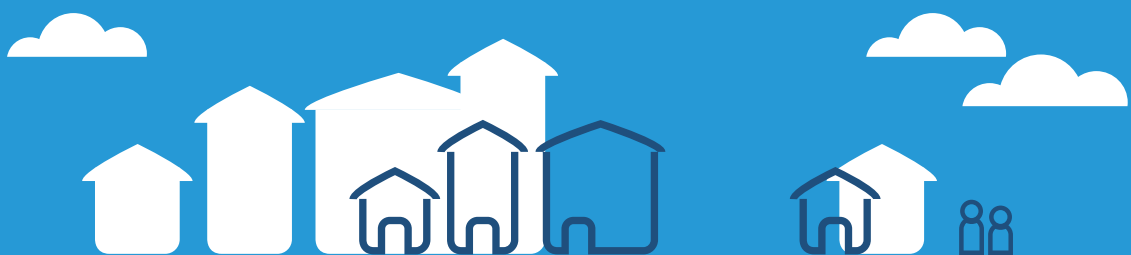
In addition to the above national strategies, there is a large body of work produced over the lifetime of the Rural Transport Programme (since its inception in 2002) that has informed the preparation of this strategy. Key documents developed by the Rural Transport Network¹ in 2011 include

- Rural Transport Programme Strategy 2011 to 2016 as proposed by the RTN.
- Towards Integrated Rural Transport- A submission to Government Aug 2011 by the RTN.

In both of these documents, the case is strongly made that the “future of the RTP must be considered in the context of all public transport subvention and planning in Ireland, and not in isolation. In any future form the Programme, while retaining a special focus on the needs of excluded members of society, must be seen as part of a better integrated and hence more efficient national public passenger transport network as a whole.”

¹ The Rural Transport Network is a representative body of the seventeen groups delivering the Rural Transport Programme (RTP) in Ireland.

Strategic Priorities for the Rural Transport Programme 2018 to 2022



4. Strategic Priorities for the Rural Transport Programme 2018 to 2022

Throughout 2017, the Authority in partnership with the Chairs and Managers of the Local Link groups led the development of a new five year strategic plan for the Rural Transport Programme. It is intended that the key objectives and actions outlined across the following nine priority areas will result in a strengthened Rural Transport Programme by 2022 – a Programme that is dedicated to identifying local transport needs and responding with high quality accessible, sustainable local transport solutions.

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

Priority Area 1 – Sustaining the Rural Transport Programme

The main aim of this strategy over the next five years is to move the Rural Transport Programme post its restructuring phase to a period of further growth and development. To sustain the Rural Transport Programme, it will continue to operate within a regulatory environment that focuses on:

- Identifying and addressing corporate governance issues over the five year lifetime of this strategy. Specific focus here on Business and Financial Reporting, Risk Management and Performance Delivery, Procurement and Data Protection (including GDPR).
- Managing the financial and human resources of the Programme in a value for money manner in conjunction the Boards and Managers of the TCUs.
- Continuously reviewing the relevance of the strategic priority objectives as detailed in this strategy over the next five years.
- Measuring the impact of the key actions contained in this strategy.

From a service delivery perspective, the following are the key objectives and actions associated with sustaining the Rural Transport Programme over the next five years:

Key Objectives:

- * Embed the concept at a national, regional and local level that the Rural Transport Programme is an integral part of the Irish public transport system and can be trusted to deliver a quality service to all users.
- * Ensure that the Rural Transport Programme continues to best meet the needs of users from a social inclusion perspective by promoting a suite of additional transport options including the Community/Voluntary Car Scheme, Car Sharing options, Rural Hackney services and Evening/ Night time services.

Key Actions:

- * Maximise passenger numbers on services being provided by the RTP.
- * Explore the opportunities for supporting fleet acquisitions by Direct Award companies operating within the Rural Transport Programme.
- * Review services being provided on a regular basis and amend as necessary in the interests of passengers and having regard to cost, value for money and other relevant factors.
- * Review existing key performance indicators and replace with more appropriate indicators so that the impact of the Rural Transport Programme can be more accurately measured both socially and economically.

