



**Community
Transport
Association**

**Response to the
Department for Regional Development
on the
Draft Sub-Regional Transport Plan.**

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Community Transport Association

Introduction

The Community Transport Association is a rapidly growing national charity giving voice to and providing learning and enterprise support to member organizations. It promotes excellence through providing training, publications, advice, and project support on voluntary, community and local accessible transport. Voluntary and community transport exists to meet the travel and social needs of people to whom these would otherwise be denied, providing accessible and affordable transport solutions.

In Northern Ireland there are over several hundred minibuses serving over 300,000 passengers every year being operated for use by voluntary & community groups and other organisations, or to provide door-to-door transport for people who are unable to use public transport. This door-to-door transport is not limited to minibuses, as there are many voluntary car schemes throughout Northern Ireland where a volunteer will use their own car to provide transport for individuals.

The CTA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Department's discussion and consultation process on the Draft Sub Regional Transport Plan.

The following section details the CTA's specific comments on the Plan.

Comments on the Policy Context

The context of the Plan is well documented and is clearly referenced in the Regional Transportation Strategy as an emerging Plan. The Plan also makes reference to a wide range of other related policies. The CTA is concerned that there may be missed opportunities for better coordination of transport services and targeting of resources if the ongoing Reviews do not support the full outworking of the SRTP.

The draft Plan clearly recognises the importance of the Accessible Transport Strategy and the requirement of public bodies to pay regard to the ATS when developing and implementing their policies and plans. We believe that the SRTP does not reflect fully the strategic objectives or policies of the ATS. In particular, we are interested in the principle of developing accessible transport chains and local accessible transport

networks. We believe that these two concepts are the building blocks for developing an inclusive, efficient, local transport framework within the structure of the SRTP.

The draft Plan provides a definition and distinction between rural areas and other urban areas, which relates back to the original RTS. We are aware of other government work ongoing into the definition of what is rural and urban. We welcome this work and believe it will help to eradicate some inconsistencies in the delivery of transport services to local communities.

Comments on the proposals for Other Urban Areas

The CTA acknowledges that a large amount of research has been undertaken to complete the Local Transport Studies from within the 29 OUAs. We are concerned however that the LTSs do not give more consideration to people living in areas of social need, within the identified OUAs. This is particularly the case for older people, children, people with disabilities and people on low income, due to their mobility needs. The people living in these areas are often more dependent on public transport than in other areas and therefore, as a result of their mobility difficulties, a transport mix of services may be required.

We are also concerned that the LTSs have not considered transport provision across all government agencies as a component part of all services e.g. work, health, shops, education etc.

We believe that the SRTP does not adequately reflect the role that local community and voluntary transport operators provide in many urban areas. Many of the towns surveyed have an active community transport organisation providing a choice of transport services for people with mobility difficulties. They have a pivotal role to play in developing a local accessible transport network.

We welcome the introduction of minimum standards for local bus services, for the purposes of comparative assessments. We believe however that there is a need to try to define what is an acceptable basic minimum mobility/access provision. There is also a need to define how much travel an individual should be prepared to undertake e.g. access to work. Further work on this would be welcomed.

We note that Shopmobility services currently funded by the DRD in some urban areas are not included in the SRTP.

Comments on the proposals for Rural Areas

The CTA is disappointed that the SRTP has not undertaken a similar level of primary research for rural areas as it does for the OUAs. The methodology used for analysing the needs of the rural areas is based on existing census and other data, which does not contribute to a conclusive policy for rural areas. Since according to DSD statistics, the rural area accounts for 34.7% of the population, the CTA believes that a Rural Transport Policy should be developed within the context of the SRTP.

Rural areas are difficult in transport terms because of the sparsity of the population and the individuality of their needs. This is where community transport excels. It is important to realise that community transport might not mean actually operating vehicles, but rather organising someone else to do it or act as a local point of contact for a range of mobility needs.

The CTA is concerned that the role of Rural Community Transport Partnerships in delivering services is not given more prominence in the SRTP. There are nineteen RCTPs supported by the Rural Transport Fund, and although the Rural Transport Fund is under review, there is a huge opportunity for the SRTP to outline a significant role for RCTPs in both delivering rural services and co-ordinating services for other.

The RCTPs are made up of the main local transport stakeholders, in nineteen centres across Northern Ireland. They are engaged in a myriad of local networks and draw down a wide range financial and other support from many different local and national agencies. Many RCTPs are the centre of focus for users needs in relation to passenger assistants, driver training, sources of transport information and general travel advice. We are concerned that the SRTP does not acknowledge the contribution that the RCTPs make to meeting transport and wider social objectives in their local area.

The CTA believes that it can work with the Department to provide ongoing leadership to help RCTPs develop their pivotal role in local transport provision. We would welcome a discussion with the Department on the new challenges that exist for the RCTPs.

The CTA supports the proposal to introduce minimum service levels for rural settlements, however as in the previous section, we believe that community transport is well positioned to add value to the service levels because of its lower operating costs and flexible, adaptable approach to service delivery.

In relation to the measures for the open countryside we are supportive of the concept and aim of the “Flexible Transport Plan” as outlined in the SRTP. We are disappointed however that the programme for introducing flexible services and demand responsive operations has not been introduced more widely and more timely. We are also concerned that there are proposals to reduce minimum service levels for flexible services, even before consideration or fuller examination has been provided to the existing services.

Conclusion

The CTA welcomes the Department’s Draft Plan as an attempt to develop and enhance transport networks outside of the Belfast Metropolitan area.

We welcome the recent injection of funding to improve mainstream transport services as well as to improve transport services, not regarded as mainstream, for elderly and disabled people. We believe that the services that community transport offers is well packaged and offers users a huge range of add-on benefits, which they often need, at no extra cost to themselves or the funder. We are therefore disappointed that more consideration has not been given to community transport to help with the development of the SRTP to this point.

We will conclude with a summary of the main points of our response. We look forward to further dialogue with the team as and when the final Plan is published.

Summary

- The Plan needs to make clear what future role Rural Community Transport Partnerships have in delivering services.
- The Plan should have more specific references to older people, children, people with disabilities and people on low income, due to their specific needs.
- The final Plan must do more to reflect Departmental policies arising out of the Accessible Transport Strategy especially in the area of developing local accessible transport networks.

- The Plan needs to show a much greater commitment, and more concrete actions, around providing demand responsive transport solutions for people living in rural areas
- The Local Transport Studies, which provide a significant knowledge bank for the development of the Plan, should give more consideration to rural areas and areas of social need.
- The Plan should offer a consistent approach in determining a rural and an urban area. Different Departmental programmes currently use different definitions.

Contact Details

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