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GIVING RURAL IRELAND A LIFT:

Labour's Proposals for Maintaining

Rural Public Bus Services

SUMMARY

Rural public transport services have been under-funded and neglected for years and the transport needs of rural Ireland have too often been ignored. Yet the provision of public transport services in rural communities is critical for social and economic development. Rural public transport networks are also vitally important for combating social exclusion and rural isolation especially for senior citizens, people with disabilities, families on low incomes and other vulnerable citizens. Rural public bus services generally provide good value for money. But they are also about more than the economic return given the huge social, environmental and even health benefits that result from the existence of rural public transport networks.

However, recently rural public bus services have come under sustained attack from the Fianna Fail/Green government. There has been a savage programme of cutbacks proposed for Bus Eireann fleets and services. The government is also considering ending completely the Department of Transport's funding for the innovative, community-based Rural Transport Programme. The Labour Party believes that access to decent public transport services should be a right of every citizen wherever they live.

For this reason Labour believes we must:

1. Maintain the Rural Transport Programme.
2. Make rural transport planning a key priority of the Department of Transport and the new National Transport Authority.
3. Protect the national Bus Eireann rural bus network.
4. Prioritise the enhanced integration of rural transport services.
5. Review successful EU rural transport models & establish a rural public transport services target.
6. Consider initiatives to encourage local transport companies to become more financially independent.

GIVING RURAL IRELAND A LIFT

INTRODUCTION

Public transport services in Ireland have been under-funded and neglected for decades. The transport needs of rural Ireland have been particularly ignored with the starving of Bus Eireann fleets for many years and the ongoing failure to adequately fund a comprehensive rural and community transport network. Much of what was once an extensive rail network into more rural areas was also dismantled by Fianna Fail during the mid-20th century.

Transport networks and services are fundamentally about connecting people to their families, to their neighbours and to essential facilities and services within their communities. Quality public transport services play a key role in driving social and economic development. In rural communities the provision of public transport services are also vitally important for combating social exclusion and rural isolation especially for senior citizens, people with disabilities, families on low incomes and other vulnerable citizens. In the UK, a critical 2003 report by the Labour Government's Social Exclusion Unit (*Making the Connections: Final Report on Transport and Social Exclusion*) concluded that poor transport accessibility is a key cause of deprivation and social exclusion in rural and urban areas.

LABOUR'S VISION

The Labour Party has always believed that the commuter should be king in any public transport system. Labour has long campaigned for a public transport system that is integrated, accessible, safe and fully responsive to commuters whether they live in urban or rural areas. This should include critical bus infrastructure such as a comprehensive Park and Ride network, Quality Bus Corridors and adequate bus facilities such as bus shelters and stops.

Labour believes that Minister Dempsey and his predecessors over the past ten years have been unacceptably slow on driving forward key technical improvements for commuters including Automatic Vehicle Location (AVL), Real Time Information systems and fully integrated ticketing. The Labour Party has also consistently advocated low and simple public transport fare structures which have been proven around the world to encourage more people to use public transport.

All operators and companies who receive public funding and provide public transport services should operate in the most efficient and effective manner. Labour believes that key priorities for all public transport providers must remain the achievement of increasing operational efficiencies and the ongoing enhancement of services and facilities for commuters. However, the Fianna Fail/Green government should not use the current economic difficulties as an excuse to downgrade and destroy existing rural public transport networks and services. This would be particularly regrettable given the value for money services that are currently provided by both public and private rural transport operators.

CUTBACKS TO RURAL TRANSPORT SERVICES

Access to decent public transport services should be a right of every citizen wherever they live. Yet recently rural transport services have come under sustained attack from the Fianna Fail/Green government. The government is overseeing a savage programme of cutbacks to fleets and services at Bus Eireann. Proposals are currently being reviewed which may involve cuts or reduced service on reportedly up to 99 Bus Eireann routes as well as the loss of perhaps as many as 150 buses from the Bus Eireann fleet.

In July, Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs Minister Eamon O'Cuiv announced that he was ending funding for a number of successful evening community transport services in rural areas including in East and West

Cork, Cavan, Sligo, Roscommon, Donegal and Laois. The recent McCarthy Report has also recommended to the government that in Budget 2010 they should further reduce funding to CIE as well as abolish the innovative Rural Transport Programme (RTP). The RTP currently comprises 36 local, community-based rural transport operators in every county of Ireland. In addition the decision of the government to abolish the public transport fuel rebate in October 2008 has added millions in extra costs to Bus Eireann, Dublin Bus and private coach operators this year.