- * Improve the collection of baseline information so that both qualitative and quantitative data can be collected against which to measure the impact of the Rural Transport Programme.

- * Continue to invest in the human resources associated with the delivery of the Rural Transport Programme to ensure that there is adequate training, capacity building, and remuneration for all involved.

- * The NTA and the Local Authority sector to work closely in maximising resources in terms of the capital infrastructure investment required for the Rural Transport Programme - to include investment in bus stops, bus shelters and bus timetable information.

- * Where blockages/obstacles exist in the rollout of a suite of rural transport options, that efforts are made at a national level to address these issues – insurance for some of the community based transport options is a key consideration here.

- * Consider the potential implication of Brexit in the Rural Transport Programme particularly in relation to the operation of the Programme in the border region.

- * Support the future delivery of rural transport services from an environmentally sustainable perspective in a number of ways including:
 - Developing a number of pilot electric car schemes over the lifetime of this Strategy.
 - Promoting the use of low carbon emission vehicles .
 - Promoting a sharing of transport resources within local communities e.g. Community/ Voluntary Car Scheme, Car Sharing options.

Priority Area 2 – Route Development & Expansion

The Authority in conjunction with Local Link offices will continue to identify improvements in existing services and develop appropriate new routes based on the availability of resources. Key features of these developments include greater integration with existing public transport services and better linkage of services between towns/villages. The development of core services to support initiatives aimed at the elimination of social exclusion is a key consideration in all proposals.

Whilst the delivery of Demand Responsive services remains a cornerstone of the Rural Transport Programme, there has been an increasing focus on providing regular public transport services since 2016 in response to an identified local demand. These types of services are high frequency services running 5/6/7 days a week and are designed to ensure connectivity with other public transport services thereby facilitating passengers to make onward journeys typically to access education/employment/health/recreational opportunities.

In line with the objectives contained in Ireland 2040, the Action Plan for Rural Development 2017 and the CEDRA Report 2014, these services contribute to supporting and sustaining the rural economy. A total of twenty-one new regular public transport services were funded by the Rural Transport Programme in 2016. This figure increased to twenty-seven in 2017. It is anticipated that more of this type of network development will follow over the course of this five year strategy as there are strong indicators that demand exists for these types of services nationally.

Key Objectives:

- * Ensure that rural transport services are comprehensively linked to and integrated with public transport services provided by other entities including Bus Éireann, Iarnród Éireann and other private operators including improved connectivity and integration with existing ticketing systems.
- * Improve linkage of rural transport services between and within towns and villages in order to provide more direct access to workplaces, tourist and visitor destinations, health services, shops and educational establishments.
- * Greater interaction/co-ordination with Local Authorities re. the assessment of strategic transport needs and in the development of proposed transport plans for local areas.

Key Actions:

- * Continue to support the traditional Demand Responsive element of the Rural Transport Programme with a specific focus on addressing rural social exclusion.
- * As local authorities play a key role in the planning of rural transport services, ensure that every Transport Co-ordination Unit is directly involved with their local authority in the development of relevant plans/strategies over the course of this Strategy. Particular note to be paid to the preparation of Local Transport Plans as well as inputting into Local Area Plans, County Development Plans, and Local Economic and Community Plans (LECPs). Additionally, Transport Co-ordination Units to engage/consult with the People's Participation Networks (PPNs) in each county as a valuable community development resource.
- * Ensure that the resources of the NTA are deployed to best support the Rural Transport Programme particularly in terms of accessing in-house expertise re. transport planning, modelling, mapping and ticketing.
- * Support the development of high frequency commuter type services where a demand exists for these services and resource accordingly.

Priority Area 3 – Integration with other Statutory Services

The potential for integrating a range of transport services within the Rural Transport Programme has been a consistent theme in the Programme and led to the establishment of the National Integrated Rural Transport (NIRT) Committee by the Government in January 2012. The NIRT Committee replaced the original Local Integrated Transport Studies (LITS) Steering Committee which was set up to oversee the pilot integration project process and associated work.

