
Part 1 - Background Information

AIM OF THE INITIATIVE

The Rural Transport Initiative (RTI) arose from a commitment by the Department of Transport in the National Development Plan 2000-2006, where a provision for up to €4.4 million was earmarked to support the development of pilot public transport initiatives in rural areas. The aim of this funding is *“to encourage innovative community-based initiatives to provide transport services in rural areas, with a view to addressing the issue of social exclusion in rural Ireland, which is caused by lack of access to transport”*.

The Initiative was launched in 2001 following an intensive consultation process and a public information campaign. Thirty-four projects are participating in the Initiative, 26 of which graduated from the pre-development phase. There is at least one project in every county in the country with the exception of County Louth, from which there was no application. ADM, who manages the Initiative on behalf of the Department of Transport, provides ongoing training, monitoring and support to groups.

OBJECTIVES OF THE INITIATIVE

The objectives of the programme are to:

- ❑ Promote and support the development of innovative pilot community-based public transport projects in rural areas;
- ❑ Use local knowledge and expertise in the development of public transport services;
- ❑ Improve utilisation of existing transport assets;
- ❑ Develop models of collaboration and partnership at local level by encouraging different sectors, e.g. voluntary and community organisations, statutory bodies, etc. to participate in the initiative;
- ❑ Gain experience of the use of new technologies in the co-ordination and development of transport systems;
- ❑ Encourage innovative approaches to meet recognised local needs, including those of the disabled and mobility impaired;
- ❑ Develop models of best practice that meet identified needs;
- ❑ Contribute to the development of rural public transport policy.



PRINCIPLES

1. The transport needs of the community, both social and economic should be addressed.
2. The proposed service provision must be available to the public generally within a given geographical area and should not be confined to any particular target group.
3. The proposed initiatives should seek to complement rather than compete with the existing public transport services provided either by CIE companies or by private operators.
4. The potential to enable the provision of services for the mobility impaired should be explored and promoted.
5. Innovative solutions using IT technology are considered for funding.
6. Locally sourced co-financing elements are encouraged and expected.
 - . Voluntary and community organisations and community partnerships are participating, some in conjunction with their Local Authority and/or Health Board.

ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURES

It is a requirement of the Initiative that all of the 34 participating projects must be administered by a limited company. Each of the projects are unique in terms of their:

- Management, operational and organizational structures
- Responses developed / transport models adopted
- Innovativeness
- Transport needs
- Local circumstances and operating environment
- Strengths and capacities

All groups participating are community based and many have developed a partnership response by encouraging the community, statutory and transport sectors locally to come together for the purposes of implementing the Initiative. This partnership takes place at either the Board, sub-committee or advisory group levels and in some cases, a combination of all three. The development of sub-structures such as advisory groups and user-fora, have been strongly encouraged to stimulate greater ownership over the process and harness local knowledge, energy and ideas.

Each project employs a Co-ordinator on either a full-time or a part-time basis, depending on the size and scope of the project. Ten projects receive further funding under the FÁS Social Economy Programme, which enables them to provide worthwhile training and employment opportunities for local people eligible to participate. Additional financial and non-financial support, guidance and mentoring services have been provided to projects by many local development companies, statutory agencies, authorities and individuals in a voluntary capacity.

FREE TRAVEL SCHEME

The Department of Social and Family Affairs provide a contribution towards the costs of enabling passengers entitled to free travel passes to travel free of charge. This development made a significant impact on the availability and affordability of services for many rural dwellers.

TRANSPORT MODELS

Four basic models or a combination of the following have been adopted by the projects, depending on what is more appropriate for the area and the people concerned:

- ❑ Projects that own and operate their own vehicles - community buses.
- ❑ Projects that subcontract the provision of services to other transport operators.
- ❑ Projects that use the spare capacity of vehicles owned by other voluntary organisations.
- ❑ Car sharing schemes - either a) coordinated hackney services where journeys are co-ordinated in advance and shared, thus bringing down the cost of travel or b) voluntary car schemes - where volunteers provide transport in their own vehicles for a set number of hours per week.

NEW DEVELOPMENTS

A number of concepts are beginning to develop above expectations and are advancing to a level previously thought desirable yet unachievable:

- ❑ Public and private sector contracts and service level agreements with statutory agencies (Health Boards, VEC, FÁS) and voluntary organisations (disability organisations, day care centres) to ensure more integrated, co-ordinated and cost efficient local services.
- ❑ The negotiation of transport brokerage (resource sharing) agreements between projects and voluntary organisations and in some cases the transfer of resources and ownership of vehicles.
- ❑ Co-ordination of existing services with public and privately available transport, to ensure effective linkages between local services and longer distance journeys and better service coverage and frequency.
- ❑ Introduction and utilisation of advanced scheduling and vehicle location technology to assist with the co-ordination, monitoring, reporting and delivery aspects of the services.
- ❑ Emergence of professionally qualified and certified transport operations, which are not for profit and geared towards meeting social objectives rather than reaping financial reward.

SERVICE DELIVERY

Services provided within the RTI are a combination of the following:

- Semi-flexible with deviation radii
- Partially demand-responsive
- Fully demand-responsive
- Conventional fixed route, where another alternative is not available

6% of services introduced under the Rural Transport Initiative provide door-to-door transport for passengers who may be disadvantaged because of their location, age, mobility or income levels.

The majority of services provide either semi-flexible (from the point of view of stopping points where deviations can occur within geographical radii) or are completely responsive to demand. In the latter, the actual bookings define the distance that will be traveled and the service schedule. The majority of services prioritise social needs and access to essential facilities and public services.

Although all services are available to the public generally, there are some very innovative examples of services that specifically target:

- Increased access to third-level education
- Access to mainstream schools
- Access to employment, education and training opportunities
- Access to supported employment opportunities
- Access to mainstream public transport services
- Access to childcare & pre-school activities
- Access to after-school activities
- Access to recreational facilities
- Access for tourists

PASSENGER PROFILE

The services provided through the RTI appeal to a wide section of society. For many passengers, the projects represent their only opportunity to use public transport to access essential public services. For many others, the introduction of services has given them the option of having an alternative to private car usage. Statistics collected in 2005 (January to August) show the following:

- 6 % of passengers are female
- 63% of passengers are free travel pass holders
- 9% of passengers have mobility difficulties and require all-ability access features
- 84% of passengers pre-book their journeys in advance
- 6% of journeys are door-to-door