Labour T.D.s, Senators and Councillors around the country have been at the forefront of the campaign to protect local rural public transport services as we believe that this ongoing attack on already inadequate rural public transport provision and networks is unacceptable. The planned cutbacks and the current McCarthy proposals will profoundly damage the social fabric and economic potential of rural Ireland. Furthermore, public transport services are essential for developing tourism in rural areas and for combating rural car congestion.

Slashing rural public transport services is also completely at odds with a range of longstanding government policies including the White Paper on Rural Development, the National Development Plan, Transport 21, the National Spatial Strategy, the National Climate Change Policy and the National Anti-Poverty Strategy. In fact in May 2009, Minister Noel Dempsey reiterated one of his government's key objectives under the 2009 -2020 *Smarter Travel* transport policy as a target "of getting 500,000 more people out of cars between now and 2020... (and) to make this happen commuters must be provided with real alternatives to the car." It will be impossible to come anywhere near meeting this target if vital rural public transport programmes are decimated in Budget 2010.

The sometimes patchy coverage of rural transport networks also has a significant additional cost to other public bodies and agencies. For example, the HSE reported that between 2003 and 2008 it spent €122 million on taxis and minibuses. There was a 73% increase in HSE

transportation costs from €18 million in 2003 to €31.6 million in 2007. According to the HSE, 90% of this spend was on patient travel and in particular the transportation of senior citizens to day centres and children and young people with disabilities to educational facilities.

RURAL TRANSPORT NEEDS

The 2006 Census recorded that nearly 40% of the Irish population, or approximately 1.7 million people, are rural dwellers. Yet, there are considerable unmet transport needs in rural Ireland. The 2002 National Rural Transport Survey reported that 380,000 people living in rural areas felt that they had significant unmet transport needs. A landmark 2006 Report on rural transport by Fitzpatrick Associates for the Department of Transport (*Progressing Rural Public Transport in Ireland*) has estimated that this figure will rise to 450,000 by 2021, in particular given the rising age profile of the Irish population. A 2009 CSO survey found that more than 50% of rural dwellers have difficulties accessing public transport services.

As with urban areas, over the past decades there has been little or no integrated land and transport planning for new and existing rural communities. The provision of rural public transport services has also been made more difficult in Ireland by the relatively low population density (average 56 people per square kilometre), the wide dispersal of the population in some rural areas (there are just 25 persons per square km in some rural Electoral Divisions) and the over-dependence on cars.

One 2006 study by Dr. John McDonagh found that 83% of Irish vehicle-kilometres are driven in rural areas. Long distance commuting to work (sometimes as much as a daily 100km roundtrip), to school and to social activities has increasingly become a feature of Irish rural life. The spurious rationale in the McCarthy Report for axing the RTP was that most people in rural areas have cars. Undoubtedly, there is a high dependence on cars in rural Ireland (often because of inadequate public transport services).

Yet, there is a significant ongoing minority of rural dwellers who have no access to a car (for example 22% of the rural population in Sligo, 21% in Mayo and 19% in Leitrim in 2006). These citizens are more likely to suffer considerable social exclusion. In other households there may be a car which other family members have no access to as it is being used all day to get the main household earner to and from work for example.

The recent debate about Minister Noel Dempsey's proposals to lower the drink driving limit from 80mg to 50mg (and 20mg for novice and professional drivers) in the 2009 Road Traffic Bill highlighted the serious and pernicious problems of rural isolation. Labour has always believed that best international practice (including drink driving limits) must be applied when it comes to saving lives on our roads. However, it is deplorable that Minister Dempsey and his Fianna Fail/Green colleagues did not recognize the need to address the massive rural public transport gap at the same time as they reviewed the drink driving limit given the impact a reduction may have on people living in isolated rural areas. Elderly citizens who live on their own suffer particularly in terms of social isolation when there are no local public transport services.

Yet this problem is much wider than facilitating people getting to and from the local pub or hostelry in the evening. The 2006 Fitzpatrick Report highlighted the unmet transport needs of older women in rural areas whose share of the population is "expected to increase from 6% to 8% in the next 10-15 years." There is just as great a need to provide transport services to allow people in rural areas to get to the doctor, the post office, the local village or to access other essential and recreational services as exists in large urban centres.

