Western Development Commission (WDC) Submission to department of Transport consultation on the Shared Mobility Hubs- Issues, challenges and Opportunities

3rd May 2024

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. We welcome the opportunity to make a brief submission to the Department of Transport paper on Shared Mobility Hubs- Issues, Challenges and Opportunities.

The WDC regards the provision of sustainable transport infrastructure, such as mobility hubs, as essential to underpinning the economic and social development of the Western Region and enabling the switch to a low carbon society. Our region is very rural with 63% of the population living outside of towns of 1,500 (compared to 31% in the rest of the state). In the Western Region 23% of the people live in towns with a population of more than 10,000, while nationally 52% do[1]. Our focus in relation to transport policy is on regional and rural accessibility to opportunities and services, both within our region and beyond, through a variety of transport modes.

The WDC recognises the importance of the low carbon transition and believes that shared mobility and more multi modal journeys are an important part to the shift to low carbon mobility[2]. In this submission we highlight the issues and opportunities for smaller towns and rural areas, for a region with lower population density, lower levels of public transport service provision, and less transport infrastructure.

While the issues paper has a particular focus on shared mobility hubs, in our responses we consider all types of mobility hubs. We believe that establishing mobility hubs that mix all modes, public, private and shared, will form the best basis for capturing emerging opportunities from shared mobility.

Please note we have only addressed the questions which are most relevant to Western Region issues and opportunities. We believe Mobility Hubs can take a variety of forms depending on their location and local needs. A couple of examples are set out below.

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[1] https://westerndevelopment.ie/policy/publications/wdc-census-2022-summary-report-for-western-region-july-2023/

[2] See here for more on our work on the low carbon transition https://westerndevelopment.ie/insights/making-the-transition-to-a-low-carbon-society-in-the-western-region-2/

In urban settings, where there are likely to be a variety of mobility options, hubs may be focused on shared mobility, but in smaller towns and rural areas it is important that they serve as a means of integrating travel modes and providing easy to use options for last mile travel. They can also enable more multi modal journeys so that even if private car use cannot be eliminated, there are alternative modes for some or most of the journey.

In small towns the mobility hubs can provide a range of options including shared cars and e bikes, bicycles and scooters. In some small towns they could provide the means for getting around a town without a private car. They may also serve those arriving in a town to use local services. In this case car parking would be an important element of the hub, so that it could form a type of 'park and ride' with the 'ride element' being a shared mobility option (most likely micromobility). This would require location at the edge of a town. Hubs should be located at the key public transport stops, (rail or bus) allowing integration of multiple modes on longer journeys.

In the most rural areas, outside towns, bus stops should be locations for mobility hubs providing options for first/last mile transport (e bikes, bicycles and places for waiting and pick -up). Potentially, depending on the nature of the bus stop, parking for private cars would be important to allow people to connect to public transport recognising the reliance on private cars to access the services.

We welcome the recognition in the paper that shared mobility can play a key role in 'just transition' offsetting the costs of vehicle ownership by providing more affordable shared alternatives (p10). We also welcome the recognition that in regions where the provision of services is less commercially attractive that state support may be required. Without such support the development of mobility hubs outside urban centres will be difficult.

Questions

What issues or topics should be addressed as part of a policy on mobility hubs, and what should its key objectives be?

The definition of mobility hubs needs to be broad and their development needs to go beyond a focus on shared mobility. Hubs can act as places for interchange of modes (of all kinds) along a journey. Shared mobility options are just one part of this. Larger urban hubs may have a particular focus on shared mobility but in smaller towns, villages and rural areas all modes and ownership options should be integrated at these hubs e.g. public transport, private car pick up and drop off, lift sharing meeting points, car and bike shares, and secure places to leave private bicycles when changing to other modes (e.g. bus). Taking this wider view will increase opportunities for hub use which in turn will increase the potential services which can be offered.

Which business/operational models would be most appropriate for a nationwide network of hubs?

Options provided should vary depending on the hub location (urban, rural etc) and the main expected hub function e.g. link to public transport services, or allowing to a switch to bicycle for access to a town centre. It is important that there are different business models available.

What alternative models of hub provision should be considered (e.g. community-led hubs)?