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

Four sub-groups were established to inform the work of the Committee namely and to identify structures and logistical resources to support integration in terms of:

- * Health Related Services Integration
- * School Transport Integration

Health Service Related transport

Health related transport services are provided by a number of organisations including the Health Service Executive, charitable bodies and others and are funded by the government through the HSE. There are many circumstances where the merging of such services would present opportunities for greater efficiencies, improvements in value for money and most importantly an improved service for the passenger.

The NIRT committee examined the potential for the integration of health-related transport services with regular rural transport services. Issues rose at the time included difficulty quantifying the transport need at a national level given the diversity of services, locations, medical conditions etc. The subgroup also examined how non-acute health transport is organised in the different HSE regions, the HSE policy in the provision of those services and the categories of health related transport that would not be suited to the integration process.

Currently, several Local Link companies have entered into Service Level Agreements with their local HSE offices and are transporting significant numbers of HSE service users to outpatient clinics, to hospital appointments, for renal dialysis etc. Whilst this work is progressing well, some issues are arising that will have to be addressed during the lifetime of this strategy including:

- Difficulty quantifying the non-emergency transport needs of the HSE at a national level given the diversity of services, geographic locations, range of medical conditions, etc.
- Level of engagement by HSE differs throughout the country.
- Reimbursement for Free Travel Pass does not reflect usage.
- Need for a more standardised approach generally to the delivery of these services with additional work required re. the reporting/data collection aspect of this work as well as identifying the most appropriate IT data management systems.
- Accessibility issues and vehicle standard issues.

Some initial conversations have taken place between the NTA and the HSE in terms how the Rural Transport Programme might play a role in both the procuring and provision of non-emergency health related transport.

Driving this agenda and as highlighted in Ireland 2040, ESRI projections indicate that the numbers of people aged over 65 will more than double to almost 1.3 million people by 2040, comprising approximately 23% of the population. This compares to 13.5% in 2016. In addition, it is expected that the population aged over 85 will quadruple. As people get older they are likely to have increasingly complex healthcare needs, with a requirement for services and facilities to support provision of suitable and necessary care.

Existing delivery of non – emergency transport services by a number of Transport Co-ordination Units has resulted in significant savings in transport costs for the HSE. Further integration with the Rural Transport Programme would not only represent increased savings but would also further support many older people to continue living independently in their rural communities.

Key Objectives:

- * Examine the non – emergency transport services provided by the Health Service Executive (HSE) with a view to integrating these services with those provided by the Rural transport Programme by 2022.

Key Actions:

- * Seek to establish an interdepartmental working group to examine this issue further to include representatives from the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, the Department of Health, the HSE, the Office for Government Procurement and the NTA.
- * Currently, a number of Transport Co-ordination Units in the North West of the country have entered into contractual arrangements with the HSE to deliver non-emergency transport services locally. In partnership with the HSE seek to involve Transport Co-ordination Units nationally in providing these non-emergency transport services.
- * Carry out a scoping exercise re. current HSE funded fleet ownership in the health charity sector and explore the potential for improved integration of service delivery with the Rural Transport Programme.
- * Continue to work with the Office for Government Procurement to identify the most appropriate ways for Local Link groups to provide non-emergency health related transport services on behalf of the HSE.

Schools Transport

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

Outside of the STS it is estimated that 6% of RTP service trips are involved in providing schools related transport.

The NIRT committee examined the integration of schools transport with regular rural transport services and a number of key barriers were identified including operational and regulatory issues e.g. Licensing Tax and Insurance.

Four pilot rural transport schemes were initiated in counties Waterford and Sligo in recent years where the return leg of a school transport service was used as an open public transport service. Limited efficiencies were achieved -two of those schemes were implemented as permanent schemes while two others did not continue as the schemes did not prove viable.

Having regard to the barriers identified above, the possible amalgamation of the School Transport Scheme with the Rural Transport Programme is not being considered in the immediate future for a number of reasons including:

- Any change in the administration of the school transport scheme has the potential to undermine the legitimate administrative arrangement between the Department of Education and Skills and Bus Éireann,
- The scheduling of rural transport services and school transport services presents significant challenges with timing of scheduling and capacity issues. Schools start times in particular coincide with other morning peak requirements generally.
- The amalgamation of the non-emergency services of the Health Service Executive is expected to provide significant opportunities for improved public transport provision and value for money so this is the primary focus of development effort currently.

