Rural Transport & Rural Isolation;

A Case Study on the Impact of Rural Transport Provision on Older People in one Rural Area."

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Preface:

This case study is a very valuable contribution to the local needs and services for rural isolated people. Miriam McKenna is a committed leader. Miriam with the board of Flexibus and the support of the Rural Transport Initiative (RTI) has had a life enhancing impact on the lives of many people in Meath. The Flexibus staff and the community groups around Meath and South Cavan have a great deal to be proud of.

This document is a way of recognising the impact of Flexibus and the many projects like it. What is so valuable in this document is the voice of the people who use the Flexibus service. Read this document and let the people who use the service speak to you through it. You will come to know them and when furnished you will feel that you have travelled with them.

You will find it a great experience.
Michael Kenny

Readers

The board and staff of Flexibus, Meath Accessible transport is pleased and honoured to be associated with the production of this publication which started as a Thesis in Rural Development by our manager , Miriam Mc Kenna.
There can be little doubting the vital role which accessible rural transport can play in enhancing the quality of rural life and few are in a better position to research and describe its effects than Miriam.
During her tenure at Flexibus the services have expanded greatly in scope, range and quality to rival any other in Ireland.
The publication of this thesis, "title" will contribute greatly to the understanding of the development and impact of accessible rural transport in making rural life more acceptable and pleasant for some of its more disadvantaged people.
It will also hopefully, contribute to the understanding as to the potential which of rural transport in rural development generally at this sensitive juncture when the model is about to be extended nationwide.

John Burns. Chairperson.

Passenger Story.

"Flexibus" is my lifeline in from week to week. Everyone looks forward to the crack(fun) on the bus and hearing the stories from one week to the next. Some of passengers find it difficult to sleep on Sunday night with excitement looking for to the trip on Monday.

I often wonder how many miles we cover on our trip. I get the bus at 10 and we get to Bailieborough at about 11.30. In that $1\frac{1}{2}$ hour journey we go to some very isolated rural places as we go door-to-door. The rest of us on the bus try to guide the driver as best we can to pick up new people. But some of the roads are only known by God alone. We chat & laugh on the way and hear the histories of the various townlands as we travel. The journey never seemed so long butl we are ready for a coffee when we arrive.

When I see people confined to the house I know what it means to them to get on the bus, have a laugh, a chat, and get their shopping done. I am amazed at how few opportunities some people have to get out and visit their neighbouring villages not many miles away. I started using "Flexibus" to go to Navan on Friday's and then started going to Bailieborough on Monday's also. Each trip has different people and now I have a great circle of friends. I really look forward to meeting them all.

We must mention our driver, John. He is very caring and looks after us very well. He brings in all the shopping and nothing is too much trouble for him. He is a careful driver and does not complain if there are roadworks. He's considerate to each one of us.

Long may "Flexibus" continue to bring us to meet with our friends.

Peggy Govern

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A Case Study of the Impact of Rural Transport Provision on older people in one Rural Area"

1. Introduction.

"We love it, it's great to be brought to the door and back. My husband died last year and I never learned to drive. I depend on my son but he is working and has a family. I hate to disturb him" Philomena.

"Inadequate transport has a particularly adverse impact on those who are disadvantaged in any way and on those in society who are most vulnerable. The impacts appear more marked in rural areas where even basic services can prove difficult to access"
(Farrell Grant Sparks, July 2000. *Rural Transport – A National Study from a Community Perspective).*

People love the idea of living in rural Ireland. All that green space, quaint villages and life at a slower pace. This is all true. However if you are an older person in rural Ireland without a car or means of transport the picture is very different. It may mean not getting to shop once a week or collect a pension until someone brings you. It may mean not getting to the doctor or collecting a prescription. It may mean not getting your hair done. It may mean not talking to anyone else from one week to the next. It may be lonely, isolated and desolate.

The purpose of this case study is to detail the impact of rural transport on older people who live in rural areas.

Community development groups have been highlighting the need for public transport in rural areas for many years. Rural areas Need analysis shows that people need access to employment, health care, social activities and personal business to sustain their lives and community.

The Rural Transport Initiative got under way with funding from the Department of Transport in 2002. Since then rural transport has provided a significant service to many areas. In this case study, I will discuss the impact of the rural transport project on older people in rural North Meath over 3 years. I will give an overview of the area in which these people live and describe how isolated and remote some areas of County Meath can be. I will outline the Rural Transport Initiative, how it started, and the services it offers.

I will then case study the impact of the service for older people in North Meath. Older people have a lot to say and I will present this information in my findings and summary. I include some photographs of passengers using various services. At the beginning and end of each chapter you will find a quote from passengers. They can express more clearly than I can what rural transport or "the bus" has done for them.

> "The bus is great. I used to bring my car to town but the parking is gone too hard and I can't manage the one way streets. I go on the bus and meet the neighbours and I hear the news". Mickey.

2. People & Place: Brief Background to Meath & North Meath.

Introduction.

> *"Given the low and dispersed population of many rural areas, innovative approaches to transport provision are required and a structured approach is necessary to apply actions at local level."*
> Department of Agriculture and Food, (1999) *Ensuring the Future – A Strategy for Rural Development in Ireland. White Paper on Rural Development.* Page 29

This section describes the demographics of the County and in particular the north Meath area in which this case study is set. The data shows how rural and isolated parts of County Meath are.

Geographical Area.

This case study is set in North County Meath from north of Kells to North of Slane. The Kells-Cavan road (N3) and the Slane–Monaghan road (N2) are the two primary routes on which public transport is available to this area. Between these two routes there is one main road running from Navan to Kingscourt through Nobber. One private transport provider has a regular service on this route. The principal towns, villages and routes in this area are shown in Map 1. Also included in this map is the case study area.