CURRENT RURAL TRANSPORT PROVIDERS

Typically public transport services in rural areas are a mix of conventional (eg fixed, scheduled services) and non-conventional services (eg on demand and semi-scheduled), public and private operators. It would be

commercially and logistically impractical for example to extend the Bus Eireann network and fixed Bus Eireann services into every town, village and townland. Operators in rural Ireland range from the core Bus Eireann inter-urban, regional and local networks and services, private bus operators either working independently or on a sub-contract from Bus Eireann, school buses and the community-based rural transport companies. Other elements of the transport mix within rural Ireland include HSE-funded taxi and minibus services to get patients to and from hospitals and the normal taxi services and fleets in towns and villages.

BUS EIREANN

The national bus operator Bus Eireann (with approximately 1,300 buses including the school transport fleet and 2,700 staff) provides a critical mix of inter-urban, provincial and local bus services across Ireland. In 2007 Bus Eireann had more than 50.2 million passengers and between 2001 and 2007 the company grew their passenger numbers by 15%. Bus Eireann received an operational Public Service Obligation (PSO) subsidy of €36.6 million in 2007. As well as the successful inter-urban network, Bus Eireann also run a significant number of routes which are not commercially profitable but provide essential connectivity for smaller towns and rural dwellers.

In 2008 the government-commissioned Deloitte review of costs and efficiencies in Dublin Bus and Bus Eireann found that the national carrier was basically an efficiently run company. In fact Deloitte stated that the "scope for significant cost savings in Bus Eireann is limited." What was also striking was Deloitte's analysis that Bus Eireann's PSO contribution at just 12% of operating revenue was "low" in European terms.

Deloitte highlighted similar transport operators across Europe which received significantly higher PSOs to run their operations including Connexion in the Netherlands (49% subsidy) Car Postal/Post Auto in Switzerland (51% subsidy) and TEC in the Belgian Walloon region (78%

subsidy). Critically, Deloitte further recommended the "retention of the fleet replacement programme at both companies to maintain the current average age of the fleet." Bus Eireann also runs the school transport network and in doing so they sub-contract a significant number of operators from the private sector to provide essential school bus services.

RURAL TRANSPORT PROGRAMME

The Rural Transport Programme grew out of individual often community-development based initiatives to provide local, responsive-to-need, transport services utilising community owned buses, private bus operators and voluntary cars. In early 2002 there were eight pilot rural transport companies and 34 companies were then originally funded under the Rural Transport Initiative (RTI) in 2002/2003.

There are now 36 rural transport companies in the Rural Transport Programme (RTP) based in every county in Ireland including services run by the Avondhu Blackwater Partnership Ltd and IRD Duhallow in Cork; Laois Transport for Rural Integration Programme; North Fingal Rural Transport Company; Carlow, Kilkenny & South Tipperary South Riding Rural Transport Ltd (Ring-a-Link); Clare Accessible Transport; Wexford Area Partnership; Kerry Community Transport; Tipperary LEADER Group; Offaly Kildare (OK) Community Transport; Wicklow Rural Partnership; Deise Link, Co. Waterford; County Sligo LEADER Partnership Company Ltd; Westmeath Rural Transport Association Ltd; Meath Accessible Transport Project; County Limerick and North Cork Transport Group Ltd (Rural Bus); Meitheal Mhaigh Eo Teo and Bealach, Carna, Co. Galway.

In 2008 over 1.2 million passenger journeys were provided by the RTP operators. (In a recent Dail debate Minister Dempsey stated that the number of trips was approaching 1.5 million annually). 64% of passengers who used the network in 2008 were Free Travel Pass holders and 76% of the passengers availed of a door-to-door service. The RTP is also an important source of local employment and social enterprise with 737

drivers directly or indirectly employed by the 36 RTP companies. In addition 1,354 volunteers contributed to the operation of the service on an annual basis.

The 2006 Fitzpatrick Report concluded that the Rural Transport Initiative has to “a large degree pioneered a new kind of non-conventional rural transport service...(and) in particular the door-to-door, semi-scheduled and/or fully demand-responsive nature of most of the services provided has been a crucial success.” Around 50% of RTP trips have also been put in place to link up with key health, education and other vital public services.

