

1.1. Ring-a-Link DRT (IE)

Ring a Link was established in 2001 as a **community-based provider of local transport services** with focus on combatting social exclusion and now functions as a Transport Coordination Unit linked to the National Transport Authority. Ring a Link provides rural mobility through a **mix of demand responsive transport services**, some fixed-route services.

Good territorial coverage 	Integration with Public Transport
Community-based 	Long-term durability

1.1.1 About Carlow, Kilkenny and Wicklow, Ireland

Country	Region	Target Area	Population	Population density
Ireland	Carlow, Kilkenny and Wicklow Counties	5.000 km ²	139.000 inh. (rural) + 158.000 inh. (towns)	28 inh./km ² (rural)

Ring a Link services are implemented in three adjoining counties in the southeast of Ireland, Kilkenny, Carlow and Wicklow, consisting of medium-sized and smaller towns, many villages and a dispersed rural population.

The three counties have a few large and many small towns and villages, but lack a major urban centre. To the north, especially Wicklow, they are heavily influenced by Dublin to which many people commute on a daily basis. To the south-east, Waterford City is the main attraction point. The three counties are quite well served by intercity and regional public transport, both bus and rail. However, the internal public transport is not well developed. Towns and villages are heavily dependent on longer-distance routes passing through them, so that many villages are not served at all by public transport.



Figure 6 Kilkenny

The national Schools Transport Scheme ensures comprehensive transport to/from schools for schoolchildren, but is limited to term time and cannot be used by others. There are not special mobility services for out-patients, daycare or

healthcare access, except where these are arranged privately. In this context, Ring a Link provides the “social safety net”.

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Kilkenny City receives large numbers of short-stay visitors all year round. There are many historic and cultural attractions in the County, and some leisure/adventure amenities, but these are generally only accessible by car despite the short distances (<30 km), which constrains their development.

1.1.2 Description of the Mobility Solution

Since its establishment in 2001, Ring a Link has steadily increased the coverage and intensity of the provided services. Nowadays, it directly operates 23 minibuses and contracts in a further 10 minibuses daily. Ring a Link provides primarily minibus-based DRT services and some fixed route services. All services are for general use, but the DRT services require to be pre-booked.

A dispatch centre in Kilkenny has used the Mobirouter software since about 2006, while units on the buses provide drivers with booking details. During 2022, KLP sponsored an RTPi system to support integration between commercial intercity bus routes and the DRT of Ring a Link.

Main objective of the Mobility Solution

The main objectives of this Mobility Solution are self-determined, but consistent with those of the Rural Transport Initiative from which it originated:

- (1) Combat social exclusion by providing at least weekly opportunity to travel for all people in the rural areas;
- (2) Improve access between villages and the main urban centres (Kilkenny, Carlow);
- (3) Optimisation of resources by efficient route and ride-matching and dispatching;
- (4) Increased emphasis on the integration of rural transport services with existing transport provision.

Target user groups and needs

Originally, the main target groups were people at risk of isolation and social exclusion, as this was the priority of the Rural Transport Program. The number of areas served increased, but not the service intensity which was usually one or two days a week.

Over time, the main target groups have expanded to include persons in rural areas without a car who need daily access to work and education; those in rural areas who need periodic access to training and other social activities; and an emerging target group is visitors/tourists to be able to access rural areas. This has led to daily services, in some cases with multiple trips. This was gradual expansion, in line with increases in available funding.

In 2016 Ring a Link added the areas of Wicklow and Dun Laoghaire/Rathdown to its operational area. In 2017, Ring a Link absorbed the North Fingal transport initiative (NiFTI) through a merger, thus expanding its operations to the northern hinterland of Dublin city. These were step changes that significantly increased the ridership and the scale of operations.

Involved Bodies

- Ring a Link (now renamed 'Local Link Carlow Kilkenny Wicklow') is the designated Transport Coordination Unit (TCU) for the area. It manages the booking and dispatch centre, direct operates about two thirds of its services and contracts in the remainder from local private operators.