Map 1   Map of Co. Meath –Towns, Villages and Routes with case Study Area
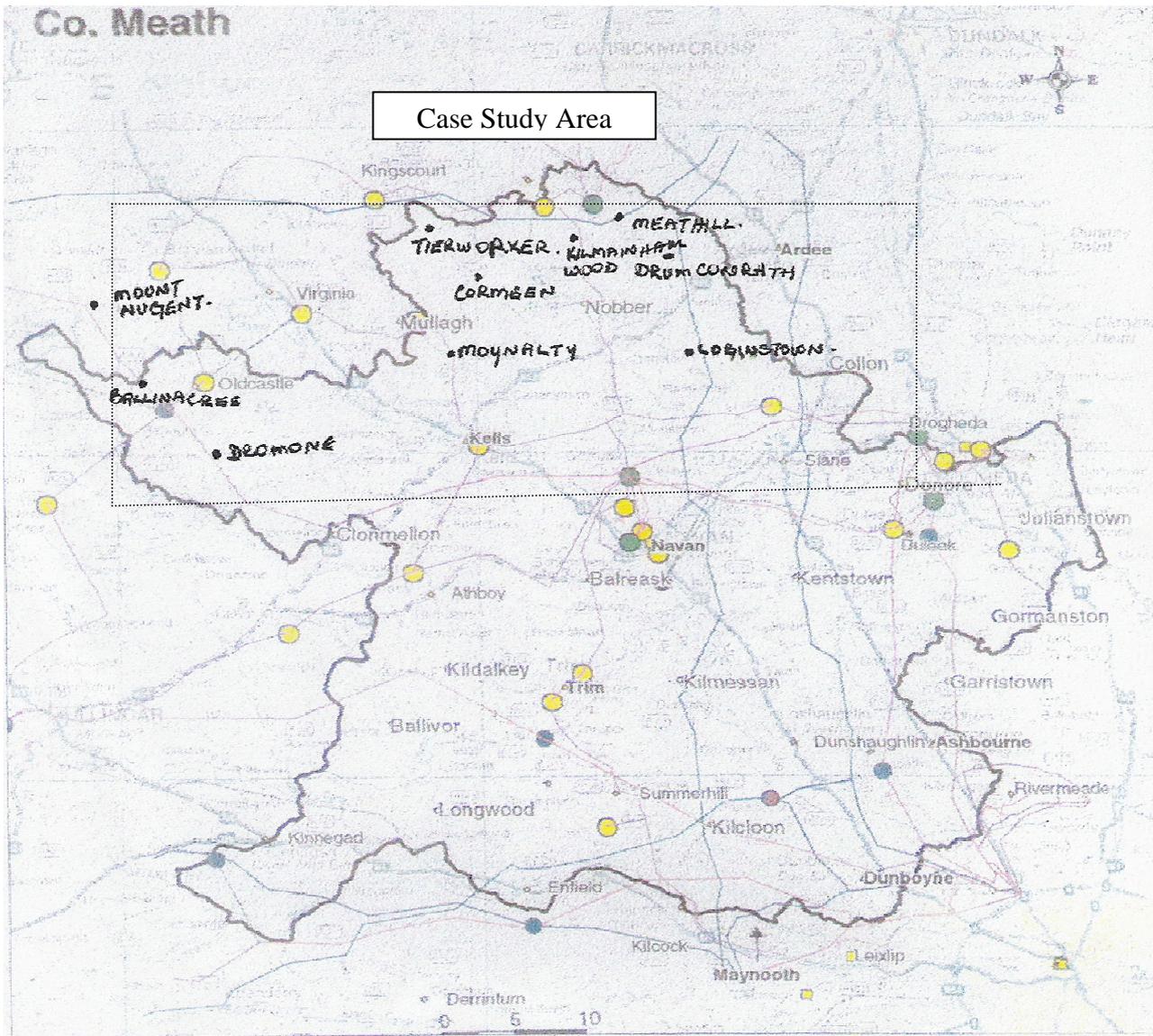
Population & Rural Typology in County Meath

Meath had a population of 134,005 in 2002 representing an increase of 28,365 (27.3%) since 1991 (the majority of this increase occurred since 1996, 21.1% or, 24,204 persons).   Meath is among the fastest growing counties in the State. The county is sandwiched between, on one hand, the Greater Dublin Area (GDA), and on the other the Objective 2 Border Midland West (BMW) region. Development in the South, East and NorthEast of the county is very much influenced by the opportunities and pressures of the Dublin metropolitan area and to a lesser extent Drogheda and Dundalk. The West and NorthWest of the county is more rural and essentially constitutes a periphery to the perri-urban/suburban South and East. This case study is set in North County Meath.

