



**Irish Rural Link**  
*Nasc Tuaithe na hÉireann*

## **Opening Statement from the Representatives of Irish Rural Link (IRL) on the Topic of TFI Local Link Transport Services in Regard to the Rural Transport Programme to the Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development and the Islands.**

**May 10<sup>th</sup> 2023.**

### **1.0 Background**

Irish Rural Link (IRL) has been a key supporter and advocate of Rural Transport since the establishment of the Rural Transport Initiative (RTI) in 1998. Since the establishment phase, IRL has contributed in a collaborative manner in supporting both policy and operational progression to ensure transport in rural Ireland has continued to be a key output in Governmental decisions pertaining to both transport and rural development.

The Board of IRL has had a particular rural transport focus since 1991 with representation then secured from Flexibus, an independent Company Limited by Guarantee (CLG) providing rural transport services since 2002. The Local Link Network (LLN), the representative body of the 15 organisations currently providing Transport Coordination functions has had a seat at the IRL Board since 2015.

As an organisation, IRL recognises the key contribution that transport makes in ensuring vibrant and sustainable communities. In November 2000, the Report of the Interdepartmental Working Group on Rural Transport<sup>1</sup> stated the following ***“While important individual initiatives are progressing, rural transport as yet lacks a fully integrated national approach. There is already wide consensus about the existence of a “rural transport problem”, but neither the full nature or scale has been systematically quantified, and the overall direction of policy needed to address it has not yet been fully articulated”.***

In noting the above report, IRL would now wish to acknowledge the improvements that have been achieved in the delivery of public transport in rural Ireland, particularly the integrated national approach that has recently been seen through the ongoing roll out of the Connecting Ireland Programme<sup>2</sup>. However, we would also advise that IRL will continue its role in ensuring that this roll out realises its full potential and effects change in as many rural communities as is possible.

This approach is consistent with the strategy, ***Our Rural Future 2021- 2025***<sup>3</sup>, which is the national rural development policy. It recognises that people living in rural areas should have access to good quality public services that enable them to continue to live sustainably in rural communities and help them to maintain a good quality of life.

We believe that this will require the continuation of innovative solutions that should build on the initial successes of the Rural Transport Initiative where Demand Responsive Transport<sup>4</sup> played a key part in delivering rural transport solutions. An approach we believe if implemented appropriately will play a key part in ensuring that those living outside of settlements in rural areas can also benefit from the expansion of Regular Rural Bus Services<sup>5</sup> currently being planned and delivered under Connecting Ireland.

---

<sup>1</sup> In order to capture what was deemed as critical information in relation to the needs and requirements of the rural population, an interdepartmental Working Group was set up and Chaired by the Department of the environment and Local Government in November of 2000

<sup>2</sup> Connecting Ireland – Ireland’s Rural Mobility Plan- <https://www.nationaltransport.ie/connecting-ireland/>

<sup>3</sup> [gov.ie - Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021-2025 \(www.gov.ie\)](https://www.gov.ie/en/publications-and-resources/publication/our-rural-future-rural-development-policy-2021-2025/)

<sup>4</sup> Demand Responsive Transport – Door to Door services.

<sup>5</sup> Regular Rural Services- Bus services delivered by TFI Local Link using conventional methods such as scheduled routes and timetables



## 2.0 Introduction

Currently, 15 independent organisations are operating as Companies Limited by Guarantee (CLG), registered as charities, and working as Not for Profit entities delivering Transport Coordination Unit (TCU) functions on behalf of the Department of Transport and managed by the National Transport Authority (NTA).

Each of these independent companies have their origins in the original 35 companies set up under the RTI. All of the organisations operate under the Governance of voluntary directors, whom in most cases represent Community Groups, Local Development Companies, Statutory Bodies and Local Authority's.

The current structure provides an example of a ground up approach, supported by Government Departments and a National Agency that through cooperation at various levels have contributed to exponential growth in the number of people availing of, and using public transport in rural areas.

### 2.1 Recent Growth Patterns

In line with Governments Sustainable Mobility objectives, the period 2018 – 2022 has seen substantial growth in the delivery of public transport in rural areas under the TFI Local Link brand and the Rural Transport Programme.

This period has experienced a substantial widening in the demographic of the Irish population whom now avail of public transport in rural areas. Services are now facilitating older people, younger people, second and third level students, workers, and tourists.

