

**Rural Transport: Service
Audit and Needs
Assessment**

Laois County Report

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>1. OVERVIEW</u>	1
<u>1.1 INTRODUCTION</u>	1
<u>1.2 TOPOGRAPHY</u>	1
<u>1.3 SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROFILE</u>	2
<u>1.4 SPATIAL STRUCTURE</u>	3
<u>1.5 TRANSPORTATION OVERVIEW</u>	4
<u>2. AUDIT OF EXISTING SERVICES</u>	6
<u>2.1 SCHEDULED SERVICES</u>	6
<u>2.2 NON-SCHEDULED SERVICES</u>	9
<u>3. NEEDS ASSESSMENT</u>	11
<u>3.1 KEY FINDINGS – PRIVATE CAR ACCESSIBILITY</u>	11
<u>3.2 OVERALL TRAVEL PATTERNS</u>	13
<u>3.3 TYPES OF JOURNEY</u>	14
<u>3.4 TRAVEL NEEDS AND ATTITUDES</u>	15
<u>3.5 RURAL TRANSPORT WORKSHOP/CONSULTATIONS</u>	16
<u>4. CONCLUSIONS</u>	18
<u>4.1 KEY FINDINGS</u>	18
<u>4.2 UNMET NEEDS IN CO. LAOIS</u>	19
<u>ANNEX 1 GIS MAPS</u>	1

ANNEXES

1. Overview

1.1 Introduction

This service audit and needs assessment was undertaken as part of a wider national rural transport study. The study was commissioned by the Interdepartmental Working Group on Rural Transport, chaired by the Department of the Environment and Local Government. Under the study the consultants were required to:

- develop a template for use by County Development Boards (CDBs) in carrying out service audits and establishing reasonable rural passenger transport needs in their counties;
- work with four CDBs – Westmeath, Laois, Mayo and Kerry – to undertake pilot studies in their counties.

This is the report of the pilot study in Laois. It is based on a combination of a survey of rural residents about their travel patterns and needs, a consultative workshop with key interest groups, and relevant desk research regarding the county.

Chapter 1 gives an overview of the county in terms of the topography, socio-economic profile and spatial structure. Chapter 2 details existing scheduled and non-scheduled passenger transport services in the county. Chapter 3 describes overall rural travel patterns, and assesses the perceived travel needs of rural residents in Laois. Chapter 4 summarises key findings and draws conclusions in relation to rural passenger transport services in the county.

1.2 Topography

Laois is the 8th smallest county in Ireland, covering an area of 1,719 km² (or 171,990 hectares) or 2.4% of the national land mass. The county is generally low lying, with the highest peaks (c.400 metres) found in the Slieve Bloom Mountains to the north-west. It is landlocked, bordered by counties Carlow, Kildare, Kilkenny, Offaly and North Tipperary. Only 0.1% of the surface area is covered by water, though a number of small lakes in the county have been developed for fishing purposes. The River

Barrow rises in Laois, and the early stages of the River Nore also pass through the county.

1.3 Socio-economic Profile

Co. Laois had a population of nearly 53,000 in 1996. Its population increased slightly since 1991 (by 1.2%), and the county accounts for about 1.5% of the total national population. It is a very rural county, although this is changing (especially in the northern part of the county). Over 36,000 people (69.2%) live in rural areas. Population density is low, at 31 persons per km², though the rural density (22 persons per km²) is about average for rural areas nationally.

Table 1.1: Socio-economic Profile of Co. Laois 1996

	County Laois	Rural Laois	STATE
Population (1996)	52,945	36,619	3,629,860
Overall population density (per km ²)	30.78	-	51.65
Rural population density (per km ²)	-	22.18	21.81
% population aged over 65	12.1%	12.8%	11.4%
- % male	47.1%	48.7%	42.8%
- % female	52.9%	51.3%	57.2%
% population aged 14 or under	25.7%	25.6%	23.7%
% in socio-economic groups A & B	7.6%	6.6%	11.6%
% in socio-economic group G	6.4%	6.4%	5.8%
% in socio-economic groups I & J	14.6%	20.0%	8.2%
% of population with third level education	8.7%	8.2%	12.7%
% of households with access to a car (1991 Census)	73.5%	77.3%	66.0%

Note: The socio-economic groups are defined as follows: A = Employers and Managers; B = Higher Professional; C = Lower Professional; D = Non-manual; E = Manual Skilled; F = Semi-skilled; G = Unskilled; H = Own Account Workers; I = Farmers; J = Agricultural Workers; Z = All Others Gainfully Employed.