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Significant population growth occurred around Navan, Trim and Kells as well as the District Electoral Divisions (DEDs) in the environs of Drogheda between 1996 and 2002. Towns located close to the national routes (N1, M1, N2 and N3) experienced a population increase of over 15%. In contrast population actually declined in almost one third of DEDs especially in the NorthWest (Oldcastle District) and in many Eastern districts in the hinterland of Slane (Drumconrath and Tierworker). The density levels of population within the county varies considerably with less than 25 persons per square kilometre in 36 of the 92 (DEDs) and as low as 20 people per square kilometre in some DEDs the North of the county.
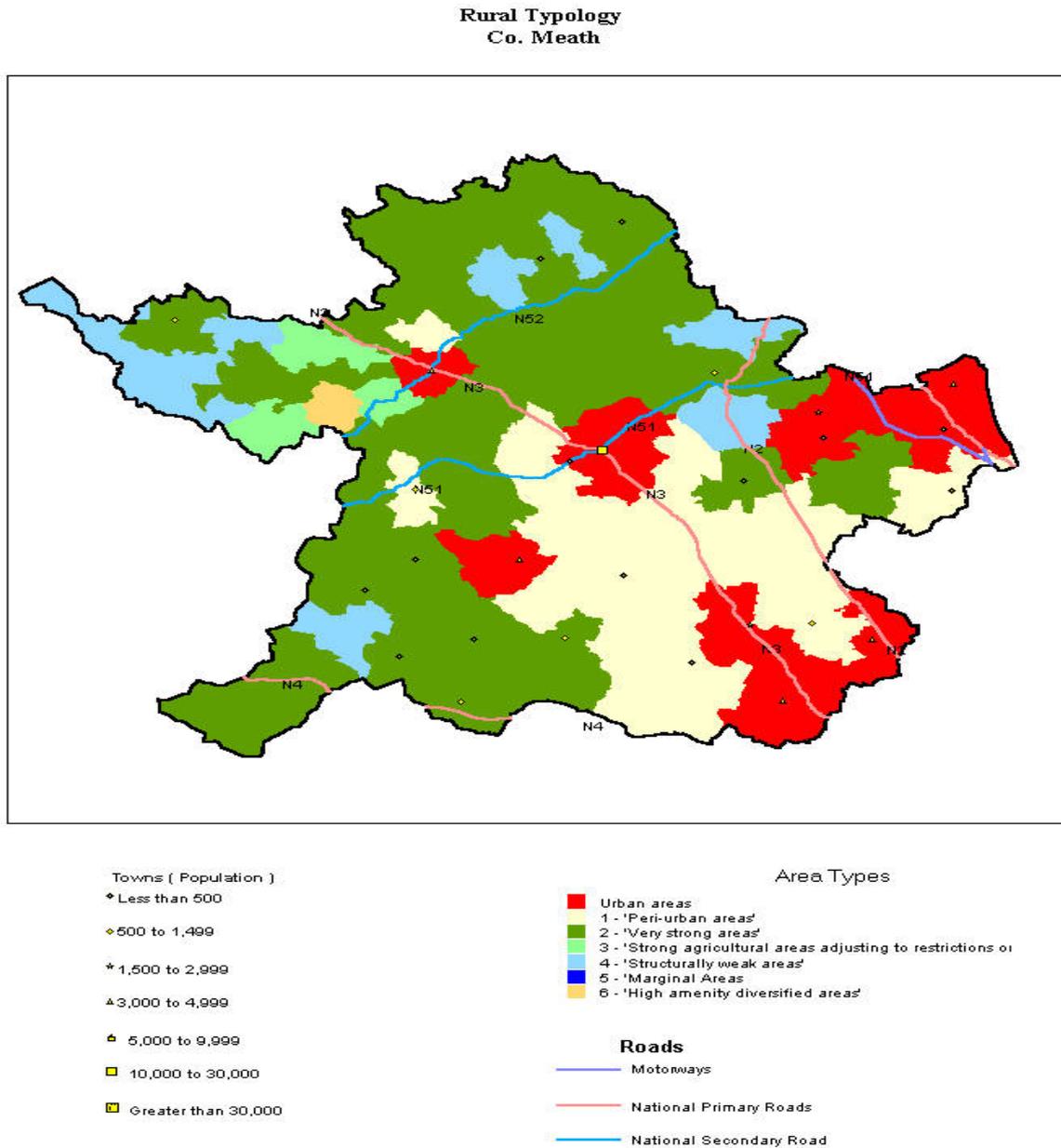
Map 2 [1] was prepared using 30 indicators of demographic change, labour force characteristics, educational and social classes, sectoral employment and agriculture profiles. The map shows the urban and perri-urban areas of the East & SouthEast. The map classifies a number of strong rural areas possessing a strong agricultural base throughout the central and northern Meath. Interspersed within these strong rural areas are weak rural areas. This area type, weak rural areas, represents the rural DED's that are economically and demographically most disadvantaged. The defining attributes of weak rural areas are a strong reliance on a very weak farm structure[2], low levels of employment in manufacturing or services; a below average level of self-employment outside agriculture, and the lowest level of females in part-time employment. These economic attributes have contributed to the emergence of a weak demographic profile based on an ageing population with relatively fewer households with young children. These area types account for 3% of the population in Meath, mostly in the districts around Oldcastle, and in the DEDs of Tierworker, Meath Hill and Drumconrath.

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[1] Constructed by the Dept of Geography, NUI, Maynooth for Meath County Development Board 2000.
[2] Elderly farmers on small farms producing very low levels of output, high level of decline in number of farmers, though they still account for the largest share of the workforce

Map 2   Rural Typology

Rural Typology
Co. Meath

Towns (Population)
- Less than 500
- 500 to 1,499
- 1,500 to 2,999
- 3,000 to 4,999
- 5,000 to 9,999
- 10,000 to 30,000
- Greater than 30,000

Area Types
- Urban areas
- 1 - 'Peri-urban areas'
- 2 - 'Very strong areas'
- 3 - 'Strong agricultural areas adjusting to restrictions or
- 4 - 'Structurally weak areas'
- 5 - 'Marginal Areas'
- 6 - 'High amenity diversified areas'

Roads
- Motorways
- National Primary Roads
- National Secondary Road

Source: Integrated Strategy for Meath, 2000 to 2012, Meath County Development Board

Disability, Elderly and Deprivation

There were just under 9,000 people in the Co. Meath with a disability in 2002. The majority of these people were aged 65 years and over and accounted for 40.5% of the total persons with disabilities. In 2002, 2.1% of households comprised of males aged 65 years and over living alone.

The majority of persons aged over 65 years living alone were predominately located to the North and North West of the County Meath around Drumconrath, and Tierworker. The equivalent percentage of females over 65 years of age and living alone is 4.4%. The Deprivation Index as developed by Haase and Pratschke[3] provides a single measurement of the overall deprivation of an area. This takes into consideration the underlying dimensions of deprivation such as social class, demographics and labour market deprivation. Table 1 shows that County Meath has a higher level of deprivation relative to the national figures. Further detail on the County Meath figures show the least affluent areas are North of Kells around Tierworker, Drumconrath and Whitewood.

Table 1: Social Indicators: Meath & the State.

Social Indicators.	Meath	State
Lone Parent Families	12.8%	16.6%
People with no formal primary or lower secondary education	49.0%	49.9%
Unemployed (Unemployment Rate)	6.6%	8.9%
Rented local authority housing	4.5%	7.4%
No Car Households	12.19%	21.7%
Aged 65, or Over, and Living Alone	2.0%	2.9%
Aged 75, or Over, and Living Alone	1.1%	1.5%
People with a Disability	6.7%	8.3%
Absolute affluence/deprivation (Haase-Pratschke)	21.6	17.4
Relative affluence/deprivation (Haase-Pratschke)	6.4	2.2
Change in deprivation score 1991-2002	18.2	15.4

Household & Community Impact

Rural household structures have changed considerably in recent years. Average household size has fallen and older people are much less likely to live in the same home as their offspring. Some 3,520 people over the age of 65 now live on their own in County Meath which has resulted in increased isolation for many older rural residents. The percentage of households with elderly people living alone has implications for the provision of services. The Health Service Executive (HSE) has noted

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[3] http://www.nuim.ie/nirsa/news/documents/mappingpoverty_2-2.pdf

that transport is one of the key obstacles to a health and well-being for the elderly, especially those living on their own.