RTP FUNDING

In 2008 the Department of Transport allocated €10 million in total (administered by Pobal) to the RTP, with the RTP directly receiving €8.3 million of this funding. The Budget '09 Department of Transport allocation was €11 million which represents about 44% of total RTP funding. Another 19% is funded by the HSE, 16% is from other Government agencies, including the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs and local fund raising accounts for a further 4%. There is also about 7% collected as fares on buses and through passenger contributions. It should be noted however that several operators generate a significant percentage of their funding themselves through fares or fundraising for example. (There were also very significant in-kind contributions due to the high levels of volunteers who participate at board and other levels in RTP companies).

At the launch of Transport 21 in 2005, then Transport Minister Martin Cullen outlined the government's commitment to increase the funding of the programme to approximately €18 million per year. The 2007-2013 National Development Plan also pledged that some €90 million would be spent on enhancing public transport services under the Rural Transport

Initiative over the lifetime of the NDP. In Action 14 of the 2009 *Smarter Travel: A Sustainable Transport Future* policy, the government pledged to “build on the good work at local level in developing the RTP to expand the network in other ways, such as demand responsive services.” In that same policy document the Fianna Fail/Green government committed to providing “a regular 7-day a week transport service for rural communities and those in smaller urban areas.”

The Rural Transport Programme has consistently shown itself to be a good value for money programme. Pobal's 2008/2009 Performance and Impact Report concluded that the RTP had met or exceeded all of its key performance indicators and targets and “has demonstrated a capacity to deliver in the complex operating environment of market failure and diminishing public service provision.” The economic and social value that the RTP adds to the communities within which it operates is simply unquantifiable. It serves people many of whom have no other public or private transport options to go about their daily lives and get to the local post office, doctor or pub (and certainly have had no other opportunities to use their Free Travel Pass). This is a lifeline service without which many elderly citizens would have difficulty living on their own. For example, the RTP estimated that the annual cost to the state for one person to stay in a nursing home was €40,456.

At a recent Oireachtas Transport Committee, a senior Department of Transport official confirmed the value of local rural transport services and went on to say that, “*With regard to the amount of money saved...we estimate that the cost of keeping a person in care is between 15 and 20 times the cost of providing him or her with rural transport. I refer to a person who is relatively self-sufficient but who cannot go shopping, collect his or her pension, etc., because there is no rural transport available. He or she will eventually become a customer of the Department of Health and Children and be placed in community care. It is here that the additional costs accrue.*”

LABOUR'S PROPOSALS

The current economic crisis clearly makes it a very challenging environment for the provision of publicly funded transport services. But slashing public transport services is a very short-sighted approach that will hinder our much needed economic recovery. The absence of essential transport infrastructure and services is a major barrier to job creation and investment and also presents a serious obstacle for job seekers (particularly in rural areas). When the economy picks up again it is essential that public transport services are in place to facilitate and help drive economic recovery.

Rural public transport services are also about more than the economic return. The Department of Transport's own rural transport official has stated that rural public transport services are "*not primarily just about transport, it is also about the quality of life of those who live in rural areas (and)...the policy context must address social exclusion caused by unmet public transport needs.*"

For these reasons Labour believes that we must:

1. Maintain the Rural Transport Programme.

The Rural Transport Programme is an absolutely essential service that is particularly important for senior and other vulnerable citizens who would otherwise be completely isolated. Funding for the network was only put on a more secure footing in 2006 and it is unacceptable that this would now be removed. It is essential that the RTP continues to have a stable funding source and remains on a permanent financial footing in the Department.

The Minister for Transport must ensure that the relatively small €11 million '09 (net €8.3 million in 2008) budget allocation is maintained in Budget 2010. Much of the €11 million allocation could be found in savings from other departmental expenditure - for example from consultancy and administrative costs; through reviewing or ending Pobal's administration of

the RTP; from savings due to the delayed planning of T21 initiatives consequent on the recession and banking crisis; and from funding derived in any government initiatives to promote “sustainable and smarter travel” and the modal shift away from the private car.

Labour also believes that the commitment to increase funding for the programme to at least €18 million per annum must be a key priority for the Department when the economy recovers in the post-2013 period. In the medium to longer term our preferred option is for the development of a comprehensive Rural Public Transport Policy and Network as recommended in Option 3 of the 2006 Fitzpatrick Report. This is also important to meet the ongoing unmet transport needs of areas in rural Ireland where there are no local public transport services.