Source: CSO Census of Population

Just over 12% of the county's population, and 13% of the rural population, is aged 65 or over. The national average is 11.4%. The older population in Laois is also more male-oriented (47%, compared to 43% nationally). The proportion of young people in the county (14 or under) is also above average. About 26% of the population is aged 14 or under, compared to 24% nationally.

The younger population is reasonably well spread throughout Laois (see Map 1.1). The older population, on the other hand, is proportionately higher in the rural areas in the south and west (see Map 1.2). The east, particularly the area around the Co.

Laois stretch of the N7 Dublin-Limerick route, has a noticeably lower proportion of residents aged 65 or over.

The socio-economic profile of Laois is indicative of a rural-based economy. A relatively high proportion of the county's population is involved in farming or agricultural activities (15%). By comparison, the proportion of employer/managers or higher professionals in Laois is low (8%), while the number of people with a third level education (9%) is also below the national average.

Unemployment levels seem to be relatively high in the east of the county, particularly in the south-east (see Map 1.3). Unemployment is lower in the south and west.

1.4 Spatial Structure

Portlaoise, the county town, is by far the largest town in Laois. This contrasts with the more polycentric structure of the other pilot counties – Westmeath (Mullingar, Athlone), Mayo (Castlebar, Ballina, Westport) and Kerry (Tralee, Killarney).

Portlaoise has a population of nearly 9,500 (1996 est.), over 6,000 more than the next two largest towns, Portarlinton and Mountmellick. Abbeyleix, Mountrath, Rathdowney and Stradbally are the only other towns with a population greater than 1,000.

Table 1.2: Hierarchy of Settlements in Co. Laois

A.	B.	C.	D.
Portlaoise		Mountmellick Portarlinton Abbeyleix* Mountrath* Rathdowney*	Stradbally Durrow Clonaslee Ballylinan Ballinakill Castletown Borris-in-Ossory Emo Newtown Ballyroan Donaghmore Ballacolla Ballybrittas Arles Camross Coolrain Cullahill Killenard Killeshin Luggacurren Rosenallis Shanahoe Swan Timahoe Vicarstown Ballybrophy Graiguecullen (Carlow Environs)

Note: Towns are categorised from A to D. Category A denotes county towns, Category B denotes towns of population > 5,000, Category C denotes towns of population 1,500-4,999 and Category D denotes towns of population < 1,500. The higher the category, the broader the array of services/functions that becomes available. The hierarchy is broadly based on the population of towns as per the 1996 Census. Adjustments are made where a settlement (marked *) is seen to serve more functions than its population might suggest, however.

Table 1.2 above gives a broad indicative hierarchy of settlements in Laois, based on the various town sizes and their functions. As would be expected, Portlaoise is the major administrative and commercial centre in the county, and provides the widest range of facilities (eg government, retail, recreational, medical). Portlaoise is also growing rapidly, being now in part a major commuter town for Dublin. Towns like Portarlinton, Abbeyleix, Mountmellick, Mountrath, Rathdowney and Stradbally are smaller but significant centres of economic activity with more limited services. Abbeyleix and Mountmellick also provide hospital care.

Laois residents can also avail of a wide choice of services in neighbouring large towns. Important centres outside Laois include cities/towns like Kilkenny (pop. 18,696), Carlow (pop. 14,979), Tullamore (pop. 10,039), Athy (pop. 5,306) and Roscrea (pop. 4,170). These towns are all important centres for retail, recreational and medical services. They also provide employment for some Laois residents.

Two national primary road routes pass through Laois – the N7 (Dublin-Limerick) and the N8 (Dublin-Cork). Both intersect at Portlaoise. Major national secondary routes serving the county include the N80 (Athlone to Enniscorthy) and the N78 (Kilcullen to Kilkenny). Portlaoise, Portarlinton and Ballybrophy are also served by the national rail network.