Increasing female participation in the labour force has resulted in many empty rural homes during the day. This adds to the sense of isolation for older people in rural areas. Greater labour force participation amongst rural residents has also impacted on the availability of people to undertake voluntary work at community level. This impacts greatly on community projects as they depend on volunteers for Boards of Directors, Management Committees and community work.

The availability of services such as post offices & banks in rural areas have declined due to service rationalisation[4]. County Meath has had a number of post office closures and more are imminent. This impacts greatly on marginalised groups who depend on local access to services and has resulted in greater need for rural residents to travel outside of their local areas to access essential services.

As an important indicator of transport deprivation, 19% of respondents of this case study, stated that they "rarely" or "never" have a car available to them. While the incidence of unmet transport needs[5] varies across the county this case study showed that, in terms of transport availability, a clear pattern emerges across socio economic groups in rural areas. Those with least access to cars are older people (especially women), people who are ill or people who have a disability, young people and those in lower income groups.

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[4] See Audit of Services, County Meath CDB, 200
[5] The percentage of the adult population stating that there are journeys that they would like to make at present but cannot due to lack of suitable transport

3. Rural Transport Initiative Background.

> *"Mam gets up earlier when the bus is coming. She is easier to live with"*
> Family member.

> *"I used to travel everywhere on my bicycle. At 77 I have bad arthritis and cannot use the bike. I live in a very isolated area and never see my neighbours. My family live in Dublin. I collect my pension and my prescriptions when I use Flexibus*" **Kathleen**

> *"I'm 86 widowed since I was 49. All my children live in England. My neighbours are either working or too old like myself. I never see anyone from one end of the week to the next. I feel very safe on Flexibus."* Mazie

Background

The White Paper on Rural Development[6] gave voice to the need for rural transport. While acknowledging the dispersed nature of the rural population calls for "innovative approaches to transport provision" in a "structured approach" were necessary. Rural Transport was constantly being identified by Area Partnership Companies, Community Groups and Disability Groups as being an obstacle to overcoming disadvantage and social exclusion. "*ADM became involved in transport by default because inadequate transport was a major obstacle to carrying out their core function of targeting disadvantage and social exclusion*" according to the report by Farrell Grant Sparks, July 2000[7]. This report also noted that it is not until rural transport services are piloted that the "true demand will materialise" and "that a flexible approach is needed" with regard to the piloting period.

A report by Fitzpatrick & Associates, (July 2001[8]), based on a survey conducted in four counties, established that the "rural transport problem is about access to services for people in rural areas who have no car available to them" This mirrored the findings of many transport working groups around the country like "Going the Extra Mile" (Mayo), the "Meath Accessible Transport project
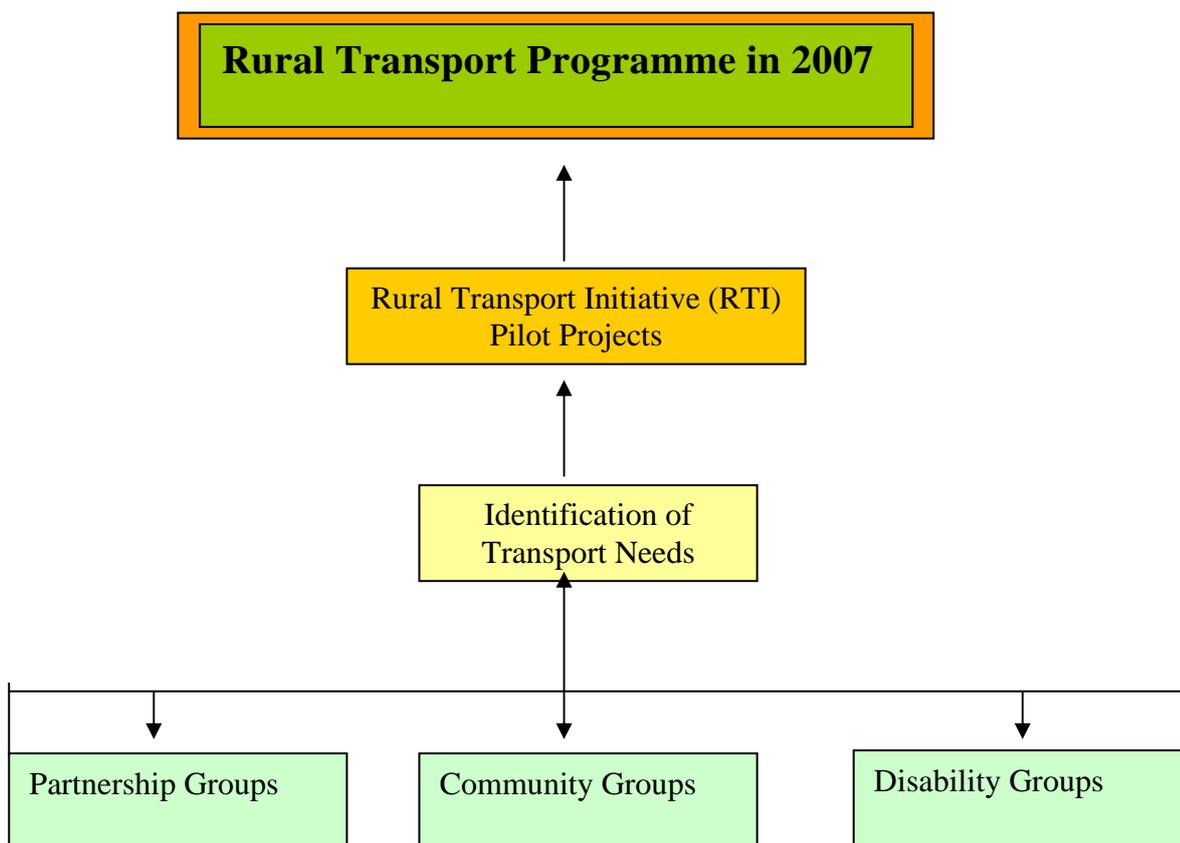
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[6] Department of Agriculture and Food. *Ensuring a Future: A Strategy for Rural Development in Ireland. (*White Paper on Rural Development*,* August 1999, page 32)

[7] *Rural Transport A National Study from a Community Perspective, p*age 37.

