# Rural Community Network

## Regional Development Committee Inquiry into Sustainable Transport

## Rural Transport Considerations

## 7 September 2009

Rural Community Network (RCN) is a regional voluntary organisation established by community groups from rural areas in 1991 to articulate the voice of rural communities on issues relating to poverty, disadvantage and equality. We have a membership of over 450 across Northern Ireland.

RCN is committed to a rural community and networking approach to the planning and development of sustainable rural communities in order to address poverty, social exclusion and equality and to support work towards a shared future.

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**Underpinning principle**

**If we can address the rural transport issues for the most vulnerable within rural society then we will all stand to benefit**

1. **Introduction**

1.1 Rural transport is often a highly charged issue in many rural areas, whether it's about the impact of rising fuel costs, un-gritted roads, poor quality roads, or the lack of public transport.

1.2 The core issue that communities and policy makers face is that the car is an absolute necessity in ensuring the mobility of rural dwellers and their accessibility to key services and employment. Up to now, rural transport policy has tended to focus on those who don't have access to a car. A new rural transport policy is needed which ensures that *the problems of the immobile socially excluded are not analysed or tackled in isolation from the mobile included* within a wider canvass of growing sustainable rural communities that balances environmental, social and economic sustainability.
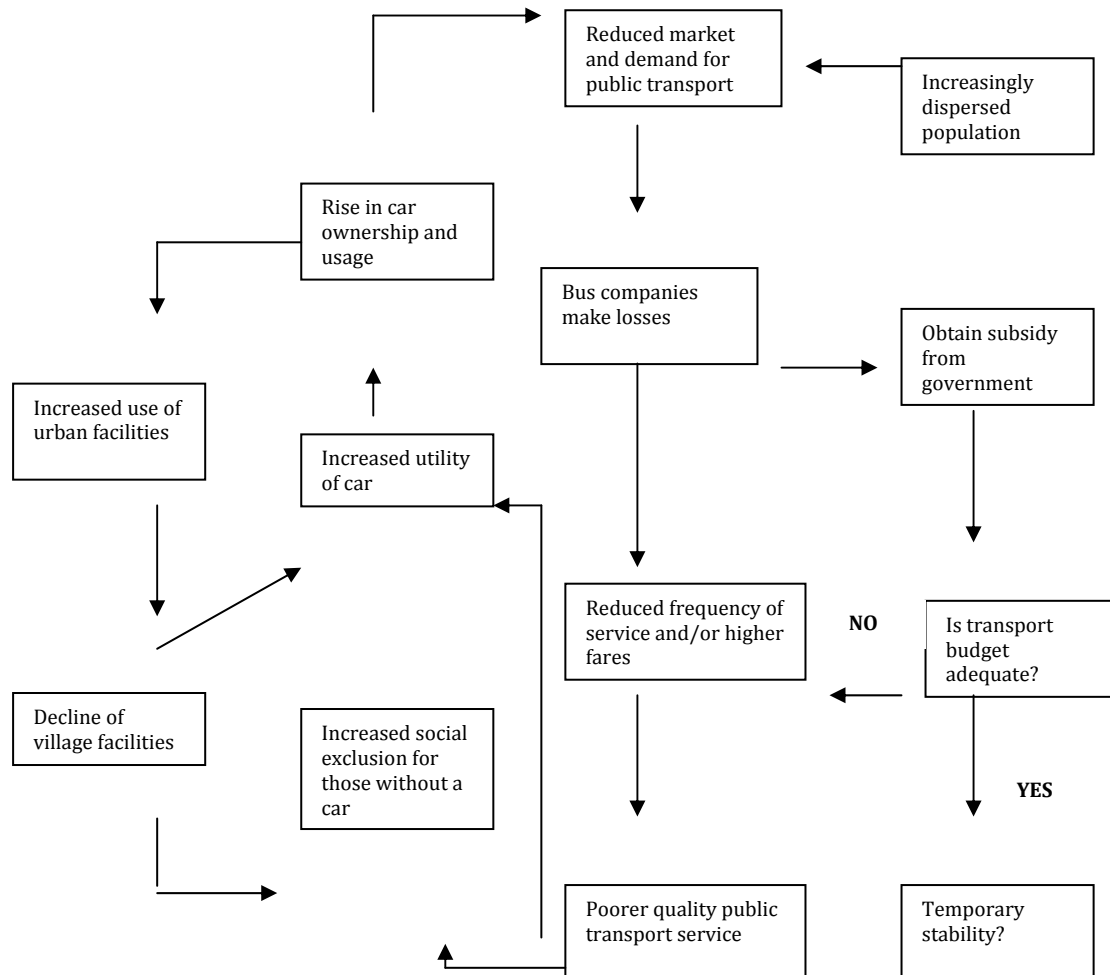
1.3 For those who own or have access to a car in a rural communities, the issues and challenges can be very different to the 20.5% who don't[1]. If you own a car, rural transport challenges are around keeping mobile which might include the price of running a car, the price of fuel and safety on the roads. If you don't own a car, rural transport is about how to access vital and often disappearing services. As Preston and Ragie have argued "the problems of the immobile socially excluded should not be analysed in isolation from the mobile included"[2] as there is often a vicious cycle in operation between increased car ownership, greater commuting distances and a decline in services with key groups who don't have access to a car, such as those on low income, young people and older people, losing out.