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- The National Transport Authority (NTA) is the transport authority for planning, regulation and PSO contracts for all public transport services in Ireland, and the regulator for all commercial PT services and taxis.
- Kilkenny County Council, through its various planning, local development, economic and social activities and committees provide a framework and non-financial support for the rural mobility in County Kilkenny.
- Kilkenny LEADER Partnership (KLP) has been active in promoting rural mobility. It facilitated the formation of an *ad hoc* Transport Working Group which includes Kilkenny County Council, KLP, local agencies and stakeholders and Ring a Link. It arranged conferences on rural mobility in 2017 and 2022, subsequently produced a Comprehensive Mobility Plan for County Kilkenny during 2018, and mobilised the KITE project aiming to integrate fixed-route and DRT.
- JJ Kavanagh & Sons is Ireland's largest private bus company. It provides bus services in Kilkenny County and is the fixed-route operator in KITE.

Mobility services provided/addressed

Ring a Link fields 30 vehicles daily, all minibuses (20 minibuses in-house and contracts in a further 10 minibuses daily).

The primary model is to connect rural areas to their main urban centre (Kilkenny, Carlow, Carrick-on-Suir, ...), for access to amenities, shopping, banking, healthcare, etc. Over the years, some daily services have been added to cater to commuters and those wishing to connect to/from inter-city bus routes. In a few cases, Ring a Link has stepped in to provide transport to/from school in some areas where children cannot avail of the national Schools Transport scheme for various reasons.

The Ring a Link services consist of the following service types:

- fixed-route services, mostly in counties Wicklow and Fingal;
- Demand Responsive services, operating as flexible routes and mainly oriented to social necessity in more remote areas. In total there are currently 21 DRT routes;
- evening services: Ring a Link provides a number of evening services at weekends to/from Kilkenny City from the outlying villages. These were implemented as part of an initiative to reduce drink driving;
- schools transport: this currently consists of six routes operated during school term;
- social inclusion trips: a small number of day excursion trips are provided for social groups, by prior arrangement.

Ring a Link does not operate any healthcare, daycare or outpatient mobility services.

Users are required to register for the demand responsive services. Among other things, this greatly simplifies the booking processes and reduces errors, as key information such as home location (not easily explained in many rural locations), usual destinations, any specific requirements, etc. are already in the system.

Under a national program for all PT, fares have been reduced significantly for students and young adults.

Under Connecting Ireland, the desire is for all buses to be accessible, with wheelchair lifts (not clear if this can actually be delivered). All new services under Connecting Ireland will be with new buses and low-floor. This will improve comfort and ease of access.

Ridership and other key metrics/results

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In the earlier years, the focus of the service was on social inclusion. Annual ridership exceeded 50,000 in 2009. In subsequent years, they began to provide services to students and the annual ridership exceeded 100,000 in 2016 (specifically 136,620), primarily due to expansion of the coverage area. Total ridership across all services in 2022 was just over 200,000, up from the 180,000 passengers in 2019 (the last pre-COVID year) and equivalent to an average of almost 17.000 per month.

Also in recent years, a few regular services of higher frequency have been implemented, and these are now attracting work trips. It is noted that the traditional social-inclusion services are now declining in absolute numbers, not just as a proportion of the overall business. It is considered that “new old people” have cars, are used to having cars, so they are different to those of similar age twenty years ago.

The number of users dipped in 2020 during the main pandemic period, then recovered in 2021, and the number of users in 2022 exceeded the pre-COVID levels.

Shopping, pension, banking, pharmacy used to be the main motivations. Younger people use the services to get to school, college, training, employment, etc. Travel to work is becoming more significant, as additional regular services are introduced.

There will be more regular services under the national Connecting Ireland program. This will introduce new routes and/or strengthen existing routes to minimum 3 return trips daily, sometimes more. This will continue to shift the balance of trip motivations.

Supporting technologies

From the outset, Ring a Link has used ITS-supported booking and reservation software. The MobiRouter product remains the core support to trip management and service optimisation. This decision was largely influenced by Kilkenny’s involvement with the SAMPO and SAMPLUS projects, which demonstrated the use of ITS to support DRT in a number of European settings. It was also influenced by the substantial territory covered by Ring a Link (then Carlow, Kilkenny and South Tipperary) and the possibility that the number of services and volume of bookings would exceed what could reasonably be managed without such support tools.

In addition, Ring a Link has operated the Integrated Transport Management System (ITMS) which has been provided by NTA to all Transport Coordination Units since January 2015. Electronic ticket machines are used on the services in County Wicklow.

During 2020-22, Ring a Link participated in KLP’s KITE initiative, hosting the RTPI system at its dispatch centre.