[8] *Report of the Interdepartmental Working Group on Rural Transport.*

community Action Plan", and the "Transport survey" carried out by OAK Partnership (Offaly & Kildare).

In July 2001 the report of the Interdepartmental Working Group on Rural Transport was published. This led to the establishment of the Rural Transport Initiative (RTI) and this in turn led to the moving of the Initiative to a programme in its own right in 2007. As you can see from the following diagram, this is a bottom up approach where needs were identified by the users of the service. This eventually led to the new Rural Transport Programme.

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          ┌─────────────────────────────────────────┐
          │   Rural Transport Programme in 2007       │
          └─────────────────────────────────────────┘
                             ▲
                  ┌──────────────────────┐
                  │ Rural Transport       │
                  │ Initiative (RTI)      │
                  │ Pilot Projects        │
                  └──────────────────────┘
                             ▲
                  ┌──────────────────────┐
                  │ Identification of     │
                  │ Transport Needs       │
                  └──────────────────────┘
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   ┌─────────────────┐  ┌─────────────────┐  ┌─────────────────┐
   │ Partnership     │  │ Community       │  │ Disability      │
   │ Groups          │  │ Groups          │  │ Groups          │
   └─────────────────┘  └─────────────────┘  └─────────────────┘
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With the identification of need comes the identification of methods of delivery of rural transport. The Interdepartmental report suggests a mix of solutions. "A key implication of the findings of this study is that there is probably no one single delivery solution to rural transport in Ireland" (Fitzpatrick & Associates, July 2001, page 17). This report suggests the following options

- Expansion of existing scheduled public and private services.
- New scheduled services may have potential in some areas.
- Dedicated services will be necessary in many cases.
- Community based schemes, existing & potential, in areas where community structures are strong.
- Co-ordinated use of local taxi and hackney services.

- Semi scheduled services are needed in areas where essential services are needed for older people, people with disabilities and people on low incomes. These services need to be door to door and have the potential to deviate off route if need be.

The Rural Transport Initiative (RTI) was established in 2001 with initial funding from the Department of Transport and was managed by Area Development Management (ADM). A budget of €4.4 million was originally allocated under the National Development Plan and funded by the Department of Transport. This was increased by €3 million for the year 2002/2003. Due to a later than planned start up of all projects the funding was extended for a further year bringing the total allocated by the Department of Transport to €9 million. Further funding also became available to the RTI programme through the FAS Social Economy Programme and from the Department of Social Family & Community Affairs who are responsible for the Free Travel Pass refund system.

Eight pilot projects were initially given operational funding and these were followed by a further 26 projects who were awarded pre-development funding by ADM under the Rural Transport Initiative. Some projects were community based, some parish based, some county based and some cross border based. By 2003 other projects were up and running and, thereafter, no document relating to rural development would be complete without a paragraph on rural transport.). In the space of two years rural transport had become an integral part of many rural development programmes.

This was copper-fastening of the section in the Rural Development White Paper that stated that rural transport was an integral part of any rural development work or planning. *"The Government will have specific regard to transport requirements to support rural development in order to reflect fully the rural proofing principles set out in the White Paper"* (Department of Agriculture and Food, August 1999, page 33

It was the responsibility of the 34 groups established throughout the country to identify the best model for rural transport services within their area with a primary objective to develop *"Innovative community based public transport projects in rural areas and to use the experience from these projects in the development of rural public transport policy."* (Fitzpatrick's Associates, July 2001, page 21).

In July 2004 Fitzpatrick's Associates conducted an external evaluation of the Rural Transport Initiative. From this report the following four models of service delivery were reviewed:

<u>Supporting existing private operators, taxis & hackneys, particularly operators who had existing school services.</u> The advantage of this model was the use of local area knowledge, familiarity, comfort for local passengers, and extra income for local operators. Of the 34 groups nationwide 29 RTI groups contracted some or all of their services to private operators. It was evident from this model that passenger numbers were insufficient to make routes viable for private operators without support form the RTI.

<u>Community car scheme</u>**.** In areas where community structures were strong this proved an excellent scheme as it allowed volunteers to utilise their time and vehicles to bring passengers to necessary services. The driver gets reimbursed on a per-mile subsistence and extra insurance is subsidised by the RTI Group. This scheme works very well in remote areas where taxis, hackneys and mini buses are not viable.

<u>Owning and operating own vehicles.</u> Some community groups own and operate their own vehicles. These groups were successful in attracting funding under the FAS Social Economy Scheme. This service model is very flexible and could deliver a range of services throughout an area in an integrated way. Just under one third of RTI groups purchased their own vehicles through this model.

<u>Brokerage.</u> Brokerage involves sharing vehicles between different voluntary organisations. Within the RTI there are two types of brokerage. Either a community group or agency gives a vehicle to the RTI, or the RTI contracts a service to a community group or agency. Eight groups implemented this type of transport model. However this was the least successful of all models mainly due to insurance and legal difficulties.

Flexibus: Meath Accessible Transport Project.

Meath Accessible Transport Project was set up in March 1999, as one of two pilot projects set up by the Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform. Its purpose was to engage in community action planning of accessible transport, as envisaged by the Commission of the Status of People with Disabilities. While the focus of the initial period of activity was on physical accessibility and on disabled people, many of the issues identified involved wider community transport issues. In conjunction with this funding the project made a successful application for funding under FAS Social Economy Programme to set up a Social Economy Scheme. The Company, Meath Accessible Transport Project Ltd., Flexibus was formed in June 2002.

Social Economy Schemes are located in "rural locations to deliver a range of essential community services including transport" and "Such services have helped sustain declining rural populations, delaying the onset of a demand for residential care of the elderly and in the process, creating training and employment opportunities for the long term unemployed"[9]

The Meath Accessible Transport Project, after extensive needs analysis, started public services using two types of service provision:-

- ❖ Use of downtime with private providers vehicles.
- ❖ Purchasing a project vehicle and using this vehicle to fill in for services not covered by private providers.