The following diagram adapted from Brake and Nelson (2007) in a recent report[3] by the Commission for Rural Communities summarises the complexity of the rural transport system and its impact on sustainable rural communities.

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[1] 2001 Census
[2] Preston, J.M., Ragie, F., (2007) *Accessibility, Mobility and Transport Related Social Exclusion,* Journal of Transport Geography, 15(3), 151-160 – As quoted in Irish Rural Link Report (2009)
[3] Commission for Rural Communities, (2008) *Thinking about rural transport – Sustainable rural accessibility – is it really possible?* , p.5

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                          ┌─────────────┐
                    ┌────→│ Reduced market│←──────────┐        ┌──────────────┐
                    │     │ and demand for│           └────────│ Increasingly │
                    │     │ public transport│                  │ dispersed    │
                    │     └─────────────┘                      │ population   │
                    │            │                             └──────────────┘
           ┌──────────────┐      ↓
           │ Rise in car  │  ┌─────────────┐
           │ ownership and│  │ Bus companies│         ┌──────────────┐
           │ usage        │  │ make losses  │────────→│ Obtain subsidy│
           └──────────────┘  └─────────────┘          │ from         │
                │                 │                    │ government   │
                ↓                 │                    └──────────────┘
     ┌──────────────┐   ┌──────────────┐                     │
     │ Increased use│   │ Increased utility│                 ↓
     │ of urban     │   │ of car       │            ┌──────────────┐
     │ facilities   │   └──────────────┘   NO       │ Is transport │
     └──────────────┘         ↑          ┌──────────│ budget       │
            │                 │          │          │ adequate?    │
            ↓          ┌──────────────┐  ↓          └──────────────┘
     ┌──────────────┐  │ Reduced frequency│                │
     │ Decline of   │  │ of service and/or│               YES
     │ village      │  │ higher fares │                    │
     │ facilities   │  └──────────────┘                    ↓
     └──────────────┘  ┌──────────────┐          ┌──────────────┐
            │          │ Increased social│       │ Temporary    │
            │          │ exclusion for   │       │ stability?   │
            │          │ those without a │       └──────────────┘
            │          │ car          │
            │          └──────────────┘
            │                 │
            ↓          ┌──────────────┐
                       │ Poorer quality│
                       │ public       │
                       │ transport service│
                       └──────────────┘
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According to Comhar Sustainable Development Commission "*if Irish transport is to become more sustainable then it will be necessary to improve the sustainability of rural transport by reducing the amount of individual vehicle kilometers driven while improving mobility and accessibility to services."* ."[4] Replacing the vicious cycle with a virtuous one will require 'decreasing car ownership', 'decreasing individual miles driven' and most importantly, 'increasing accessibility and mobility to local services.