Table 1.3: Spatial Context of Co. Laois

	County Laois	STATE
Area (km ²)	1,719	70,273
Kilometres of National Primary Roads:		
- per 100 km ²	4.86	3.73
- per 100 residents	0.16	0.07
Kilometres of National Secondary Roads:		
- per 100 km ²	4.62	3.81
- per 100 residents	0.15	0.07

Source: Derived from CSO/National Roads Authority

1.5 Transportation Overview

As elsewhere, the private car is by far the main form of transport in Laois. There are over 18,000 private cars in the county, and car ownership per head of population is roughly on a par with the national average. Some 23,000 people, or 44% of the population, hold a full driving licence.

About 230 privately-owned public service vehicles operate in Laois, which is less than is available in Westmeath, a nearby and similar sized pilot county. There are also 44 vehicles operating Department of Education licensed school transport routes in the county.

There are 80 privately licensed bus routes in Laois, with just four Bus Éireann routes serving the county. There are nearly 100 Department of Education school transport routes, though some of the privately licensed routes are also in effect school routes.

Table 1.4: Baseline Transport Statistics

	County Laois	County Westmeath*	STATE
Number of cars (as at 31-12-99)	18,079	22,728	1,269,245
Number of current full driving licences	23,093	28,002	1,536,761
Number of cars (per 100 residents)	34.15	35.90	34.97
% of population with a full driving licence	43.6%	44.2%	42.3%
Number of Bus Éireann routes (Expressway and local)	4	16	-
Number of private licensed bus routes	80	17	-
Number of DoEd school transport routes (primary & post-primary)	98	81	-
Number of privately-owned public service vehicles [†]	229	304	-
Number of DoEd school transport vehicles (contracted and Bus Éireann)	44	51	-
Average distance (miles) travelled to:			
- work	5.6	5.1	5.6
- school	3.5	3.2	3.0

* A similar pilot county for rural transport audit.

[†] Taxis, hackneys and buses combined.

Source: Various

2. Audit of Existing Services

2.1 Scheduled Services

2.1.1 Description of Bus and Rail Services

Bus Éireann services in Laois include one local service to/from Dublin (Dublin-Ballybrittas-Portlaoise-Mountmellick) as well as the Expressway services that pass through the county. The local service runs once a day (Monday-Saturday), with an early morning departure from Mountmellick and an evening departure from Dublin. The Dublin-Limerick-Ennis Expressway service runs 13 times a day, however, providing good transport links along the Co. Laois stretch of the N7, ie from Ballybrittas to Portlaoise (including the hospital), Mountrath, Castletown and Borris-in-Ossory. This service also links with the Tralee-Limerick-Roscrea-Athlone route at Roscrea. In addition, the Dublin-Cork service links Portlaoise-Abbeyleix-Durrow six times a day, while Stradbally, Portlaoise and Mountmellick are served by a once daily service from Waterford to Athlone.

Table 2.1: Bus Éireann Scheduled Services in Co. Laois

Route	Serves	Days	Frequency
Expressway			
Dublin-Limerick-Ennis	Ballybrittas (R), Portlaoise Hospital (R), Portlaoise, Mountrath, Castletown (R), Borris-in-Ossory	Mon-Sun	13
Dublin-Cahir-Cork	Portlaoise, Abbeyleix, Durrow	Mon-Sun	6
Tralee-Limerick-Roscrea-Athlone	Portlaoise*	Mon-Sun	2-3
Waterford-Athlone-Longford	Stradbally, Portlaoise, Mountmellick	Mon-Sun	1 ⁺
Local			
Dublin-Portlaoise-Mountmellick	Portlaoise, Mountmellick	Mon-Sat [#]	1
* Connects with Dublin-Limerick-Ennis service at Roscrea.			
+ Serves Longford on Sunday only.			
# Evening service from Mountmellick-Dublin on Sundays.			
R Request stop.			

Source: Bus Éireann

The Bus Éireann services are supplemented by private licensed bus routes (see Table 1.4). There are 80 such routes serving Laois, operated by 13 different providers. There are a few (5-6) “Expressway”-type or regional private services linking Laois to Dublin, Carlow, Kilkenny and Tullamore on a daily or week-day basis. There are also 4-5 college services bringing students to Dublin, Carlow, Waterford and Athlone. Most other routes are school runs, “bingo/disco” runs or weekend

services between the main population centres. A few provide daily services within the local area, however (eg “Townlink” within Portlaoise, Portarlington-Portlaoise).