Community led hubs should be an important option for rural areas, both for the management of the hub and potentially also for the provision of shared mobility options (which could range from bicycles to shared vehicles). The community in these situations would provide important local knowledge on what is needed and would also be important for spreading information about the hub and its options.

What would you regard as essential features of a smaller, rural hub? How could mobility hubs most effectively be utilised to enable rural dwellers to reduce their car usage? What are the main challenges to be addressed in making mobility hubs viable for use in rural Ireland?

This has been mentioned elsewhere, but car parking would allow people to leave private vehicles when they switch to other modes, reducing the share of the journey taking place by car. In urban hubs there is less need for this and less space available, but it is likely to be essential in rural areas. Provision of bicycle parking or shared bicycles (either through a formal scheme or a community bicycle) would also make it attractive to those who do not drive. Safety is very important. There needs to be a place for private cars to stop and drop people safely, or to wait for people to arrive and collect them for the last mile. Hubs also need to also need to be safely accessible on foot. Reducing speed limits in the area of a hub could help with this, along with good location and design of the stopping and interchange areas.

Once the appropriate model is found mobility hubs should be viable in rural areas. There is likely to be an unmet demand for interchange areas, but for hubs to work they must address the particular needs of the area. They need to be located at key interchange points and need to be kept simple. The key objective of government policy should be to provide alternative mobility options and replace more of the journey with sustainable travel options. In defining viability, it is important not to rely on private shared mobility options for the definition of success. In the early stages of hub development providing a simple range of options which may be most popular as it allows for use to grow slowly.

In your opinion, what types of journey could be readily switched from private cars to shared modes, specifically among people living in rural areas?

Looking specifically at shared modes, the easiest options could relate to carpooling for travel to work or third level where the journey end point is in a larger town. In order to increase carpooling and car sharing in rural areas hubs with car parking, scooter and bicycle parking would be important, so that they can be left safely. Such points already exist informally throughout rural Ireland, but use could be increased with the provision of some facilities.

Similarly providing shared mobility options (bicycles and e bikes) to connect public transport stops to the local town would be useful. In many towns the railway station is at some distance from the town itself, so there is a demand for transport to and from the stations. Likewise, where towns have been bypassed, intercity bus stops may be on the bypass rather than in the town, for at least some of the services, and easy connection to the town using shared options could be popular. There are also intercity bus stops along the national road network where people are often brought by car to catch the bus. These stops could also be shared mobility hub locations.

In addition to factors set out in the issues paper, what else (if anything) should influence the location of hubs in order to maximise their usage?

As noted in the issues paper, proximity to public transport is probably the best way to maximise usage, but in towns and rural areas having the space for the space to co locate car parking would be important. People may need to travel to the hub by private car and then switch to other modes, whether public transport or shared.

What factors might attract you or others to use shared mobility hubs?

A range of mode choice, easy sign up and integration of apps and suppliers would all make it more attractive particularly in an urban context.

Information is also key. Detail (on simple signs, not just online) about the services operating, how to use them (for shared mobility modes in particular), public transport timetables (up to date!) and ideally access to real time information on when the next service is due, would all make mobility hubs more attractive to use.

In a more rural context where, as described above, mobility hubs would operate best as places of modal interchange integrating public, private and shared options. To make it work all the buses operating locally should stop at the mobility hub. Shelter and seating (such as in a bus stop) would also make it more attractive for those waiting on a public transport service, or waiting to be collected on arrival. Additionally, lighting would be helpful (solar panels could avoid the need for an electricity connection). Access to Wi-Fi would of course make the hub more attractive, but we recognise that this would not be possible in many rural hubs.

What factors might discourage you or others from using shared mobility hubs?

Lack of safe access and good traffic management would discourage use. Any mobility hub (especially small mobility interchanges in rural areas) needs to be safely accessible on foot and bicycle, particularly in the vicinity of the hub itself. In addition, there needs to be place for cars to pull in easily safely for drop off and collection or car users may be inclined to continue journeys by car.

Specifically relating to the shared mobility element, needing to sign up for and download multiple different apps, depending on the mode to be used or the providers at different hubs would discourage use particularly for hubs that are not part of a person's usual journey pattern.