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[4] Comhar SDC (2008) *Sustainable Travel and Transport Action Plan: Response to Public Consultation,* Dublin: Comhar SDC, available at
http://www.comharsdc.ie/_files/Comhar%20STTAP%20report.pdf

**Submission of Evidence**

### 2.1   *To explore and clarity the social, environmental and economic aspects of sustainable transport.*

2.11   Using the Inter-Departmental Urban-Rural Definition Group's definition of rural [population of 4500 and below] 34.7% of the total NI population lives in a rural area, with over one third of these living in settlements with populations ranging from 50 to 5000 people. [2001 Census] The remaining two thirds of rural dwellers live in settlements with populations of less than 50 people or in the open countryside. According to Sub-Regional Transport Plan [2007]:

"*This means that there is a sizeable proportion of the rural population who live beyond walking range to a number of key services such as schools and food shops. Therefore these people need to use motorised modes of transport.*"[5]

| Area | Population Band | Households without a car (%) | Working population who walk or cycle to work (%) | Working population who use public transport to work (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Small Towns | 4500 - 5000 | 24.1 | 9.4 | 4.4 |
| Intermediate Settlements | 2250 – 4499 | 20.0 | 8.5 | 4.8 |
| Villages | 1000-2249 | 23.8 | 16.3 | 4.9 |
| Small Villages | 500 – 999 | 21.4 | 16.6 | 4.4 |
| Hamlets | 50 – 499 | 10.9 | 4.0 | 2.7 |
| Open Countryside | <50 | 14.9 | 5.5 | 3.3 |
| **Rural** | | 20.5 | 10.7 | 4.2 |
| **Other Urban Areas** | | 28.6 | 14.8 | 4.9 |
| **Northern Ireland** | | 26.3 | 10.6 | 6.9 |

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[5] DRD Sub-Regional Transport Plan, p.43

2.12    The Sub-Regional Transport Plan also notes that:

"*In much of rural Northern Ireland, especially in the north and west, the majority of people do not live within easy reach of an existing bus service.*"
[p.46]

The Roads Service most recent Travel Survey for Northern Ireland [2005-2007] shows just over a half (52%) of households in Belfast had access to one or more cars compared to 79% and 76% in the East and West of Northern Ireland.[6] Thirty percent of households in Northern Ireland had access to two or more cars. However, only 14% of Belfast households had access to two or more cars, compared to 34% of households in the East and 31% in the West. The Survey comments that the average number of cars per household remained fairly constant over the 2002-2007 year period. [7]

The high level of car ownership is due to a number of factors including declining services, poor public transport, and poor integration between land use and spatial planning. The rise in the rural population and projected rise clearly has a critical role to play as well.