Transport by rail within the county is available at Portarlington, Portlaoise and Ballybrophy via Iarnród Éireann’s Dublin-Cork and Dublin-Limerick services. Portlaoise is best served, while daytime frequencies at Portarlington and Ballybrophy are limited. Portarlington is also an intermediate point on the Dublin-Galway and Dublin-Westport lines, providing a short-haul connection to Tullamore.

All Bus Éireann and Iarnród Éireann services accept Free Travel Pass holders. In addition, there are four private operators serving Laois that are also licensed to accept the Travel Pass. Nearly 8,300 people in the county, or 16% of the population, are eligible for a Free Travel Pass. This is similar to the national average. Some 1,700 Free Travel Pass holders (21%) qualify for invalidity or disability reasons.

Table 2.2: Free Travel Pass Holders in Co. Laois

	County Laois	County Westmeath*	STATE
Number of free travel pass holders	8,295	11,090	586,363
Number of free travel pass holders (per 100 residents)	15.66	17.52	16.15
Number of free travel pass holders qualifying through receipt of invalidity pension or disability allowances/(% of total)	1,719 (20.7%)	2,297 (20.7%)	124,845 (21.3%)

* A similar pilot county for rural transport audit.

Source: Department Of Social, Community and Family Affairs

2.1.2 Comparison with Other Pilot Counties

Compared to other pilot counties, Laois as a whole is less well served by scheduled bus and rail services (see Maps 2.1 and 2.2). Map 2.1 shows all scheduled transport services (bus, rail) serving rural parts of the county. Map 2.2 shows scheduled morning and evening services that facilitate access to work in the main towns, ie the service must arrive in the destination before the start of the working day, and return in the evening after work.¹

Some 44% of the population live in DEDs that are served by some form of scheduled service, compared to 66% in Mayo, 63% in Kerry and 62% in Westmeath. This reflects the fact that Expressway services in Laois are concentrated on two key routes, while the county also lacks a local bus network and has a concentration of

¹ This means that not all morning and evening services are necessarily included in Map 2.2

private services in a small number of areas. The proportion of the Laois population with access to services that can facilitate transport for work/training opportunities, however, is 35%, higher than for Kerry, Mayo and Westmeath. This is because proximity to Dublin means that the frequency and timing of Expressway services through the county makes their use for work/training journeys potentially attractive.

Table 2.3: % of Population in DEDs with Public Transport Services¹

	Laois	Kerry	Mayo	Westmeath
Any scheduled service	44%	63%	66%	62%
Daily working service ²	35%	26%	17%	18%
1. Refers to DEDs where services stop. Includes Bus Éireann, Iarnród Éireann and private services.				
2. See text for description.				

Source: Derived from CSO Census of Population, Service Timetables

Service accessibility can still be an issue for key target groups, however (eg older people, the unemployed), given the lack of service outside the Expressway routes. This is especially the case if people are not conveniently located near the main national primary routes. Throughout the county, for example, there are people in the key target groups who have poor access to daytime transport services, services to large towns and services to education/training facilities (see Maps 2.3-2.5).

2.1.3 Other Scheduled Services

As noted in Section 1.4, there are nearly 100 Department of Education licensed school bus routes in Laois. Of these routes, 60 are primary and 40 post-primary. Bus Éireann is responsible for the operation of these routes, though much of the work is sub-contracted to private operators. Of the 44 vehicles operating school transport routes in the county, 35 are contracted private vehicles.

Table 2.4: School Transport Routes in Co. Laois

	County Laois	County Westmeath*	STATE
Number of DoEd school transport routes (primary & post-primary)	98	81	6,000
Number of DoEd school transport vehicles (contracted and Bus Éireann)	44	51	2,300
Average distance (miles) travelled to school	3.5	3.2	3.0
* A similar pilot county for rural transport audit.			

Source: Department of Education

Many private bus routes are school routes for the Laois area, as their licences are restricted to week-day operations for school terms only. These services are licensed by the Department of Public Enterprise. The main Department of Education school

transport system differs from these routes in that it explicitly restricts its services to carriage of school-going children only.

Scheduled Midland Health Board services are limited to one daily minibus (14-15 seats) that travels from Portlaoise to the Dublin hospitals. This is free to medical card holders and costs £4 for others. Apart from this, the Health Board also supports non-scheduled transport for medical purposes (see Section 2.2 below).