2. Make Rural Transport Planning a key Priority of the Department of Transport and the new National Transport Authority.

At present rural public transport services are funded and planned in a disjointed way across a number of different departments and agencies including the Department of Transport, the Department of Community, Gaeltacht and Rural Affairs and Pobal, the Department of Health and Children and the Department of Education and Science. The Department of Transport should be mandated to fully oversee rural transport planning and financing to facilitate a more integrated, coherent and efficient approach to designing and implementing rural public transport policies and infrastructure. The new National Transport Authority should also have a key responsibility to plan and promote local integrated transport networks. Labour believes that rural transport planning should be put on a permanent statutory and regulatory footing and we submitted an amendment to this effect to the recent Public Transport Regulation Bill 2009. We will also consider major new legislation on integrated rural transport services including accessibility targets in the next Dail.

3. Protect the National Bus Eireann Rural Bus Network.

The recently published Public Transport Regulation Bill 2009 has just passed through the Oireachtas and implements a new regulated bus licensing system to reform the antiquated 1932 Law. Labour has long supported an overhaul of the outdated and cumbersome 1932 legislation. But it was disappointing that the new 2009 bill did not contain clearer and more stringent provisions to protect the integrity of the Bus Eireann national bus network outside of the Greater Dublin Area.

If the Minister does not protect the core national network, then we could be left with large operators vying to run the attractive inter-urban routes. But there may well be no operators willing to provide services at all on routes serving less populated and rural communities where many citizens rely totally on the local bus. For this reason Labour tried to insert a number of amendments to the Public Transport Regulation Bill specifically aimed at strengthening and protecting the national, urban and local bus network and in order to avoid the cherrypicking of profitable inter-urban routes at the expense of services in more isolated and less affluent areas.

4. Prioritise the Enhanced Integration of Rural Transport Services.

Labour believes that there are huge possibilities for the further integration and streamlining of services between the different public and private bus companies and services in Rural Ireland. For example one fifth of Rural Transport Bus services already link up with Bus Eireann or other scheduled operators. There has also been an Inter-Departmental Working Group on Rural Transport. But there is scope for the development of a much more comprehensive and seamless network of linked and integrated rural public transport services at no extra cost. All companies receiving public funding to provide rural transport services should be mandated to work with the Department of Transport and National Transport Authority

(NTA) to develop and implement a new plan in order to provide a more integrated service and reduce costs.

Local Authorities clearly also have a major role to play in the provision of a more integrated network of local services. Such a development would also facilitate more integrated demand-responsive and fixed-route services and the shared use of associated technology. In other countries the school bus network is sometimes also used to meet the unmet transport needs of other citizens in remote rural areas including those of senior citizens. The viability of similar flexibility and access in the Irish context should be considered. The Deloitte Report also suggests that there is scope for greater combinations of “dedicated services (e.g. schools, RTP and conventional bus).”

5. Review Successful EU Rural Transport Models & Establish a Rural Public Transport Services Target

We should also look to successful models of local rural transport provision in our EU partner states. For example the British Labour government has developed a transport accessibility planning system called ACCESSION that uses Geographic Information Systems (GIS) through current bus routes and population information to assess the time and cost of accessing a range of transport services and modes. ACCESSION is also used to identify areas in the UK where there are significant problems in obtaining transport services. There are other successful local schemes in the UK including the “Lincoln Interconnect” system in Lincolnshire where rural communities that are not serviced by the conventional bus routes are linked to the fixed, scheduled service through “CallConnect” feeder buses at quality interchange points.

Access to regular good quality public transport is a core civic right wherever a citizen lives. Therefore, Labour believes that the government should develop a clearly defined target for each citizen’s access to quality rural public transport services. Examples of this include the British Labour

government's ten year target for a one-third increase in the proportion of rural households living within a ten minute walk (or better) of an hourly bus service

6. Consider Initiatives to Encourage Local Transport Companies to Become More Financially Independent

A key function of the new National Transport Authority under the Department of Transport guidelines should be to set best standards of operation and practice for the current 36 local transport companies and for any new companies. Wherever possible companies should be encouraged to emulate the best local funding models already existing and to be open to best funding practice in other EU transport jurisdictions. Public service obligation and other public funding is critical for the start-up and maintenance of local transport services. But it has been demonstrated that some elements of local transport services as for example evening services have a good potential fare box which can cross-subsidise more vulnerable services.