What needs to be considered in the context of multi-modal journeys, which integrate shared modes with other forms of sustainable transport, when developing a mobility hub policy?

This has been discussed elsewhere, but the provision of car parking places and secure bicycle parking (ideally under cover) along with places to sit and wait (there can be long waits for public transport services) and shelter for those using hub would allow better modal integration across journeys.

How important in this regard is the reliability, interoperability, and useability of shared mobility apps?

This is very important. People do not want to have to sign up for and download multiple apps which they may use infrequently. If there is easy interoperability is makes shared mobility more attractive especially in places the user is not regularly traveling.

Co-location of Mobility Hubs and Remote Working Hubs

There are also opportunities for the co-location of mobility hubs. ConnectedHubs.ie is a Government of Ireland initiative that provides a means for co-working hubs to come together under a shared identity to maximise the economic opportunity of remote working. ConnectedHubs.ie is managed by the Western Development Commission in conjunction with the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD). The Connected Hubs (CH) team has recently begun to explore the options for

integrating shared mobility options into the Hubs network, so that mobility hubs could be co located with co-working hubs. A car sharing organisation has recently approached the National Hubs Network exploring zero CH platform cost options to deploy shared cars as an initiative to co working hub sites that wish to participate, along with discounted rental rates for registered hub users nationwide[3]. This is in its early stages, but we believe that co working hubs could provide good location for mobility hubs, depending of course on other available facilities. Please contact us for further information on this work.

Conclusion

The WDC welcomes the consultation on the issues and opportunities for mobility hubs. Given the very rural nature of the Western Region it is important that the opportunities in rural areas are fully explored. We believe mobility hubs are an important step towards reducing reliance on private car use. As noted above, there are a variety of different mobility hub models which will working different settings. The provision of mobility hubs or modal interchange areas need not require significant investment but can provide simple low tech solutions, though there are also opportunities for higher tech options in future. Community provision or management of mobility hubs or provision of shared mobility should be explored.

The WDC recently developed a Sustainable Mobility Index (SMI) for 35 small towns in our region (population 1,500-10,000 in Census of Population 2016). One of the indicators used to create this composite index measures cycle parking proximate to rail stations or bus stops. This indicator measures what might be considered as a basic precursor to a mobility hub (an opportunity for a modal interchange) and unfortunately, in collecting the data (June 2022) we found in many towns scores on this indicator were low. The insert below shows the indicator for cycle parking (at public transport and in towns). Half of the score is for cycle parking at public transport. Clearly, this needs to improve and designating mobility hubs and mobility interchanges could be part of this. We are updating the SMI this year (2024) and similar data will be collected before end Q2 2024. [4].

We welcome the opportunity to make a submission to the consultation on Shared Mobility Hubs. We believe that these hubs, in various forms depending on their location, have the potential to help shift users to lower carbon forms of transport.

If you would like any more information or to discuss our submission further, please get in touch with me.

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[3] https://connectedhubs.ie/networknews/posts/network-news-25-april-to-9-may-2023

[4] https://westerndevelopment.ie/policy/publications/a-sustainable-mobility-index/