2.2 Non-scheduled Services

There are 229 privately-owned public service vehicles (ie taxis, hackneys and private buses) operating in Laois. This includes 28 taxis (three wheelchair accessible), 108 hackneys and 93 private licensed buses. On both an area and a per capita basis, Laois has a lower concentration of taxi/hackney service than is available nationally, though its private bus capacity is similar to Westmeath. Average fleet size for private bus operators is 2.4 vehicles (less than Westmeath, where average fleet size is 3.1 vehicles).

Table 2.4: Privately-owned Public Service Vehicles in Co. Laois

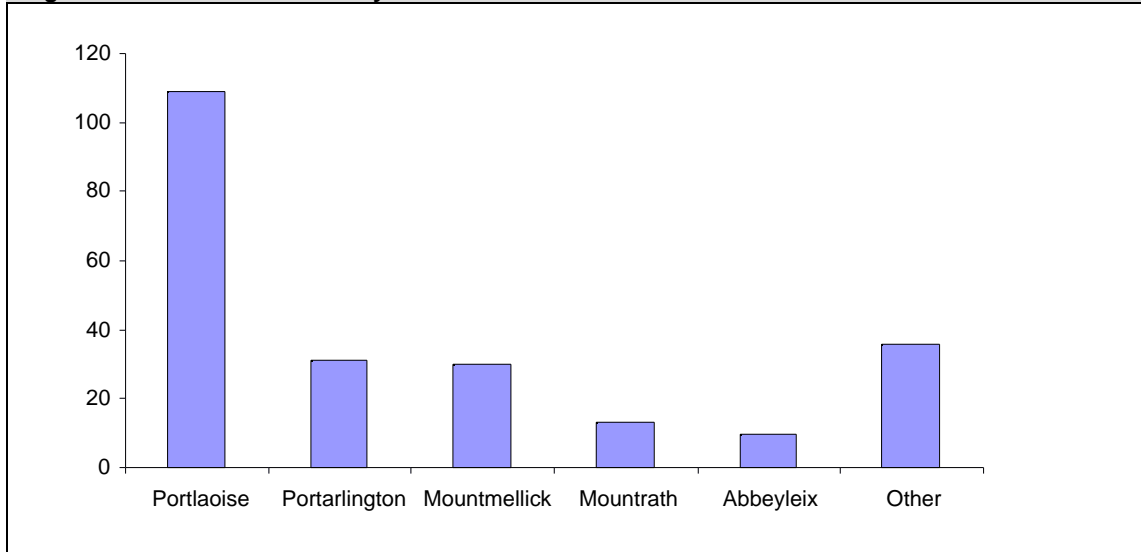
	County Laois	County Westmeath*	STATE
Number of hackneys and taxis:	136	270	13,076
- per 100 km ²	7.91	14.67	18.61
- per 100 residents	0.26	0.43	0.36
Number of private licensed bus operators	39	31	-
Number of private licensed buses:	93	97	-
- per 100 km ²	5.41	5.27	-
- per 100 residents	0.18	0.15	-
Average fleet size of private licensed bus operators	2.4	3.1	-
Number of privately-owned public service vehicles ⁺	229	367	-

* A similar pilot county for rural transport audit.

⁺ Taxis, hackneys and buses combined.

Source: Departments of the Environment and Local Government/Public Enterprise

Nearly half of all public service vehicles are based in Portlaoise, with 85% of vehicles located in five towns that account for less than 35% of the population. Portlaoise is the location for all taxis, being the only taximeter area in the county, while there are also 30 hackneys and about 40 private buses based in the town. Both Portarlinton and Mountmellick have about 30 public service vehicles available, with smaller numbers located in Mountrath and Abbeyleix.

Figure 2.1: Location of Privately-owned Public Service Vehicles in Co. Laois

Non-scheduled Health Board activities involve taxi services transporting people to/from hospitals, foster homes etc. These activities are run using a tendering list of 4-5 operators. A separate contractor also provides a specialised, flexible taxi service to the Dublin hospitals for dialysis patients.

3. Needs Assessment²

3.1 Key Findings – Private Car Accessibility

3.1.1 Cars in Household

One of the first indicators of transport availability is the number of cars within a respondent's household. In the survey of rural residents in Laois, 9% of rural Laois residents live in households with no car, with over half living in households with two or more vehicles. This compares favourably with the other pilot counties.