Priority Area 4 – Accessibility of Services

Accessibility of Services

From a transport planning perspective, Accessibility of Services is generally understood to mean ‘ease of reaching’. Access to basic amenities through public transport services is an essential requirement for sustainable rural communities. Lack of access caused by inadequate public transport is a major cause of rural social exclusion. The potential for more flexible forms of transport such as Demand Responsive services play a vital role in connecting people in rural areas to the services and amenities they rely on daily.

In 2008, Pobal commissioned GAMMA and Trutz Haase, Social & Economic Consultant to produce a report on ‘The Development of an Accessibility Index for the Republic of Ireland’. Specifically this report sought to develop a technical aid that allows the identification of geographical areas in greatest need of assistance for rural transport projects.

It is now considered opportune to revisit this work and produce an updated report to reflect recent data including Census 2016 as well as the 2016 Pobal HP Deprivation Index. The 2016 Pobal HP Deprivation Index provides a method of measuring the relative affluence or disadvantage of a particular geographical area using data compiled from the 2016 Census. It is a key resource to enable a targeted approach towards tackling disadvantage, by providing local analysis of the most disadvantaged areas throughout the state. Percentage data for the area is provided under a range of categories such as unemployment, educational attainment and population change.

Key Objective

- * Invest in research making optimum use of relevant data to provide for an evidence based approach when considering future developments within the Rural Transport Programme.

Key Action

- * Commission the preparation of an updated Transport Deprivation Index for Ireland.
- * Use the data captured by both the 2016 Pobal HP Deprivation Index and the updated Transport Deprivation Index to inform the delivery of this strategy generally as well as specific actions.

Priority Area 5 – Access for All

“The lack of provision of an appropriate and adequate level of public transport significantly diminishes the quality of life for people who are heavily dependent on it. This impacts on their ability to pursue education, attend training courses, work outside the home or live in the area of their choice. They cannot participate in social activities on the same basis as their non-disabled peers. This can be particularly acute in rural areas of Ireland where no public transport service is available and where there is a need for further support in the development of innovative initiatives, within rural communities, to provide local accessible transport.”²

The benefits of improved transport accessibility extend to all transport users, even to the most able-bodied, and issues relating to transport accessibility go far beyond the needs of people with disabilities. They impact on the transport needs of the entire population because most people, at some point in their lives, are likely to acquire a physical or other impairment or be impeded in some manner, that will make travelling difficult, if not impossible on conventional transport vehicles.

As highlighted in Ireland 2040, there were approximately 650,000 people with a disability in Ireland in 2016, comprising 13.5% of the population. A significant proportion of the population will experience disability at some stage in their lives particularly as the population ages. Many accessibility issues relevant to people with disabilities are similar to those relating to older people, including the need to facilitate independent living, access and mobility in relation to buildings and the environment and full integration with society generally. As many people with disabilities are of working age, access and proximity to education and employment opportunities is particularly important.

Key Objectives:

- * To ensure the provision of fully accessible transport services on all services with a target to achieve at least 95% fully accessible trips by 2020 within the Rural Transport Programme.

Key Actions:

- * Specify accessibility requirements in service contracts for the provision of transport services.
- * Following the completion of the retendering of all existing rural transport services in 2018, undertake an analysis of accessibility levels across all contracted operators on a national basis.
- * Ensure that Direct Award entities provide suitable vehicles that cater for accessibility needs.
- * Ensure that legal, design and best practice accessibility requirements are embedded in the provision of transport services.
- * Improve App based journey accompaniment systems to facilitate greater access to rural transport services.
- * Ensure that feedback from disability representative groups and key stakeholders is used to inform a best practice approach to accessibility in the Rural Transport Programme.

