



*Irish Rural Link*  
*Nasc Tuaithe na hÉireann*

# Submission to All Island Strategic Rail Review

**21<sup>st</sup> January 2020**

**Contact**  
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Irish Rural Link is core funded by the Scheme to Support National Organisations (SSNO) funded by the Department of Rural and Community Development through Pobal



**Rialtas na hÉireann**  
Government of Ireland

## 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.

We welcome the opportunity to make a submission to the consultation on an All Island Strategic Rail Review.

Access to a robust and reliable rail service and indeed a public transport system in general, continues to be a challenge and an obstacle for people living in rural areas. As a result, accessing employment, health services, hospital appointments, education and training and socialising can be more difficult for people. Census 2016 showed 91% of households in rural areas owned at least one car; highlighting the over reliance on cars for people living outside Dublin. Vulnerable groups of people; older people and people with disabilities as well as those who are unable to afford a car living in rural areas are most affected by this. They rely on the goodwill of family members and neighbours to meet appointments and to go to the nearest town to do their day-to-day business.

There are many people living in rural areas who have never been on a train in this country. Either because there is no rail service where or close to where they live, the distance to the nearest train station is too far that it adds to their journey time, the length of the journey by train is too long and the cost of travelling by train is far more expensive than driving. Accessibility to rail services, not just on the train but accessibility at the train station also, is also a deterrent and not an option for people with a disability.

Rail is recognised in the consultation paper for this review *“as an important asset to enable a better quality of life and more sustainable travel”*. However, years of underinvestment in this mode of transport and with many counties and regions in the country not connected by rail, the review should focus on how to improve current rail services to make them more efficient to increase their use as well as how better to connect those areas with little or no rail service to it so it can become an option for people.

This submission focuses on the content and questions posed in Consultation Paper for this Review.

## **Goals for All Island Rail Service**

The goals set out for a more efficient and sustainable rail service are ambitious, given where the rail service is currently at. Enhancing regional and rural accessibility and contribution to decarbonisation are two goals IRL would see as most important for our members. Improving All Island connectivity between major cities but also between towns is also important as well as a more sustainable transport system.

## **Current Gaps and Vision for the Future of Rail in Ireland**

For IRL and its members, many of whom live in rural areas with little or no rail service near them, a vision for a robust transport system can often feel like wishful thinking with many feeling a rail service in their area will never happen.

### **No Rail Service**

With so many counties currently not served by the rail network, especially in border counties, there is a sense that they are cut off from both North and South of the country and especially from the major cities. People living in these counties would need to travel to another county to access a rail service, often going out of the way to their final destination and adding extra time to their journey.

This is also a challenge in other parts of the country where a train station is located a long distance from where a person lives that it adds to a person's journey or would have to wait for a train when they reach the station that it is more convenient for them to travel by car.

### **Insufficient Track Infrastructure**

Where rural areas and indeed larger towns are served by rail, Irish Rural Link would like to see more efficient services provided in these areas. Many rail services to the west and mid-west of the country are only served with one line. The knock on effect of any delays of passing trains causes inconvenience and irritation for passengers. For example, the Dublin to Galway/Westport service is one track after Portarlinton, slowing the train and also needing to stop to allow other trains, going in the opposite direction, pass. This makes the journey longer for passengers and Prior to the pandemic, this service was busy with commuters to Dublin and often delayed their journey to and from work, choosing to drive instead. With remote and hybrid working set to remain in place for many workers when Covid-19 restrictions are lifted, proper investment to improve the line infrastructure of major routes would encourage more people to travel by train on days they are required in the office.

### **Terminus only in Major Cities**

At present, the majority of rail services start and end in Dublin or one of the other major cities. This means most stops along the route have to wait for a service from one of these cities which may only have limited service throughout the day. IRL and its members would like to see additional services during the day, starting in the smaller towns or villages to the major cities. An example given in the consultation paper of

services from Cloughjordan, Nenagh, etc. to Limerick with only two services per day. This is an example of where additional services could be introduced during the day that start in some of these smaller towns. This would encourage more use of the train for travel between smaller towns and major cities for commuting to work, hospital appointments or leisure without having to wait all day for a return train. It would help to achieve Government Transport and Climate Policy objectives for shift away from dependency on the private car and reducing carbon emissions.

### **Better Connections with other Public Transport**

As mentioned, rural areas in Ireland still lack a robust public transport system. While the number of Local Link services have increased in the past number of years, it still needs further investment and services. Ensuring that these services can connect into the rail network is crucial to ensure more use of both Local Link and rail services. Ensuring Local Link routes include stops at rail stations as well aligning of timetables is of great importance.

IRL continue to call for a community car/uber-style car service in rural areas to run in conjunction with Local Link services. This would allow people who do not have a car or have mobility problems to access public services.

### **Accessibility of Rail Services**

The Consultation Paper acknowledged the lack of access to some platforms due to no lifts available or lifts out of order at train stations, for extended periods in some instances. This makes rail travel not accessibility for people in a wheelchair or with limited mobility. While there are ramps to access the train, people often have to wait on the platform for a member of staff to come with it for the person to access the train. Also, the need to have this arranged before travelling limits people with a disability and wheelchair users' ability to travel whenever they like and need to plan their journeys in advance.

### **Cost of Travel by Train**

The cost of travelling by rail where it is available can be expensive. This can be especially true for families where it is often cheaper to drive to the destination. Making rail travel more competitively priced can incentivise more use of the train. Insufficient parking at many train stations can deter people from using the train, if they arrive and there is no parking available, they end up continuing their journey by car. This is where connecting other public transport services to the rail service is important.

### **Further comments**

There is an awareness raising and promotional piece that needs to happen around rail travel and how it can be a more efficient and more sustainable mode of travel.

## **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 600 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.'***