Examples of such growth are as follows;

- Between 2018 and 2022 the number of regular rural services delivered has increased by 205.9 per cent from 34 to 104. An extra 61 new services are planned for 2023. If delivered this would represent an increase of 385.3 per cent in the number of regular services delivered between 2018 and 2023.
- In 2018, there were just 7 regular rural services operating 7 days per week, accounting for 20.6 per cent of total services. In 2022, there were 62 regular rural services operating 7 days per week, accounting for 59.6 per cent of total services. Between 2018 and 2022, the number of regular rural services operating 7 days per week increased by 786 per cent.

#### 2.1.1 Climate Action

In its National Sustainable Mobility Policy Action Plan 2022-2025<sup>6</sup>, the Department of Transport outlined its vision for future transport in Ireland. The plan sets out a strategic framework to 2030 for active travel and public transport to support Ireland's overall international obligation to achieve a 51 per cent reduction in carbon emissions by 2030 from 2018 levels.

Irish Rural Link are keen to ensure that the rural population are assisted to provide them with the opportunity to remove themselves from car-dependency and in turn play their part in protecting the environment and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. A situation that we recognise presents unique challenges in rural areas, and we again offer ourselves as willing contributors to finding the unique solutions that are necessary.

---

<sup>6</sup> Sustainable Mobility Policy - [gov.ie](http://gov.ie) - [National Sustainable Mobility Policy \(www.gov.ie\)](http://www.gov.ie)



**Irish Rural Link**  
*Nasc Tuaithe na hÉireann*

### **3.0 Areas of Priority for Irish Rural Link**

In addition to Climate Action and in line with our organisation's key values and goals, we must endeavour to advocate for transport and mobility solutions in rural Ireland that are inclusive and mindful of all members of our society.

#### **3.1 The Procurement of TCU Co-ordination Functions**

Irish Rural Link is aware and mindful of the fact that the functions pertaining to local transport co-ordination are currently procured on cyclical 4-year terms. IRL are also aware that the companies (TCU's) currently providing these functions are operating on 1 year extension to contract. Consideration should now be given by all members of the houses to ensuring the platform for these functions are strong enough to maintain the proposed expansion in services over the coming years.

The challenges presented by 4-year terms does not support Continuous Professional Development for staff, or allow the foundation to ensure that the appropriate Capacity or Skills are supported and developed to address the many new challenges that are presented by Climate Action or the progression of the Rural Mobility Plan – Connecting Ireland

##### **3.1.1 – TFI Local Link Bus Operators**

Challenges are currently being experienced in relation to the contraction of availability of local private bus operators to deliver the expansion of local bus services. Operators themselves are being challenged by the lack of availability of vehicles and suitably qualified and experienced bus drivers. Connecting Ireland services are now operating on average of 100 hours per week, highlighting the additional draw that creates on the pool of available drivers.

The above issues have been exasperated due to BREXIT where the availability of vehicles and replacement parts have also been affected.

##### **3.1.1 The Continuation and Expansion of Services Pertaining to Older People and People with Disabilities**

Rural Transport since its inception has been a close friend to the older members of our society and those with disabilities. It has provided an ongoing mechanism for independence and continued social inclusion. We not only want to see that continue we must insist that it is to the fore of planning and delivery processes.

Accessible vehicles must be supported by accessible infrastructure. We would respectfully request that this Committee work with Irish Rural Link to ensure that the appropriate infrastructure including at a minimum bus stops are planned for and provided to replicate where services are.

Being mindful of the recent challenges of the COVID 19 pandemic we recognise the struggle that certain members of our society are experiencing in relation to becoming part of their communities again. In this vein, we again recognise the vital role that TFI Local Link and the wider Rural Transport Programme can play in assisting these people fulfil their personal priorities.

### **4.0 Conclusion**

Irish Rural Link would like to thank the Committee Members for affording us the opportunity to offer our opinions on the opportunities that lie ahead in the expansion of public transport in rural Ireland.

Opportunities that we believe align to the overall mission and goals of Irish Rural Link as an organisation. We believe that the challenges of Climate Action, an ageing population, and the requirement to lessen our dependency on second and some cases third fourth and fifth cars in rural households provide us with the motivation to contribute to policy direction that will provide both conventional and innovative solutions.



***Irish Rural Link***  
*Nasc Tuaithe na hÉireann*

Irish Rural Link are not only committed, but are driven to work with our partners in the Local Link Network to make the most we can from the opportunity of having Ministers within the key departments of Transport, Social Protection, Community and Rural Development whom have an excellent understanding of TFI Local Link and the potential it has to allow both of those Departments meet their extremely challenging objectives.