The graph below indicates that the population of rural areas is steadily increasing and is projected to do so until 2017. In comparison, urban populations remain relatively stable and are projected to do so in the future.
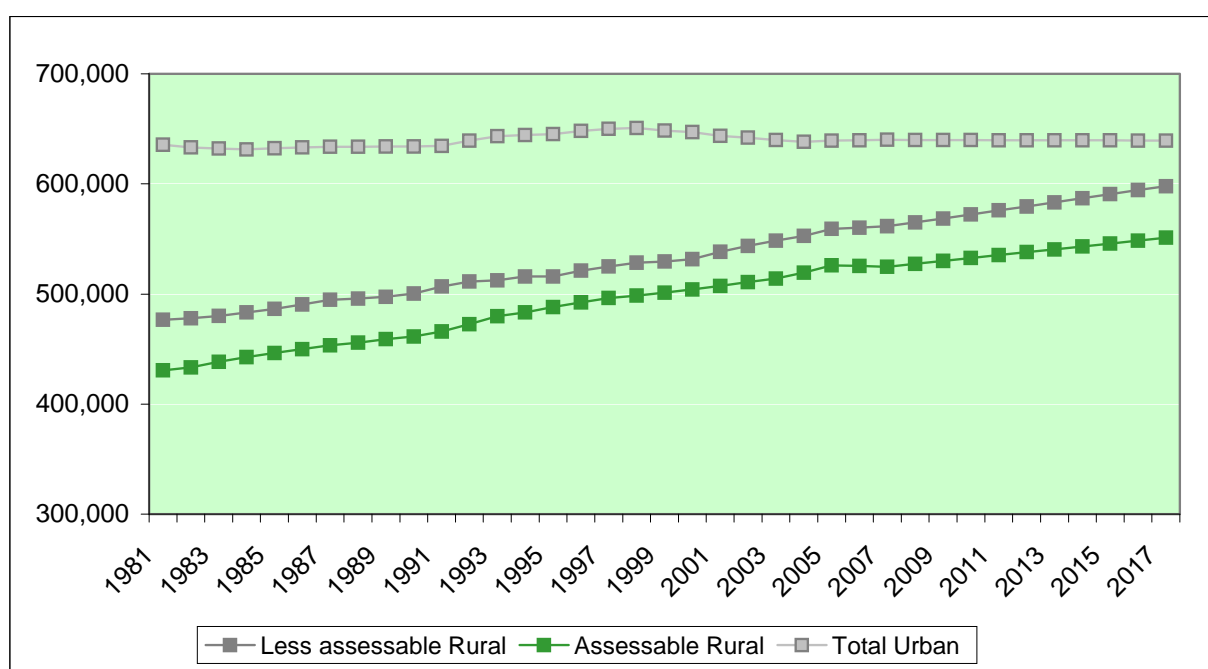


(Source: NISRA - NINIS website: http://www.ninis.nisra.gov.uk/)

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[6] Defining rural is problematic with different government departments using different definitions. In this instance, the East of Northern Ireland covers the Local Government Districts of Antrim, Ards, Ballymena, Banbridge, Carrickfergus, Castlereagh, Craigavon, Down, Larne, Lisburn, Newtownabbey, North Down. The West of Northern Ireland covers the Local Government Districts of Armagh, Ballymoney, Coleraine, Cookstown, Dungannon, Fermanagh, Limavady, Derry, Magherafelt, Moyle, Newry & Mourne, Omagh and Strabane.
[7] Roads Service [2008] *Travel Survey for Northern Ireland – 2005-2007*, p.10

2.13 The high levels of car ownership has clear implications for the sustainability of rural areas: environmentally, the government has a legal obligation to cut carbon emissions; economically, there are, for example, significant individual costs in terms of fuel prices, maintenance and longer distances travelled; socially, declining services undermines the fabric and viability of rural communities coupled with a growing trend of migration from urban areas and an aging profile. If transport is to contribute to sustainable rural communities, then the challenges need understood and tackled through the three lenses, not just the environmental.