Table 3.1: Number of Cars per Household in Co. Laois

	Laois		Average of Four Counties	
	Number	%	Number	%
0	29	9%	121	9%
1	108	34%	482	37%
2	127	40%	517	40%
3+	51	16%	172	13%
TOTAL	315	100%	1,291	100%

Source: Local Transport Survey

The population living in households without a car is consistent across most age groups. There are a number of target groups where the proportion living in non-car households is higher, however. These include:

- older people, where nearly 30% live in households with no car;
- people with illness and people with disability³, where over 20% live in households with no car;
- lower income groups (using medical card holders as a proxy), where over 30% live in households with no car.

² A total of 2,000 survey forms were mailed out to individuals in rural Laois DEDs. Individuals were sampled systematically from the electoral register database. The analysis is based upon 330 completed forms - a response rate of 16.5. In some cases, this response rate was too small to carry out detailed cross-tabulations, so results for the four pilot counties combined are included. The sample response was adjusted to remove age and sex bias and to produce a weighted dataset that was similar in profile to rural Laois.

Table 3.2: % Proportion of Sub-groups in Co. Laois Living in Households with No Car

	Laois (%)	Average of Four Counties (%)
Age Group		
18-24	3	4
25-44	5	4
45-64	6	6
65+	29	27
Sex		
Male	6	8
Female	13	11
Disability		
Able-bodied	5	6
People with illness/people with disability	22	30
Free Travel Pass?		
Yes	30	31
No	4	4
Medical Card?		
Yes	32	27
No	2	3
AVERAGE	9	9

Source: Local Transport Survey

3.1.2 Car Availability

Car ownership can mask the real determinant of the need to use alternative, non-private means of transport, ie actual car availability. In many households where there is one car, for example, it might be used by the principal income earner for the work journey and is therefore unavailable to other members of the household during the main part of the day. Around 20% of the rural population of Laois report that they “rarely” or “never” have a car available for their personal use. This mirrors other pilot counties.

Table 3.3: Availability of a Car for Use as Driver or Passenger in Co. Laois

	Laois		Average of Four Counties	
	Number	%	Number	%
Always	211	68%	851	70%
Often	40	13%	145	12%
Rarely	29	9%	105	9%
Never	33	11%	110	9%
TOTAL	313	100%	1,211	100%

Source: Local Transport Survey

Car availability is highest for 25-44 year olds. Younger people and older people, on the other hand, have the lowest levels of car availability, with 44% and 28% having little or no access to private transport. Women have similar levels of car availability to men, though people with illness and people with disabilities are far less likely to

have a car available than able-bodied people. Similarly, car availability is much less likely for lower income groups.

Table 3.4: % Proportion of Co. Laois Sub-groups Who Never/Rarely Have a Car Available

	Laois (%)	Average of Four Counties (%)
Age Group		
18-24	44	41
25-44	7	8
45-64	13	10
65+	28	27
Sex		
Male	15	17
Female	15	20
Disability		
Able-bodied	16	15
People with illness/people with disability	28	32
Free Travel Pass?		
Yes	30	32
No	16	14
Medical Card?		
Yes	42	34
No	13	12
AVERAGE	20	18

Source: Local Transport Survey

3.2 Overall Travel Patterns

People with higher levels of access to household cars make more journeys than those with lower levels of access. In Laois, people who rarely/never have a private car available make about 14 trips per week, compared to 17-18 trips for the population generally.

Table 3.5: Weekly Trips Made per Head in Co. Laois

	Laois	Average of Four Counties
All respondents	17.79	16.96
Car available rarely/never	13.91	11.71

Source: Local Transport Survey

The size of the gap in trip making differs by sub-group. Young people in the pilot counties seem to adapt to not having access to a car better than other target groups, as the size of the trip-making gap is smaller (21.3 trips vs 16.9 trips)⁴. For other sub-groups, especially older people and people with illness or disability, lack of access to

⁴ Results for all pilot counties are used because the individual county sample sizes do not allow cross-tabulation to

a car means that individuals are able to make only half, or less than half, the number of trips that those with access to a car are making.