Engagement aspects

Ring a Link was designed from the outset to be deeply-grounded in the community but it had the complication of a coverage area that spanned three adjacent counties. Ring a Link solved this by structuring the Board to have several voluntary sector representatives from each county, plus one elected Councillor from each county. A very effective working relationship has been established with the local LEADER partnership (KLP), which has taken the lead to establish an *ad hoc* Transport Working Group to strengthen rural mobility services in County Kilkenny and adjoining areas.

Focus groups were done in Carlow in 2019, also in Wicklow in 2017. The outcomes of these focus groups expressed the need to extend current provision in specific rural areas of the county. They noted loss of key services in rural areas over many years. Lack of access to key services such as third level education, health-

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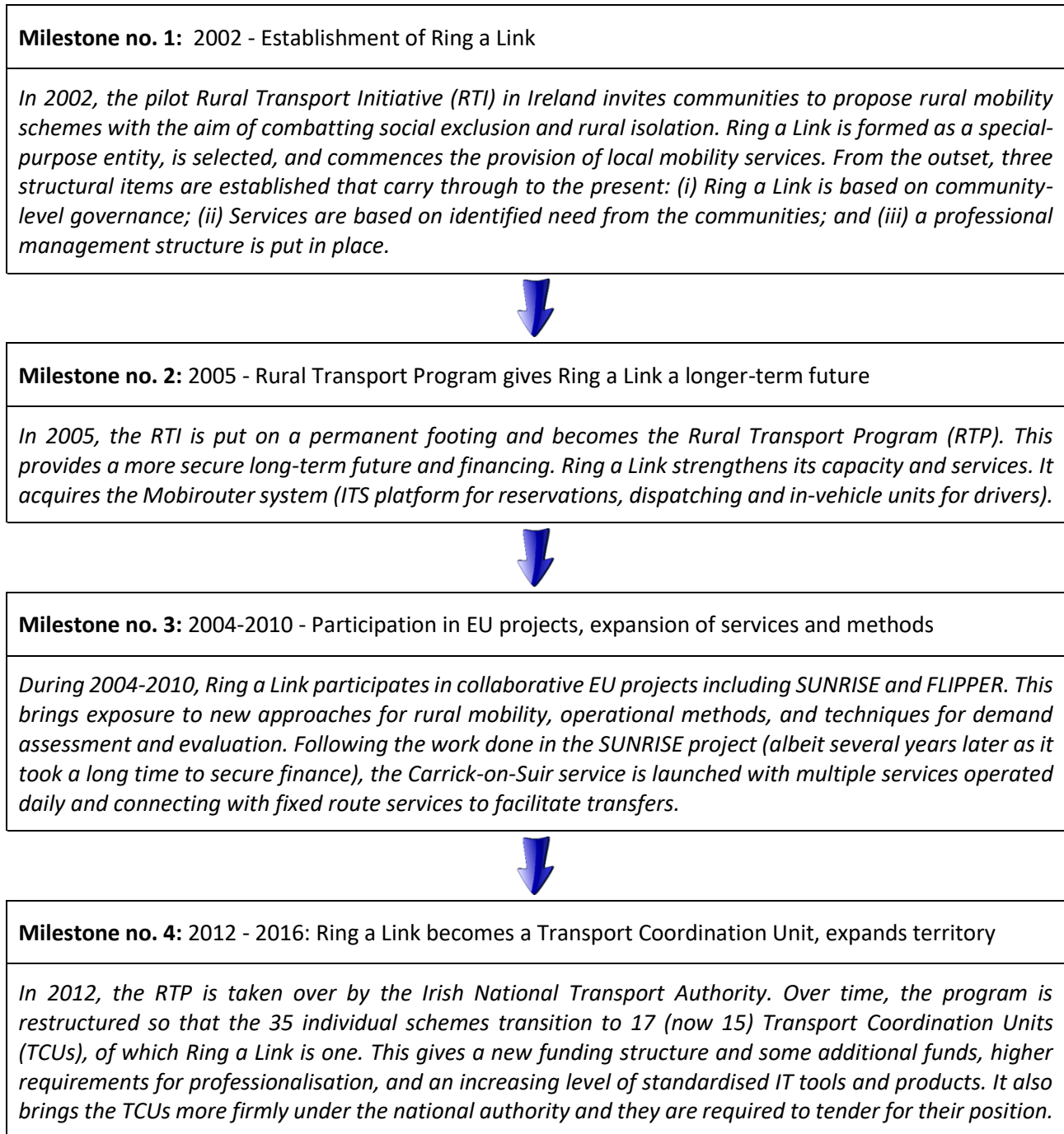




related appointments and onward travel connections were highlighted. Participants also highlighted the need to access social activities to address rural isolation and promote positive mental health.