² Towards Best Practice in Provision of Transport Services for People with Disabilities in Ireland, National Disability Authority, 2004

- * To explore the potential for developing a volunteer network of vetted and trained Passenger Assistants to ensure the safe passage of vulnerable rural transport service users

Priority Area 6 – Ensuring the Rural Transport Programme delivers an optimum Customer Experience

A key objective of the Authority is to put the customer first and obtain a deep awareness of customer experience, attitudes and needs. This includes seeking regular feedback from service users, providing as seamless an experience as possible between public transport services and providing timely, accurate and regular journey information across a range of platforms. Critical to this is the better integrating of rural transport into the mainstream transport network.

Since the Authority assumed management of the Rural Transport Programme, there has been a significant investment in technology particularly with regard to the development of the Integrated Transport Management System (ITMS). This system provides a centralised system for the scheduling of routes and services as well as the booking of passenger on these services.

Brand identification is another key aspect from a Customer Engagement perspective and again significant resources have been dedicated to date to ensure that the Local Link brand is recognised nationally alongside other public transport brands. It is acknowledged that more work is needed in this area, both locally, regionally and nationally to ensure that awareness continues to be raised re. the range of services provided by the Rural Transport Programme (operating under the brand name Local Link).

Key Objectives

- * To ensure the Rural Transport Programme is technologically resourced to meet the growing and changing demands of service users.
- * To raise brand awareness nationally of the Local Link brand, particularly as an integral part of the Transport for Ireland suite of brands.

Key Actions

- * To develop technological solutions to facilitate the integration, coordination and management of passenger information from other service areas e.g. health related transport.
- * Further development and enhancement of the ITMS System to include continued integration with existing systems and data bases within the Authority. A particular focus here on planning tools, mapping software, and real time information.

- * Provide user friendly and transparent ticketing systems that promote usage of public transport and easy interchange between services. Trial a number of ticketing options over the lifetime of this strategic plan.
- * Develop more standardised and easily recognised branded material including timetables, bus stop information, livery of buses, branded uniforms for drivers etc. in respect of the Local Link brand.
- * Develop www.locallink.ie as a key online resource for promoting the Rural Transport Programme.
- * Continue to invest in promotional/marketing campaigns to promote both new and existing RTP services both at a local, regional and national level.
- * Conduct regular customer satisfaction surveys of rural transport service users.

Priority Area 7 – Children and Young People

As outlined in Ireland 2040, ESRI projections indicate that the numbers of people aged 15 or under will decline slightly, by around 10%, by 2040, to comprise approximately 17% of the increased population. This compares to 22% of the population in 2016, meaning that the average age of people in Ireland as a whole will increase, but the overall number of young people will not decrease significantly.

The number of people aged 15 or under will continue to increase until the early 2020's and decline only slowly thereafter. This means that the continued provision and enhancement of facilities and amenities for children and young people, such as childcare, schools, playgrounds, parks and sports grounds remains necessary and will need to be maintained at similar levels for the foreseeable future thereafter.

In a rural context, access to all of the above services/facilities invariably requires transport and as such, the Rural Transport Programme is seeking to increase patronage of rural transport services over the lifetime of this strategy.

By providing child focused services from a young age, it is envisaged that young people will continue to use public transport throughout their adult life for both essential and non-essential travel.

Key Objective

- * Increase patronage by children and young people of rural transport service to facilitate access to services/facilities.

Key Actions

- * Build on the success of the rurally focussed Kids Go Free pilot campaign ran in August 2017 which saw a significant uplift in the numbers of young people using rural transport services nationally.

- * Provide for the transport needs of young people in rural areas accessing higher education and further education and training opportunities – in this context work closely with education providers to improve transport options for rural participants particularly.

Priority Area 8 – Encouraging Innovation in Rural Transport Service Provision

Opportunities exist within the Rural Transport Programme to pilot new models of rural transport service provision and to explore the potential for mainstreaming where appropriate. Over the five year cycle of this strategy, it is intended to fund a number of innovative projects that have the potential to be rolled out as national programmes.

Key Objective

- * Examine the Social Enterprise model in terms of its potential for some Transport Co-ordination Units over the lifetime of this strategy.
- * Create opportunities for the development of innovative rural transport projects by Transport Co-ordination Units in partnership with other stakeholders, where relevant.
- * Engage with similar initiatives internationally to learn from best practice models of rural transport service delivery.

