



Western Development Commission (WDC) Response to the National Transport Authority Consultation on Connecting Ireland

10 December 2021



Introduction

The Western Development Commission (WDC) is a statutory body with a remit to promote and encourage economic and social development in the Western Region (counties Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Mayo, Galway, Roscommon, and Clare). The WDC operates under the aegis of the Department of Rural and Community Development. The WDC works in co-operation with national, regional and local bodies involved in western development to ensure that the Western Region maximises its full development potential. The WDC welcomes the opportunity to submit its views to the National Transport Authority consultation Connecting Ireland.

The WDC regards the provision of quality transport as essential to underpin the economic and social activity and development of the region. Likewise, the WDC recognises the importance of the low carbon transition¹ and we understand the need for change in the pattern and modes of travel in rural Ireland, indeed this was a key part of our recent analysis² of what is needed for a low carbon transition in our region and other rural areas.

The Western Region (the seven counties under the WDC remit) is very rural. Using the CSO definition 64.7% in of the population live outside of towns of 1,500 or more. Using the definition in [Ireland 2040 the National Planning Framework](#), 80% of people in Western Region live outside of towns of 10,000. Thus, WDC work has a particular focus on the needs of, and opportunities for, more rural and peripheral areas and is particularly interested in improvements in rural public transport.

In this submission we make more general comments about the development of the Connecting Ireland Programme and service provision rather than making detailed comments about the individual services in the programme. We have circulated the consultation to WDC staff and others and encouraged them to make submissions on specific local issues.

Below we also outline some of our current work on mobility in our Region.

WDC Mobility Index

The WDC is currently developing a Mobility Index for the Western Region to set a baseline measure of current transport, mobility and accessibility in small rural towns (35 towns with population between 1,500 and 10,000). The WDC Index will be updated regularly providing comparisons over time and among towns.

As transport plays an essential role in any place's economic prosperity and quality of life it is important to find out what is working in rural areas and to consider effective approaches to addressing the issues. In general mobility indices are urban focused and there are no obvious rural models which could be used for this work, so this represents an innovative approach to measuring transport services and accessibility issues in rural centres.

The WDC Mobility Index will allow for easy comparison between places, and across different objectives and also over time to allow improvement to be measured. It will show where is in the best position for low carbon transition, or which places which are performing especially well, or about which places need targeted improvements. This project will be a way for local government, national government, enterprises, different organisations and the places themselves to be able to gauge the health of their mobility systems and their readiness for future transport and mobility patterns.

We expect that the WDC Mobility Index will be published in the first half of 2022 and will be revised in 2024 taking account of new data. The Index will therefore be able to reflect the improvements to

¹ <https://westerndevelopment.ie/insights/making-the-transition-to-a-low-carbon-society-in-the-western-region-2/>

² <https://westerndevelopment.ie/policy/publications/making-the-transition-to-a-low-carbon-society-in-the-western-region-key-issues-for-rural-dwellers-august-2020-full-report/>



services planned in Connecting Ireland and will monitor changes in public transport provision and use in these towns into the future.

We will, of course, continue to liaise with the NTA on the content and findings of the WDC Mobility Index.

Connecting Ireland

The National Transport Authority (NTA) Connecting Ireland programme is a major public transport initiative developed to increase connectivity, particularly for people living outside our major cities and towns. The WDC welcomes this programme and the goal of improving mobility in rural areas, by providing better connections between villages and towns and linking these areas with an enhanced regional network connecting cities and regional centres nationwide. We agree that these improvements should create a more effective and integrated system, bringing people in rural areas to where they want to go, when they want to get there.

We would like to compliment the NTA on the comprehensive analysis undertaken to better understand where rural bus service improvements are required and the planned introduction of new and improved connections between villages and towns. As NTA has noted in the Connecting Ireland background, the lack of weekend, evening and mid-day services within the existing network can lead to a mismatch between service coverage and customer demand. Poorly aligned timetables can result in lack of co-ordination with the work and school day as well as limiting access to connecting services. We are pleased these issues will be addressed.

We very much welcome the collaborative approach and recognise that local authorities play in a key role in local transport. It is important that this collaborative approach is well structured and focussed, so the planned improvements are effective and attractive public transport options.

The service level commitments made in Connecting Ireland are very important. They mean:

- Over 70% of those living outside the Cities will have access to a public transport service that provides at least three return trips each weekday to a nearby town
- Improved mobility options for those in remote areas with the provision of Demand Responsive and other innovative transport services
- Over 100 new Local Centre connections from rural settlements in the hinterland
- Over 100 new County Town connections from all types of settlements around County Towns;
- Over 60 new Regional Centre/City connections, from all types of settlements around these Centres/Cities.

It is important that regular, clear updates are provided at local and at national level so that progress towards meeting these commitments can easily be monitored.

The Connecting Ireland commitment to putting attractive timetables in place on regional routes between villages and towns that will suit the users rather than expecting them to adapt their life around inadequate services is very welcome. The new and enhanced services should allow rural dwellers to arrive into town and village destinations at times of the day and week that will be more useful, to spend time at the destination of make onward connections.