Services

To the end of 2005 Flexibus had 21 scheduled regular public services. These services were timetabled services open to any member of the public and accepting Free Travel Passes. They included daily commuter trips, weekly shopping, health and pension services, twice monthly shopping services and monthly health services trips. Flexibus also provided 18 scheduled Dial-a-ride services. A Dial-a-Ride service is a public service that makes a vehicle available for transport if a passenger or group has a transport need that cannot be catered for elsewhere. The dial-a-ride service operates on a pre-booking basis.

This 'bottom up' approach of the project was successful in delivering accessible public transport services to all parts of County Meath as passenger trips continued to grow as the project developed.

To the end of 2005 Flexibus carried 10,164 passengers in 2003, 20,559 in 2004, and just over 32,000 passengers in 2005. This included both services to the public and regular contracted work. Flexibus operated five accessible vehicles directly and worked with ten private operators who carried out services in various parts of the county. Flexibus operated a seven-place Social Economy Programme plus a manager. Flexibus employed one part-time development worker, one part-time receptionist, one full-time manager and thirteen full-time and part-time drivers, plus several passenger assistants. Flexibus also had two main contracts, one with the Dept of Education for children with accessible needs to go to school and one with a Day Care centre to bring clients into this service twice each week. Flexibus has a call centre based in Navan, Co. Meath and operated services six days each week.

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[9] Module 26, Unit 3.4, of the NUI BSc Distance Learning Degree Course materials (2005)

Table 2 Passenger numbers for Flexibus Meath Accessible Transport from 2003-2005.
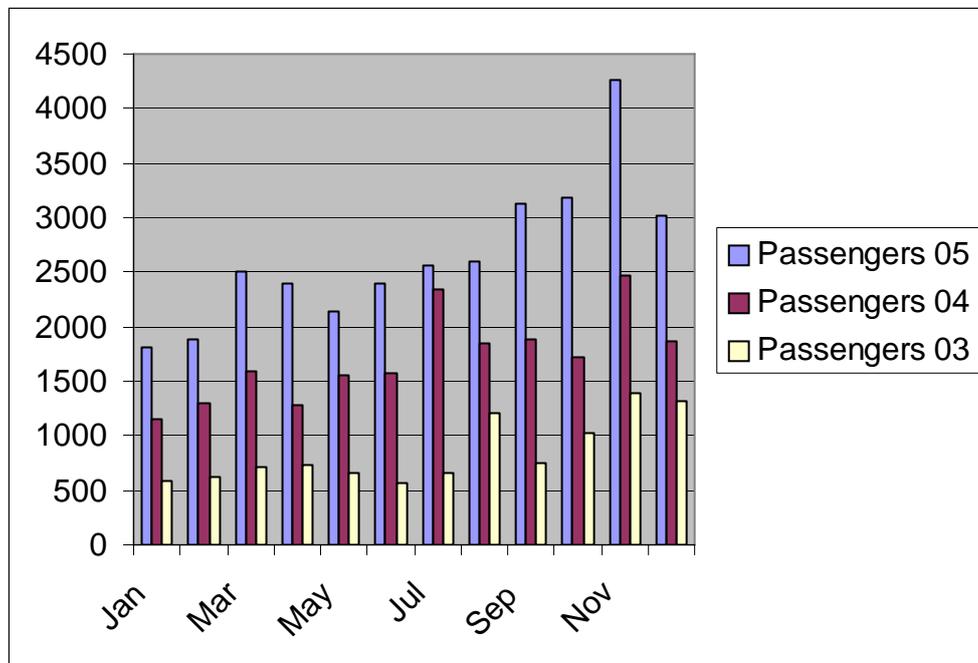
'I am over 80, and I live on my own. I don't have any family around me for support, so I rely on this service to get in and out to town to get supplies. For me, Flexibus is a gift from God.' Lucy Kavanagh (service user)

'I've always loved using the Flexibus service. I very rarely miss a week. I live on my own and am very dependent on the service for retaining my own independence. Becoming the millionth passenger of the Rural Transport Initiative was a great day for me. I got a day out in Kilkenny, a lovely clock and a voucher for a hotel stay. All for using a service that I feel grateful for! You can't beat that.' Ellen Mc Cole

4. Case Study Method

Peggy and Larry live in Kilmainhamwood. Larry is a wheelchair user and needs accessible transport to go to the local Day Care Centre every Monday and Wednesday. Flexibus collects and takes them to and from the centre. Peggy says " Only for Flexibus we would be living like hermits and never see our neighbours or friends. "

Introduction.

The overall aim of this case study is to reflect the impact of public transport services in a very rural area where there was no access to public transport previously. The needs of older people in the North Meath areas have been identified through various studies undertaken by Community groups, (e.g. Ballinacree Community Group, Kilmainhamwood Active Age Group) in the past few years. However, having established that there is a need for transport services in a rural area it is important to continually consult with the groups who are using this type of transport to see if the services provided are suitable to their needs.

Types of Research.

There are two approaches to research - quantitative research and qualitative research. Quantitative research is an exploration of a subject through quantitative measurement. "*Quantitative information is made up of quantifiable items, figures, facts referred to as data.*" (Distance Learning Course Materials, NUI, Module 22, Unit 3.2.). The quantitative data used in this case study is obtained from census data, the Gamma statistics for North Meath and data from the Meath County Development Plan 2000.

Qualitative research is an exploration of why things are the way they are. *"Creswell (1994) describes the qualitative researcher as the main instrument for the data where data is negotiated through the human instrument rather that through inventories, questionnaires or machines."* (Distance Learning Course Materials, NUI, ibid.). In this case study qualitative data reflects the views and opinions of the individuals who use the rural services of Flexibus Meath Accessible Transport.

Two methods of qualitative research are used in this case study.

- A focus Group and
- A qualitative questionnaire

Focus Groups *"Focus groups involve selecting persons because of their expertise or position in the community."* (Distance Learning Course Materials, NUI, ibid.). Thus focus groups can formulate ideas, policy or views, and inform ideas or current thinking about a particular subject. It is the views of the whole group acting as one. In this case study the focus groups consisted of older people who live in a rural area and had no access to public transport until the Rural Transport Initiative had started in their area.