**Social**

Bearable

Equitable

**Sustainable**

*Viable*

**Environmental**

**Economic**
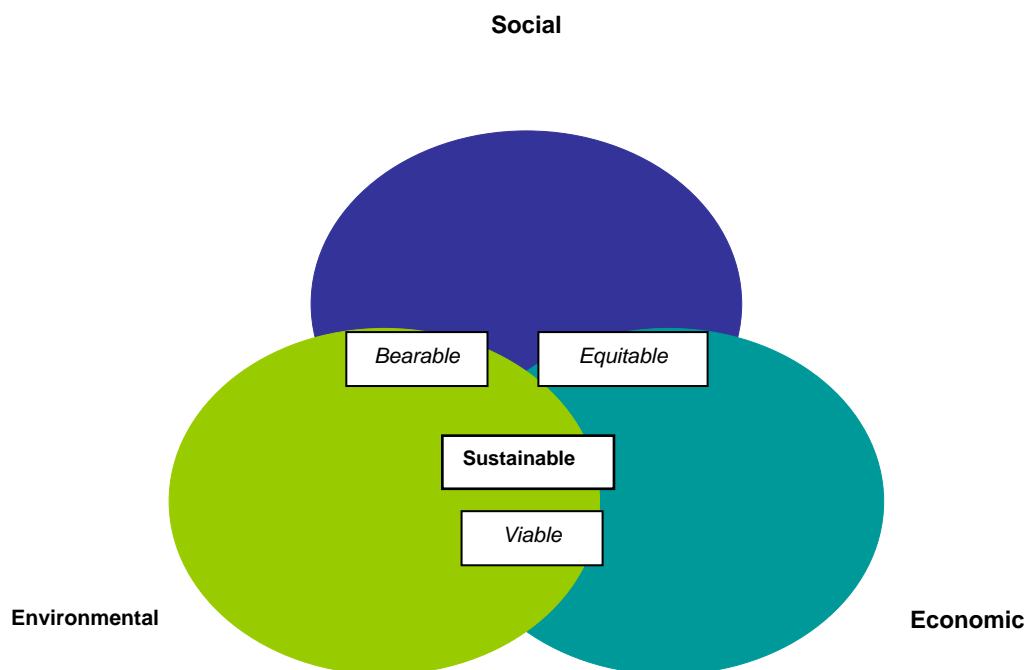
Ref: http://www.crankygoat.ca/s_2asp

As quoted in *Towards a Sustainable Transport Policy*, Irish Rural Link

2.14 In summary the reality of rural transport in Northern Ireland as experienced by many rural people on a daily basis is as follows:

- ¼ of the rural population currently receives a minimal level of service from conventional bus services. *(Sub regional transport plan (2015))*

- Only 4.2% of Northern Ireland's rural population choose to or are able to use public transport to commute to work (2001 census)

- 10.7% of the rural working population walk or cycle to work.

- The Rural Transport Fund provides financial support to Ulsterbus. The sub regional transport plan (2015) states that these are uneconomic to run, but are regarded as socially necessary. 48 services currently receive support.

- Access to bus services is much poorer in Northern Ireland than in Great Britain; 10% of respondents in Great Britain compared with 23% of respondents in Northern Ireland said there were no bus services linking their neighbourhoods with nearby facilities. (Source: Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey. Research Update. May 2002 by Liz Fawcett)

- Lack of access to bus services is more acute in rural areas than in urban areas, but it is a much more serious problem in Northern Ireland than in Great Britain; 42% of rural respondents in Northern Ireland said there were no bus services which could take them to local shops and services, compared to just 16% of rural respondents in Great Britain. (Source: Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey. Research Update. May 2002 by Liz Fawcett)

- 42% of rural dwellers are in transport poverty (defined as the % of households with no car or spending 1/3 of income on car ownership.) (RDC Services in Rural Northern Ireland, 2003)

- With regard to public transport "Bus service frequencies and coverage are generally poor in rural areas" with "users claiming that services don't go where you want to go" or services don't run when you need them." Sub regional transport plan (2015)

- The drive for 'efficiency' in relation to services and their delivery has seen an ongoing move towards centralisation. Set against this trend is that fact that the rural population of NI is projected to grow and age in the coming years.

- NISRA currently estimate that 21% of the population has a disability. Accessible transport is one of the key issues that must be addressed if people with disabilities are to play an active role in the social, economic, cultural and political life of Northern Ireland. The NI labour Force Survey 2004, found that people with disabilities are only half as likely as non-disabled people to be in employment and have lower than average incomes.

- Thirty-nine percent of women in Northern Ireland do not have a full driving license. This has particular implications in rural areas.

2.15    We offer three case studies below to illustrate some of the issues facing rural dwellers in accessing transport.

**Pearse Boyle** – Community Worker in Ballymoney

As a person with a disability living in rural South Derry and working in Ballymoney Pearse has direct experience of the problems linked to rural transport. Pearse used his car to commute everyday but due to an accident last year was unable to drive to work. This posed a serious barrier in that the only option open to Pearse if he wanted to maintain his job was a daily return taxi journey which cost £75, the cost of which Pearse met himself until he could no longer afford it. There was no rural accessible transport option for Pearse to utilise and given the cost of taxis he was forced to give up his job. Recently Pearse has moved to Magherafelt and has found suitable employment. The fact remains however that if Pearse wanted to be able to work and maintain a social life he had no other option than to move to Magherafelt due to the lack of a rural accessible transport system.