Key Actions

- * Support a targeted number of Transport Co-ordination Units to explore the Social Enterprise model as a potential business operating model. By combining a commercial business ethos with a commitment to addressing a social objective e.g. providing work opportunities to end long-term unemployment, this approach may provide a sustainable funding stream for some groups going forward.
- * Continue to provide funding for the ‘Once off Transport Services’ scheme – the stated aim of which is to address the persistent social exclusion, created by transport deprivation as experienced by identified target groups in rural areas.
- * Revisit the Rural Transport Night Scheme (RTNS), which was funded by the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, between 2007 and 2009 and aimed to address unmet transport needs in rural areas during evening and night-time hours. Whilst these types of services are provided by some Local Link groups, not all rural areas have access to the same level of service provision.

Priority Area 9 – Monitoring Progress of the Rural Transport Programme

The implementation of this strategy will be overseen by the NTA and it is proposed that a Monitoring Committee be established to include representatives of relevant Government Departments and key rural transport stakeholder interests. There will also be on-going engagement with relevant Departments, agencies and stakeholders to ensure that progress is on track.

Recognising that the Strategy has a five year life span, the monitoring process will identify priority actions and milestones for the forthcoming six months on a rolling basis. Progress on the delivery of these actions and milestones, along with “on-going” actions, will be scrutinised at the end of the six-month period by the Monitoring Committee. This process will enable clear time-bound targets to be set and reported on over the lifetime of the Strategy.

Progress Reports will be prepared in consultation with the Local Link groups and published twice-yearly and made available on www.locallink.ie

These reports will provide information on resources available to support rural transport delivery and will contain examples of best practice emerging from the Rural Transport Programme.

Measuring the socio-economic and cultural impact of this Strategy on rural communities will be an important part of the monitoring process. This process will also help to identify emerging trends or areas of concern for the Rural Transport Programme over the course of this Strategy.

Key Objective

- * Prioritise the monitoring of the Rural Transport Programme to ensure the delivery of timely, updated and accurate data for reporting purposes at a national, regional and local level