On a Sunday in March, 2006, a group of older people in met in Moynalty, North Meath for a community consultation of service users. The group consisted of older people, people with disabilities and families of older people who had expressed an interest in the service. A comprehensive consultation through group discussion and a question and answer session was organised.

Questionnaire.

A questionnaire is *"a structured planned process of eliciting information through one way communication"* (Distance Learning Course Materials, NUI, ibid.). The Flexibus Questionnaire was prepared for older passengers to query why they chose to use the service and to gauge the impact of the service in their lives as a result of its use. The questionnaire was administered person-to-person during bus journeys. Hours of feedback filled with stories, laughter and tall tales were collected from six public services with a total of 49 passengers. Information from the questionnaires was inputted into an analysis programme called SNAP.

> *"Its great just to have independence"* **Josie**

Minister Martin Cullen TD, making a presentation to the millionth passenger on the **Rural Transport Initiative (TRI)** September 2005.

5. Study Findings

"Flexibus picks me up at the door and I go to the Active Age Club. I get to meet my friends" **Mary.**

Introduction.

The findings in this section are based upon the questionnaire distributed to Flexibus passengers on rural public services in March 2006. What is not captured in the questionnaire is the atmosphere on the bus. This has to be experienced to be understood. All the news of the week is discussed and the health of individuals missing from the bus that day is queried. Visits to hospital are chatted about and passengers confer on the ability of one doctor over another. Extended family is talked about and advice comes in by the bucket. On the trip home prices are debated and 'where' to buy 'what' traded.

But the most startling discovery for an outsider is the type of shopping that is carried. Florrie bought paint, a new brush and mop on her first bus journey as she "was unable to bring them on the bike before the bus came." As bus divers push and haul gas cylinders and shopping onto the bus pets at home are not forgotten. Dog and cat food make up the majority of shopping as it would appear that chain stores prices are less than the local shop. Local shop owners and post offices are also benefiting from the bus. Post offices have the pensions ready to go when passengers arrive and the local shopping is still bought locally.

Passenger Gender

The majority of respondents were female (83.7%). This is reflected in the evaluation on the Rural Transport Initiative in July 2004 by

Females	83.7%
Males	16.3%

Fitzpatrick's Associates where they state that "Three quarters of all users are female". One interpretation of this figure is that the male (husband or brother) in the household was the driver of the family vehicle and also reflects the small number of women who learned to drive. With a husband or brother incapacitated or deceased, women become more isolated socially without transport. This is therefore reflected in the high number of women passengers when public transport becomes available.

What age group do you belong?

The majority of passengers are over 55. This shows that older people do not have access to their own transport during the

Age Group	%
Under 12	0%
12-25	0%
25-55	6.1%
55+	93.9%

daytime. This is a reflection of the increasing number of women returning to the workforce and the non availability of drivers for the older person during the day. This is again reflected in the Fitzpatrick's Evaluation in July 2001 The high proportion of older women using the service is reflective in part of the fact that in excess of 53% of the rural population aged 65 and over are female".

In which area do you live?

The small parish areas listed gives a picture of the rural areas involved. When examining the areas in which the respondents reside, it must be remembered that there was no public bus service in any of these areas and that Ballinacree (8.2%), Mountnugent (8.2%), Dromone (4.1%) and Moyalgh (4.1%) are all in the "Clar"[10] areas. Kingscourt (6.1%) has good access to mainline public transport however until Flexibus passengers were unable to access the transport services in Kingscourt because they have no transport to the town. The Drumconrath service takes in the areas of Drumconrath (6.1%), Gibbstown (2.1%), Lobinstown (6.1%), and Castletown (2%), is the most organised service with respondents gathering in the village and collecting their pension before the bus arrives. Tierworker (8.2%), Carlanstown (2%), Cormeen (6.1%), Kilmainhamwood (6.1%) and Moynalty (6.1%) have good community activists and have access to many services. The passengers on this service have access to Bailieborough each Monday, Navan on Friday, Active Retirement on Wednesday and Day Care on Tuesday. Cross with 10.2% of Flexibus passengers have access to one service each Monday and use the service for health care, prescriptions and shopping.

> *"The service is great. Even though I live just outside the village I cannot get to the centre(Health/Active Retired) because of the hill*" Paddy

> *"I'm 80 I was never able to go anywhere on my own someone always brought me Now I can go to Bailieborough on a Monday, Kilmainhamwood on a Tuesday, Active Retirement on Wednesday and Navan on Friday. What independence"*. **Peggy**

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[10] http://www.pobail.ie/en/AboutUs/AnnualReports/2002/RuralDevelopment/

Before Flexibus how often did you travel to town?

The answers to this question reflect the change of change in rural Ireland. Over 20% of the respondents stated that they seldom went to town and then only when they got a lift. Findings in the Fitzpatrick's Evaluation state" only 7% of users have access to a car" and "one third of users would not

Seldom	20.4%
When I get a lift	34.7%
Once a week	34.7%
Several times a week	6.1%
Couple times a month	4.1%

have been able to make the trip at all if the RTI service was not available". It is indicitive that the elderly do not have equality of access to basic services. Flexibus has increased their independence by giving them better choices, something to look forward to during the week and also shows the benefits of Flexibus as residents are getting out of the house more often.

"Cannot get to town as I am unable to ride my motorbike now. I use Flexibus and it's a Godsend" **Johnny "The Maker"** (Johnny was a great dancer up to a few years ago. Arthritis and bad health have placed restrictions on his movements now)

How did you travel to town before Flexibus?

30.6% of respondents stated that they depended on their family and 28.6% depended on neighbours to bring them to town. There is evidence that of the respondents who were 'unable to go' to town, 20.4% or almost one fifth were left without basic food necessities and health care. Car owners spoke of parking difficulties and heavy traffic as a reason they use the Rural Transport Service. For 80% of respondents the rural transport service increases their

unable to go	20.8%
Public Transport	2.0%
Family	30.8%
Neighbour	20.0%
Bicycle	4.1%
Walk	4.1%
Own car	8.2%

independence, gives access to social interaction. As a result passengers are much happier and healthier people.

"My son brings me to town every week. As soon as we stop the car he asks me how long will I be? I have to rush through my business. Thank God for the bus my time is my own"

Which Flexibus service do you use?