The online survey for the Carlow consultation received many responses from the 35-54 years age bracket, predominantly in the workforce. These currently use a car for travel but showed a willingness to use public transport. The Wicklow consultation followed a similar process, identifying specific un(der)served needs and proposing 5 routes.

1.1.3 Timelines and Milestones



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**Milestone no. 5: 2022 - Ring a Link begins service integration through KITE project**

Building on work initiated in 2016-17, in 2022 the KITE project was mobilised by KLP, who have been the majority funder to date. The project provides hard infrastructure and support software for coordination of fixed route intercity services and the DRT of Ring a Link at several integration points within Kilkenny County. Ring a Link hosts the software system at its dispatch centre.

1.1.4 Long-term assessment

Success, Durability and Expansion

All of Ireland is covered by the 15 Transport Coordination Units (TCUs, originally 18), of which Ring a Link is one, which operate under the generic brand “Local Link”. Each has its own arrangements, service types, local working structures and local identity. Note that while the assigned areas of the 15 TCUs cover all of Ireland, they have limited funding so they are unable to provide comprehensive service coverage, either geographic or temporal.

Ring a Link continues to operate and has a good degree of stability. As described above, the coverage area and the range of services continue to grow. The services have expanded into the neighboring counties. It may be noted that all of Ireland is covered by the 15 TCUs, which each operate under the generic brand “Local Link”, although each has its own arrangements, service types, local working structures and local identity.

The expectations are that Ring a Link and its services will continue for many years. It is likely that both the services and the platforms will continue to evolve. It remains to be seen whether a new rural mobility policy would lead to intensification of the rural mobility offer

Funding and financing

Ring a Link is a not-for-profit entity. It has no prospect to make the services financially self-sustaining, as it follows a social inclusion mission.

The service is unable to cover Opex from fares paid by customers. Fares are intentionally kept at socially-affordable levels, reflecting that the services are still primarily aimed at combatting social exclusion and isolation. Fares are a flat €3 per one-way trip for adults, €2 for under-16s, children under 5 travel free. Currently the fares are not aligned with or integrated with the general fare structure for PT.

The Ring a Link services are substantially subsidised as their cohort of users is predominantly people entitled to free travel. As a result, Ring a Link is not heavily exposed to reductions in fare revenue, giving it greater resilience such as during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Incomes are derived from four main sources:

- Customer receipts on the scheduled and DRT routes;
- NTA provides public financial support for scheduled/DRT services which could not otherwise be sustained;
- Allocation of funds from the Department of Social Protection as partial compensation for participation in the Free Travel Scheme, channelled through NTA;

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- Other sources for specific services, such as from Kilkenny County Council for the interim urban routes in Kilkenny City.

Why is it considered as a Good Practice?

Starting from scratch as a grassroots organisation and leveraging various funding opportunities, Ring a Link established a range of community and social mobility services and the enabling booking and reservation capacity. It has subsequently developed daily and regular DRT and scheduled services, expanded its coverage area, and developed into a comprehensive transport coordination unit with operations in three counties.

1.1.5 Transferability considerations

CONTEXT PECULIARITIES	TRANSFERABILITY CONDITIONS
In Ireland local governments have do not have a mandate for public transport, so it is limited what measures or support for rural mobility they can commit in their development plans or budgets.	The general services are broadly transferrable, if organisational capacity is present, and any needed permits can be obtained
DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED/WEAKNESS	LESSONS LEARNT
Financing for rural mobility is always a challenge, but current sources have been to date reasonably secure and consistent. Lack of a national rural mobility policy in Ireland.	Main lessons about how to implement this Mobility solution: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - develop durable structures, a professional team and a good IT platform; - maintain close relationship to the communities; - build relationships with entities such as the LEADER program and the County Council; - gradual but sustained development of services; - ongoing adaptation of operating practices.

References for further details

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