Cycle parking at rail stations/bus stops/ different locations across towns

Definition: Cycle parking spaces at rail stations or bus stops (5 points) and in other locations (5)
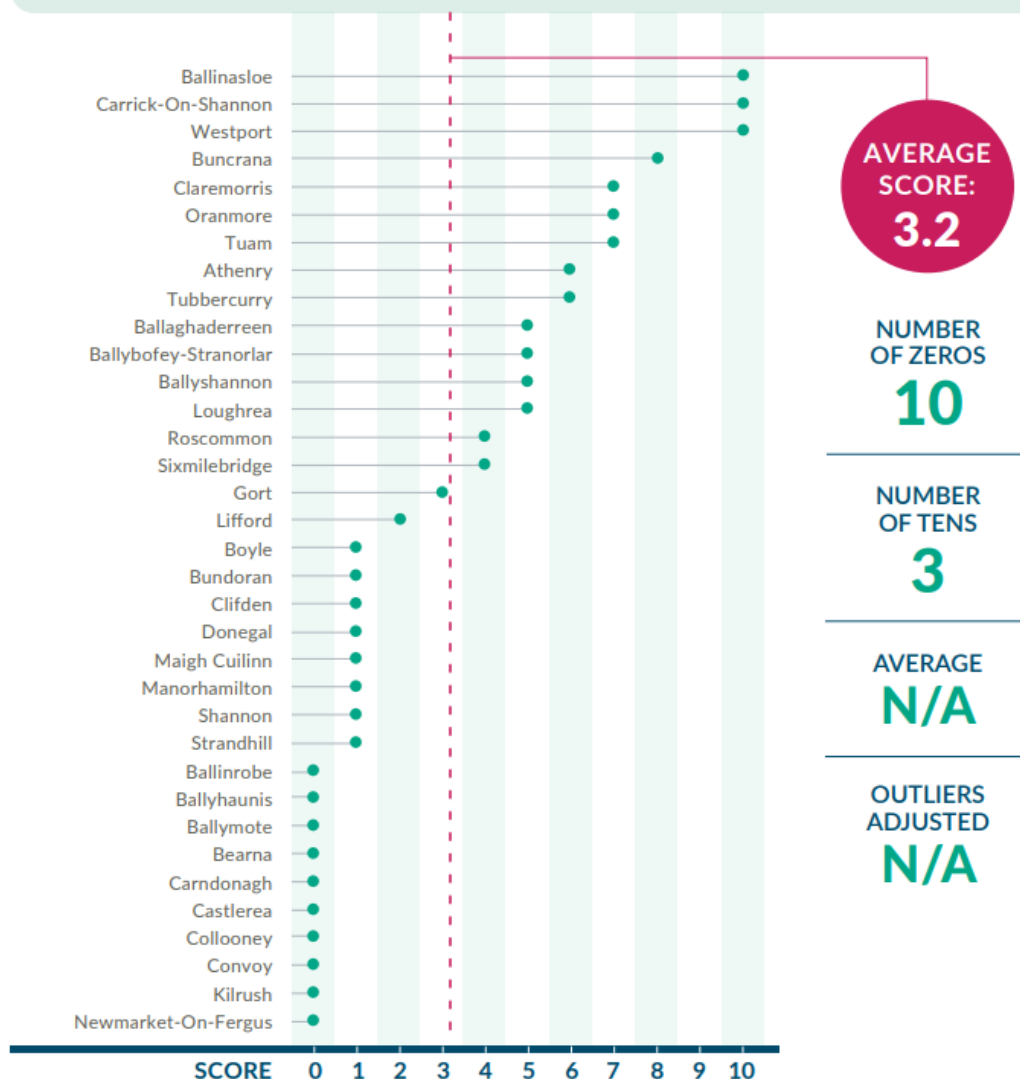
Measure 1 (max 5): Cycle parking at rail station or close to bus stop, Score None at either (0), Parking at only 1 of the 2, (2) Parking at bus if only bus, (4) Yes at both (5). Measure 2 (max 5, adjusted for population) Number of publicly provided cycle parking locations in town, None, (0); 1 place, (1); 2 places, (2); 3 places (3); 4 places (4); More than 5, (5).

Source: WDC survey

Data collected: June 2022

What does it show? Cycle parking is essential and there needs to be sufficient parking in a variety of places. Important option for public transport users and promotion of multimodal options. Measure of commitment to cycling and needs of cyclists

Type: Low Carbon Transition Theme

AVERAGE SCORE:
3.2

NUMBER OF ZEROS
10

NUMBER OF TENS
3

AVERAGE
N/A

OUTLIERS ADJUSTED
N/A

Towns (top to bottom): Ballinasloe, Carrick-On-Shannon, Westport, Buncrana, Claremorris, Oranmore, Tuam, Athenry, Tubbercurry, Ballaghaderreen, Ballybofey-Stranorlar, Ballyshannon, Loughrea, Roscommon, Sixmilebridge, Gort, Lifford, Boyle, Bundoran, Clifden, Donegal, Maigh Cuilinn, Manorhamilton, Shannon, Strandhill, Ballinrobe, Ballyhaunis, Ballymote, Bearna, Carndonagh, Castlerea, Collooney, Convoy, Kilrush, Newmarket-On-Fergus

SCORE 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10