Tierworker and the surrounding areas are the majority users of the service with 30% on Friday and 25% on the Monday service. Ballinacree (13.3%) and Moylagh (10%) also have a high passenger capacity. Kingscourt at 11.7% is equally well used. Although Kingscourt and Bailieborough (Monday) are in Co. Cavan these are the natural hinterlands and shopping areas for the passengers in this area.

Tierworker (Monday)	30%
Tierworker (Friday)	25%
Ballinacree	13.3%
Moylagh	10%
Kingscourt	11.7%
Moynalty Active Retirement	8.3%
Rural Transport Conference	1.7%

"I can go to the doctor or the nurse when I need to, not when I can get a lift" **Josie**

What are the benefits of Flexibus?

The answer to this question is the basis of this case study: The impact of Rural Transport Provision on one rural area? 'Independence' and 'Great to meet my neighbours and friends' vie for first place for over 9 of every 10 people (96%) who use the service. 'Hear the news' was noted by 76% of respondents and 'have time for myself' by 73%. These figures reflect the magnitude of social isolation among our older rural residents in remote areas.

Benefit noted	% of Passengers
Greater Independence	96%
Opportunity to meet neighbours/friends	96%
Hear Local news	76%
Time for myself	73%
Have a chat	..72%
Get the shopping	73%
Good to get out of the house	65%
Collect pension	45%
Hair do	24%
Have a pint	12%
Attend hospital	10%
Visit a show	6%
Visit Family	6%

'Get the shopping' noted by 73% is a marginally higher reason than 'good to get out of the house' noted by 65% of the passengers. For the male population 'have a pint' was a reason listed by 12% of the passengers. Twenty four per-cent (24%) of the women listed 'get my hair done' as their important reason. 'Collect my pension' noted by a 45% of respondents shows the need for access to rural post offices.

Please list any other trips you would like to avail of?

In completing this question all passengers were asked if there were any other places they would like to go? The responses tell of the social isolation of elderly people in rural Ireland. 32.9% of passengers expressed a wish to go anywhere the bus was going. 31.4% stated they would like to go to Blanchardstown Shopping Centre, 14.3% would like to go to Cavan town, 7.1% would like to go to Dundrum Shopping Centre and 4.3% would like to go to Dublin. The range of needs varies from one man who stated that "I never got to Dublin until Flexibus came along it was a great day out" to the woman who expressed difficulty getting to Mass. This is the challenge and the opportunity for services such as Flexibus into the future.

Places to Visit	% of Passengers
Anywhere	32.9%
Blanchardstown Shopping Centre	31.4%
Cavan	14.3%
Dundrum Shopping Centre	7.1%
Dublin	4.3%
Hospital	2.9%
Bingo	2.9%
Mass	1.4%
Seaside	1.4%
Shows	1.4%

How do you rate the Flexibus service

The passengers were asked to rate the Flexibus service under several headings and while many of the respondents thought the service was excellent there are some areas that need work.

Door-to-door service: All respondents were happy with the door-to-door service. Friendly driver and use of free travel pass also scored 100%. However suggestions about 'access to leisure facilities' (51%) and 'opportunities to go to Dublin' (65%) raise some options of extending service to cover more activities.

Service	Very Good	OK	Could Improve
Door to door service	100%	0	0
Friendly driver	100%	0	0
Help with shopping	92%	4%	4%
Accessible Vehicle	88%	10%	2%
Access to leisure activities	55%	24%	20%
Use Free Travel Pass	100%	0	0
Opportunities to go to Dublin	73%	20%	6%
Flexible Service	88%	10%	2%
Helpful staff in office	92%	8%	0

Do you use Flexibus to get to another service?

It is very important to establish whether passengers used the bus (Flexibus) to access and other bus service. How the respondents were interviewed 92% do not use any other service. It may be inferred from this that they are happy to have access to one service, or, perhaps, more co-ordination is required between Flexibus, Bus Eireann, and private bus operators. Fifty four per-cent (54%) of the passengers noted that the use Flexibus to connect to other bus services.

'Flexibus is just the most marvellous service. I live on my own, and the shopping trip is the only time that I get out of my house. If I didn't have the bus picking me up, I would go mad!' Angela (service user)

"Kit is my name and I live in Ballinacree and I use the service on a Friday to Oldcastle. The service has become very popular. It collects the passengers at their door and takes them to Oldcastle where the do their shopping, pay their bills, go to the hairdressers, then meet in the Naper Arms for lunch and a banter. It also collects passengers and takes them to the Warfin clinic once a week. This helps greatly as we don't have to look for parking or pay the parking fee". **Kit**

6. Conclusion

"Social Isolation implies absence of, or limited contact with, other people; contact can be defined in terms of prearranged or customary meetings and involve more that the casual exchange of greetings" (Tracy et al, 2005, page 47).

The impacts for Rural Transport for older people in a rural area are:

Reduced isolation: Rural Transport gives older people in rural areas opportunities to meet their neighbours and friends, have a chat and the opportunity to get out of the house. This is in line with Fitzpatrick's report in July 2004 that states "Independence and social contact as the most important" impact of the service.

Independence: Rural Transport offers a service for older people to complete their weekly tasks such as banking, collecting their pension, get the shopping, having a pint, getting their hair done, etc. in their own time.

Access to Health Services: Rural Transport provides accessible transport to hospital, doctor, nurse, chemist, and dentist giving relative equality of access to health care.

The majority of passengers travelling with Flexibus were female and almost 94% of passengers were over 55. This reflects the gender and the age group most isolated in rural areas. Transport possibilities prior to a tee rural transport initiative were sporadic and people aware dependent on neighbours or family members for lifts.

While a high proportion of passengers expressed a wish to access other services such as shopping centres, the most startling request for other trips was expressed by 32.9% of passengers to go "anywhere" the bus would take them. Passengers expressed satisfaction with the service offered by Flexibus. They picked out helpful drivers, help with shopping and use of Free Travel Pass for special comment. Notably the most important satisfaction was the "Door-to-Door " service.

"It's not much good having the bus stop at the end of the road if you cannot get to the end of the road". (Service User)

> 'I love using the Flexibus. I think the driver is really friendly, and if it's raining he will come down to my house to pick me up. That really makes a difference to me.;
> Margaret Smith (service user)

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