**Gerry Maguire –** Maguiresbridge Fermanagh

Gerry Maguire had organised a training event in Limavady for a group of Fermanagh based people with disabilities. The group obviously had to travel to access their training and left Enniskillen early in the morning on a translink bus that was not fully accessible. Rather than being able to travel direct they had to change in Derry, but thankfully the bus from Derry to Limavady was fully accessible. One of the participants revealed that "It was the most accessible bus I was ever on, it was great" However all of the buses used on the return journey were not accessible and this made the journey far from ideal. The random nature of the experience was the key learning in that the journey and experience could vary so greatly with one provider over such a relatively short distance.

**Connor and Brid –** young people living on the Ards peninsula

Connor and Brid are two young people living in the Ards Peninsula and belong to the TRASH Youth Council. Connor is still at school and Brid is studying in Belfast with a part-time shop in Portaferry. Both struggle with accessing education, employment opportunities and social opportunities due to the lack of public transport and the cost of alternatives such as taxis.

It costs Brid £10 for a return fare on the bus from Portaferry to Belfast where she studies at the college. She has to pay full adult price for a ticket as she is not eligible yet for a student fare. Due to the low number of buses on that

route, she has to leave her class early each time in order to catch the bus back to Portaferry to start work.

Connor is still at school but finds that there is little to do in Kircubbin for young people as there is no public transport in the evenings for them to go to Newtownards, for example. He and his friends would walk round and round the village on a loop system until someone gets bored and they all go home.

## 2.2 *To identify the policies, attitudes and technologies likely to underpin a move to more sustainable transport in Northern Ireland*

### Successes

2.21    Accessible Transport has undoubtedly improved over the past 20 years but mainly in urban Northern Ireland. Door to door transport has been extended for urban areas of Belfast and Derry to cover populations of cities and towns of over 10,000 (and would roughly cover a 5-7 mile radius from the centre of each location). This has provided an accessible and affordable transport solution for both the elderly and people with disabilities within urban areas.

Many of the main bus and rail routes are fully accessible for people with disabilities e.g. introduction of low floor buses and if contacted Translink will try and ensure that an accessible bus is on the route a person with a disability is planning to use.

2.22    The Rural Transport Fund supports transport services in rural areas through the Sub-Regional Transport Plan. The Fund subsidises socially necessary rural services provided by Translink which otherwise would be economically unviable; and provides funding for Rural Community Transport Partnerships that offer a range of complementary services to the public transport network for their members.

Currently the Fund supports 43 rural bus routes and 18 Rural Community Transport Partnerships. In 2007/2008 635,000 passenger trips were made on Rural Community Transport Partnership vehicles.

"*In 2005/06 the Rural Transport Fund generated over 180,000 passenger journeys for Translink, representing a 13% increase on the previous year. To date, a total of nine RTF services have successfully grown sufficiently to become commercially self-sustainable. Innovative flexible transport schemes have also been initiated in the Newcastle and Enniskillen areas with the support of the RTF. In November 2006, the Fermanagh Rural Rover demand responsive service was improved and extended. Translink also assists the rural community transport sector by the provision, maintenance and administration of 32 minibuses under the Rural Transport Fund. Improvements to public transport information provision, infrastructure and waiting facilities have also been initiated under this scheme.*" [Translink]

**Challenges**

2.23    Some of the challenges facing sustainable rural transport include:

- There is no Northern Ireland Rural Transport Policy – the Sub-Regional Transport Plan is a means of allocating funding as opposed to considering how to develop a rural transport system that will contribute to sustainable rural communities;
- There is a lack of coordination and integration between existing services such as the rural bus routes funded under the Rural Transport Fund and the Community Transport Schemes;
- There is a lack of co-ordination between government departments with regards rural transport; for example Health, Education and Regional Development. This means that school buses lie idle outside of school hours. The following quote demonstrates that more effective use could be made of existing transportation infrastructure:

"*The yellow bus (ELB) comes in with a few kids on it, the white bus (HSS) comes in with some older people, the blue bus (Ulsterbus) has no one on it and then in comes the community transport bus in the middle of it all.*" [Community Transport Worker – as quote in the Rural Childcare Report for DARD, 2008)

- There has been a growth in the rural population which places greater demand on existing services and greater numbers of cars on the roads.
- The rural population is ageing with 39% of pensioners living in rural Northern Ireland and 41% of farmers aged 55 and over [Age Concern/Help the Aged];
- The need to reduce carbon emissions to meet the challenge of climate change and its associated targets puts a greater onus on the need for an integrated and effective transport system that reduces the impact of individual car journeys.
- The need to challenge and change attitudes amongst key decision makers. A particular problem continues to be the belief that there is no rural transport problem in Northern Ireland.

**2.3 To m*ake recommendations arising out of the above investigations, and report to the Assembly.***

- The NI Executive's commitment to the development of a **Rural White Paper** within the current programme for government (2008-11) All ministers and departments are now signed up to doing what they can in relation their department's responsibility for rural sustainability.

- The reviews of the **Regional Transportation Strategy and Regional Development Strategy** offer a real opportunity to consider how the funding available for rural transport might contribute to sustainable rural communities from the provision of infrastructure (footpaths, cycling paths, bus stops/waiting areas) to revenue funding and subsidies to bus services and community transport providers.

- To investigate how '**accessibility planning'** might be part of the Community Planning process at local government level. All major services and new developments should be accessible by walking, cycling or public transport with accessibility defined as *the right of people to access key services at reasonable cost, in reasonable time and with reasonable ease.*

- The potential for a **Rural Action Plan** for Sustainable Transport developed by DRD with a public service agreement with the new local government structures.

- **Rural & Equality Proofing** of all proposals and policies considered for their impact on rural dwellers and particularly those who are most disadvantaged.

- **Walking & Cycling Networks** – ensure that these are not only designed for leisure purposes but also to connect to destinations or to enable utility trips, such as commuting to work or school. There may well be fundable pilots within this area.

- Extension of the **smartpass scheme** to enable free travel on community transport schemes for older people.

- Actively encourage investment in training and support to both identify and encourage **volunteer drivers** for community transport schemes.

- Consider extending the remit of **community transport schemes** to facilitate travel to hospital/medical appointments (linked to better interdepartmental working).

- In relation to car owners further explore the potential for a **fuel duty differential** for rural car owners for whom the car is not a luxury item but an essential element to daily life with no viable public transport alternative for commuting.

- **Information** – Develop rural transport information that includes bus, community transport, taxis, demand responsive services (flexibly routed bus services); community lift giving schemes, community taxi buses, car pools, school transport, social services transport, non-emergency health transport, park and ride facilities and other transport initiatives available in the local area. Co-ordinate the delivery of this information and associated services from one office/organisation.

- **Inter-Departmental Working** leading to, for example, school buses being used for demand responsive services out of school hours (see possible project).

- Transport should be better integrated with **land and spatial planning** at a local government and departmental level with a focus on addressing the accessibility needs of those most at risk from social exclusion. The review of the Regional Development Strategy provides just such an opportunity.

- The implementation of the **Bain Review on the Location of Public Sector Jobs** – and in so doing reduce the need for large sections of the rural population to commute to Belfast. In addition actively explore the potential for more services, particularly health services, to be delivered within isolated rural communities through a mobile/community space clinic thereby reducing the need for vulnerable people to travel large distances.

- **Further Research** to gather data with regards to: mobility and accessibility of rural dwellers; transport needs, demands and behaviour; interconnections with urban environments; existing transport providers, services and facilities. This will also need to actively engage those within rural communities for whom transport is a major issue.

## 3.0    Conclusion

The data shows that the primary mode of transport in rural areas is the car and that this is not a luxury but a life-line in terms of ensuring the viability of rural areas and rural communities. If the environmental imperative is to decrease rural dwellers' dependence on the car, then government policy needs to invest on efficient and effective alternatives for all in rural areas, not just those who cannot access a car, and in ensuring balanced regional development.