Key Actions

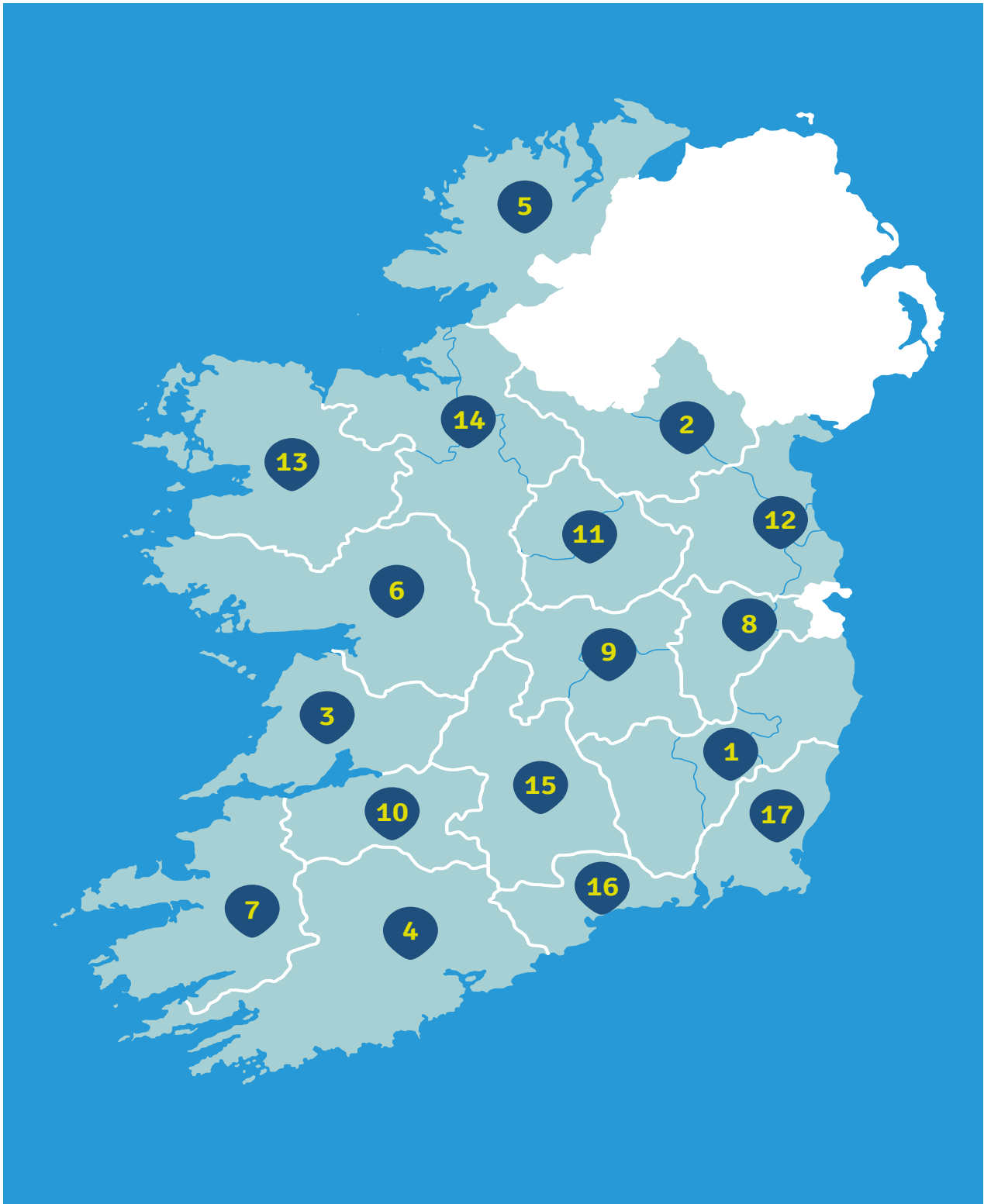
- * Conduct 2-3 Social Impact Assessments on an annual basis to assist in monitoring the delivery of the Rural Transport Programme nationally.
- * Highlight and share models of good practice from across the Rural Transport Programme on a regular basis.
- * Monitor current trends in community based transport internationally to ensure that key learning is shared within an Irish context.



Appendix



Appendix 1 – Map of 17 Local Link Groups



Appendix 2 – Contact Details of 17 Local Link Groups

1. Carlow Kilkenny Wicklow	2. Cavan Monaghan
Unit 4 Cillin Hill Dublin Road Kilkenny	The Court House Market Street Cootehill Co. Cavan
3. Clare	4. Cork
The Creamery, Feakle, Co. Clare	Local Link Cork 5 Main Street Bantry Co. Cork
5. Donegal	6. Galway
Niall Mór Community Resource Killybegs Co. Donegal	Barrack Street Loughrea Co Galway
7. Kerry	8. Kildare
Sliabh Luachra Cultural Centre Scartaglin Co. Kerry	Level 7, Aras Chill Dara, Devoy Park, Naas, Co. Kildare.
9. Laois Offaly	10. Limerick
County Hall Portlaoise Co. Laois	6a Newcastle West Enterprise Centre Newcastle West Co. Limerick
11. Longford Westmeath	12. Louth Meath Fingal
Longford Westmeath Community Transport CLG Áras an Chontae Mount Street Mullingar Co. Westmeath	Unit 23, Mullaghboy Industrial Estate Navan Co. Meath
13. Mayo	14. Sligo / Leitrim / Roscommon
Mayo Community Transport Glenpark The Mall Castlebar Co. Mayo	Aras An Chontae, Carrick-on-Shannon, Co. Leitrim.
15. Tipperary	16. Waterford
Templemore-Thurles Municipal District Offices, Castle Avenue Thurles Co. Tipperary	The Courthouse Dungarvan Co. Waterford
17. Wexford	
Block F, County Hall Carricklawn Co. Wexford	

For contact details of the 17 Local Link groups, please go to www.locallink.ie





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All Information correct at time of print.