These specific commitments are very important:

- Increase frequency of services on existing routes to attract more usage,
- Ensure that less populous areas where demand for service is low get at least a useful level of service,
- Design useful timetables for Monday-Friday, Saturday and Sunday:



- Catering for those working, shopping and visiting a town and living a distance away,
- Suiting the traditional length of a working day or a typical shopping trip, providing opportunities where demand warrants to shop / socialise into the evening,
- Serving all the major attractions a town has to offer, e.g. Public Health Centre, Hospital, Shopping area, employment zones, amenities, rail & bus stations, etc.,
- Providing better services in the evenings, between the morning and evening rush hours, and on weekends, including Sunday.

These commitments are all important. It is essential that the improvements in service take place as soon as possible. We welcome the development of new routes and service improvements but these, and indeed all existing services, need to be well advertised and promoted to ensure take-up and increased patronage levels.

Comments and suggestions

Below we also comment on other aspects of service provision and local public transport important to the success of Connecting Ireland.

Information and promotion of services

As part of Connecting Ireland is very useful to have clear maps for each county and we would be pleased to see these made available on line as an integrated map showing the country as a whole. It is sometimes difficult to see local routes which cross county boundaries on the individual maps. This would help people trying to plan journeys.

It is essential that the information shown on the maps is accurate and reflects services on the ground. Anecdotal evidence suggests that, occasionally, there are existing services not shown on the map and vice versa.

Accurate information about existing services needs to be much more widely available and much easier to find. The Local Link services need to be better integrated into on line travel planning resources such as the TFI Journey Planner, Google Directions and sites such as Rome to Rio. This would make the use of services easier to plan and would create greater awareness and use of services.

The provision of bus stops (or information boards) providing route information would significantly increase the visibility of the services. Such bus stops/ information points must be visible and must have the correct route information. In practice sometimes the most effective way, currently, to get route information is to flag down a bus in service and ask the driver, yet this option is not likely to be available to many potential users.

New routes, local demand and consultation

It is not clear how decisions are made about new routes and whether they are based on existing journey data or whether particular journey types or users are being targeted. Without this information it is hard to know, at a broader level how attractive or useful the proposed service improvements will be.

Connections between services, and timing of services and the way the routes will integrate in practice are all crucial to the success of, and benefits to be derived from the service improvements but it is difficult to comment on this without more detailed information.

The proposed increases in services are very welcome, and the commitment to a minimum service level is very important. From the background information provided, however, it is not clear when new services will be introduced or existing services enhanced. It is important that when decisions are to be made about these that there is good local consultation with users and potential users.



It will also be important that the services are well integrated with short connection times

Collaboration

We very much welcome the local collaboration approach and recognise that local authorities will play a key role in authorising new bus stopping places, providing roadside turning and regulatory facilities, improving access to rail and interurban station forecourts, prioritising access by bus to town and village centres. It is also noted that the Connecting Ireland team will recommend where best to provide stops and shelters and that a separate programme within the Authority will set about providing them.

It is essential that collaboration is well structured and focussed so the planned improvements are effective and attractive public transport options and that the roles of all involved are clear.

Bus Stops and Local facilities

There is an urgent need to provide new interchange facilities and enhanced bus waiting facilities together with enhanced passenger information, utilising smart technology in appropriate circumstances. Even relatively small investments in smaller centres are needed and if made can help support increased patronage levels. For example, certain points on the network have many interconnections, and there may be long waiting periods between them. It is particularly important that good comfortable shelter is provided at such points.

Bus services need to stop at convenient locations where it is possible to integrate with other transport modes as many rural journeys require multiple modes. Car parking, secure bicycle parking and good lighting in a secure area are all important. It may be useful to pilot the development of transport hubs in towns which bring all of the modes together and also provide comfortable dry spaces for waiting.

In future, real time information on bus arrival times should be developed most likely available via mobile phone. This is even more important in rural areas than urban areas, as people often have to wait a long time in poor conditions for a bus and it helps to know when one is due. Likewise people will often have a long walk to the bus stopping point or need to be driven and so knowing bus arrival or departure time makes for a more convenient journey.

Integration of Modes

We understand that Connecting Ireland is a bus focused programme but it is essential that services integrate with the timetables for other modes (such as rail and ferry services) allowing for short effective connections. Similarly, services to airports need to be frequent and reliable.

This review focuses on bus connections but a strategic rail review has also recently commenced. Overall, the focus needs to be on wider public transport connectivity and accessibility. This is what is crucial to rural areas especially in the context of the low carbon transition.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the WDC warmly welcomes the NTA Connecting Ireland programme as a major public transport initiative developed to increase connectivity, particularly for people living outside our major cities and towns.

The WDC is pleased to make this submission to the consultation on Connecting Ireland. If there are any queries concerning this submission, please contact me.

Dr Helen McHenry

Policy Analyst

helenmchenry@wdc.ie, M: 086 605 3264