



SMARTA-NET Final Conference

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Panel discussion on Rural Accessibility



Panel Discussion on Rural Accessibility



**Helen
McHenry**

Dr. Helen McHenry is a Policy Analyst with the Western Development Commission (WDC) where she is responsible for analysing socio-economic data and policy as it impacts on the Western Region of Ireland. She has a particular focus on rural and regional development, energy infrastructure and renewable policy and the low carbon transition for rural dwellers. Most recently she developed the Sustainable Mobility Index to quantify mobility options, services, and infrastructure for 40 rural towns. Prior to joining the WDC, she worked with various public sector organisations and at the University of Aberdeen and the Queen's University of Belfast and has extensive experience in policy analysis, evaluation and research.



**Pascale
Van Doren**

Pascale Van Doren is an agricultural engineer from UCLouvain (BE). She pursued her professional career in a European context. Her work background includes university research, consulting for public decision-making and management of European projects and networks. Rural development, territorial governance, research and innovation, support to SMEs, social affairs, maritime affairs and interregional cooperation are the main focuses of her expertise. Over 30 years of experience has given her a cross-cutting view of European and territorial issues, as well as solid knowledge in policy evaluation, programme monitoring and foresight. She is Team Leader of the Rural Pact Support Office since December 2022.



**Ute
Wein**

Policy Officer in the European Commission since 2001, in various Directorates-General. Worked principally on enlargement, (digital) internal market (Commission proposal on Single Digital Gateway Regulation) and transport issues. Since April 2022: part of the team that prepared two new legislative Commission proposals on passenger rights and inter-institutional follow-up. Since July 2024: responsible for transport poverty.

Panel discussion

Lack of accessibility have long been a significant challenge in rural areas (especially when compared to urban areas – as we heard in the previous presentations), affecting various aspects of life, including **economic development, social inclusion,** and access to **essential services** like healthcare, education, and **employment.**

- How **public transport deficit** (underdeveloped transport networks, lack of reliable, affordable and accessible transport options, etc.) is a primary contributor to **accessibility challenges.**
- How it affects **specific groups** (e.g. the elderly, low-income households, and individuals with disabilities) more than others.
- How public transport deficits contribute to a broader phenomenon known as **transport poverty,** whereas people are unable to afford or access sufficient transportation to meet their basic needs (e.g. due to high fuel costs, limited public transport options, long distances to services) – creating a vicious cycle of deprivation.
- How the above challenges can be **identified and measured;** and what the possible **policy responses** are.