

FUNDING ON TRACK FOR RURAL TRANSPORT INTEGRATION

Greater connectivity, a wider selection of destinations and more frequent transport services are top priority for existing and potential service users of rural public transport, according to the findings of a major public consultation by the National Transport Authority.



Tim Gaston, NTA's Director of Public Transport Services.

The Connecting Ireland Rural Mobility Plan will create a more integrated, accessible and sustainable public transport network for rural Ireland, according to research findings by the National Transport Authority (NTA). It will provide a better rural transport network, reduce rural isolation and facilitate greater access to services, work and educational opportunities and will improve the economic competitiveness of rural Ireland, the research found.

Addressing the recent Integrated Rural Urban Transport Evolution (iRoute) conference, Tim Gaston, NTA's Director of Public Transport Services, pointed towards integrated thinking on rural transport provision, which he said would provide much improved connectivity over the next five years under the Connecting Ireland programme.

"We do not live in cities or towns like other parts of Europe. More than half the number of people in Kilkenny, for example, do not live in urban areas. Funding is coming for rural transport integration and

the Climate Action Plan, with the previous and the current government having started to give us more funding. We had to take a national view, so we did a study.

"Over 3,000 people participated in a public consultation process where the NTA asked for views on the Connecting Ireland proposals. It showed that 46% of respondents want better connections to other services; 44% would like to access a wider range of destinations via public transport; 70% would like more frequent services on their current public transport routes and 65% of respondents said that they feel that Connecting Ireland will lead to a reduction in car dependency and transport emissions," he told delegates.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Minister of State for Transport, Hildegard Naughton, told conference delegates that the overarching aim of the Connecting Ireland programme is to develop an integrated, accessible, and sustainable network of public transport offerings across Ireland. She said the government aims to

expand the Community Transport Scheme that has already been rolled out.

"We have also committed to reviewing the extensive learnings coming out our pilot study in Co. Leitrim, which positively integrated non-emergency health transport with public transport offerings. Through these endeavours community engagement and participation are central to providing meaningful public transport options in rural areas."

The Department of Transport's newly launched Sustainable Mobility Policy sets out the vision for the future of sustainable mobility in Ireland, and Minister Naughton said it aims to support a transition to more sustainable daily travel methods.

"There are targets to deliver 500,000 additional daily active travel and public transport journeys as well as a 10% reduction in kilometres driven by fossil-fuelled cars by 2030. The policy is underpinned by a robust action plan out to 2025 alongside capital funding allocations in the revised National Development Plan to ensure delivery."

RURAL TRANSPORT



Conference chairman and economist Jim Power said it's vitally important to bring various stakeholders together to discuss what is being done in Ireland and other European countries.

UKRAINIAN RESPONSE EFFORTS

Considering recent events, she acknowledged the important role played by these communities in welcoming, supporting and hosting Ukrainians fleeing from conflict. "Transport is central to the response efforts, with emergency public transport services being provided to those Ukrainian refugees housed in rural or isolated locations to ensure better access to our local communities.

"This will be achieved through an acceleration of network improvements identified through the Connecting Ireland public consultation. Local communities, TFI Local Link offices and certain public transport operators in rural Ireland play a

key role in delivering and supporting these services."

The Minister said that her department is set to establish a Community Transport Fund, which will be operated by the TFI Local Link offices. This will enable Ukrainian refugees to join in activities in towns across Ireland, in particular activities focused on social inclusion, youth, integration, culture, and education.

The Minister pointed out that Community Response Forums have also been established in every local authority by Ministers Darragh O'Brien and Malcolm Noonan, to play an integral role in co-ordinating the community-led response in providing assistance and support to



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Ukrainian refugees that are accommodated around the country.

RELIABLE PUBLIC TRANSPORT

Economist Jim Power, who chaired the conference, said: "To bring social and economic vibrancy to rural communities, having adequate and reliable public transport is essential. To live in rural Ireland, having a car is essential to socialise, to shop and to go to work. As well as imposing higher costs of living on rural dwellers, it also flies in the face of Ireland's so-called environmental agenda.

"The car culture and the car dependency need to be addressed in urban and rural settings. While public transport in urban areas is still inadequate in most cases, no attempt is even being made in rural Ireland, which has disastrous economic, environmental and social consequences.

"On a cost-benefit basis, which must include economic, social and environmental metrics; the State must invest in adequate public transport in rural areas. In the absence of such investment, remote working will not work; the car culture will continue to undermine environmental objectives and continue the process of denuding rural areas of young people, and social and economic vibrancy. It is time to adopt a revolutionary approach to the provision of public transport," the native from rural Waterford noted.

Power said that it's vitally important to bring various stakeholders together to discuss what is being done in Ireland and other European countries. "Communities, practitioners, agencies, politicians and researchers will share their experiences that will hopefully contribute to finding a way forward and finally developing a long-awaited policy for rural mobility in Ireland.

"During the pandemic we witnessed the re-emergence of a love affair with the importance of supporting and fostering local businesses, and it is now vitally important that we keep our focus on the importance of creating and sustaining local communities, local businesses and local economies.

"Mobility, communication and somewhere local to buy food have been described as the three basic elements of any community, and are heavily inter-connected and inter-dependent," he concluded.