Table 3.6: Impact of Car Availability on Trip Making of Key Target Groups (All Pilot Counties)

Target Group	Weekly Trips Made per Head	
	Car Available Always/Often	Car Available Rarely/Never
Age 18-24	21.26	16.90
Age 65+	12.46	4.61
People with illness/people with disability	15.27	6.07
Medical card holders	15.58	7.00
Free travel pass holders	13.89	5.44

Source: Local Transport Survey

3.3 Types of Journey⁵

Work and education/training journeys are the most important trips for younger people in the pilot counties, followed by sports and social activities. For older people, people with illness and people with disabilities, and lower income groups, shopping trips are highly important, as is visiting friends/relatives. Church-going is also important to older people and to lower income groups.

Table 3.7: % Relative Importance of Journey Purposes for Key Target Groups (All Pilot Counties)

Journey Purpose	Young (18-24)	Older People (65+)	People with Illness/ People with Disability	Medical Card Holders	Free Travel Pass Holders	TOTAL
Work	24%	9%	15%	12%	9%	25%
Training/Education	14%	0%	4%	7%	2%	5%
Food Shopping	9%	26%	17%	19%	23%	14%
Non-food shopping	7%	8%	10%	7%	8%	6%
Personal business	5%	9%	6%	7%	8%	6%
Doctor's appointment	0%	4%	3%	3%	4%	1%
Hospital appointment	0%	1%	1%	1%	1%	0%
Attending day care centre	0%	1%	1%	1%	1%	0%
Children to crèche/school	1%	1%	6%	6%	2%	9%
Visiting someone in hospital	1%	3%	2%	2%	3%	1%
Visiting friends/relatives	12%	10%	11%	10%	10%	9%
Social activities	13%	6%	8%	8%	7%	9%
Sport and recreation	10%	6%	6%	6%	7%	8%
Going to church	4%	17%	8%	10%	15%	7%
Other	1%	0%	1%	1%	1%	1%
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Local Transport Survey

The county town is the most important destination for most journey types. The exceptions to this are food shopping, where all other settlement types are of

⁵ Results for all pilot counties are used because the individual county sample sizes do not allow cross-tabulation to

importance (especially medium-sized towns), and church-going, which is concentrated on smaller towns and villages.

Table 3.8: Destination for Different Journey Types (All Pilot Counties)

Journey Purpose	Settlement Type				
	County Town	Large Town	Medium Town	Small Town	Other
Work	47%	14%	13%	4%	22%
Food shopping	10%	19%	42%	10%	19%
Shop (not specified)	50%	17%	23%	3%	7%
Leisure	73%	13%	-	13%	1%
Visiting friends/relatives	70%	6%	8%	-	16%
Sport	66%	-	-	-	34%
Education/training	48%	19%	11%	6%	16%
Hospital	100%	-	-	-	-
Going to church	-	-	-	23%	77%

Source: Local Transport Survey

3.4 Travel Needs and Attitudes

Around 30-40% of the key target groups in rural Laois have identified evidence of trips that they would like to make but are currently unable to due to lack of suitable transport. This gap is consistent across all pilot counties.

Table 3.9: Incidence of Unmet Demand for Trips in Co. Laois by Key Target Group

Target Group	% Incidence of Unmet Demand for Trips	
	Laois	Average of Four Counties
18-24	41	35
65+	32	37
People with illness/people with disability	34	38
Medical card holders	39	40
Free travel pass holders	34	36

Note: Unmet demand for trips defined as the existence of trips that could not be made due to a lack of suitable transport.

Source: Local Transport Survey

The most strongly favoured type of new transport service in rural Laois (favoured by 29% of respondents) is a pre-booked, direct, door-to-door service, ie a service that is closest in nature to a hackney or taxi service. A direct service with no pre-booking and a nearby stop is also a popular choice, however (favoured by 28% of respondents).

Table 3.10: Likelihood of Using New Services in Co. Laois

Service Description	% Stating They Would 'Very Likely' Use New Service	
	Laois	Average of Four Counties
A. Pre-booked/door-to-door/direct	29	30
B. Pre-booked/nearby stop/direct	15	15
C. No pre-booking/nearby stop/direct	28	26
D. No pre-booking/nearby stop/interchange required	14	13

Source: Local Transport Survey

For a quarter of the rural population across the pilot counties, the cost of the service would greatly affect their willingness to use it, while for the remainder it would not⁶. Attitudes to cost vary little across the target groups, although people with illness and people with disabilities, and lower income groups, appear to be slightly more sensitive to cost.

Table 3.11: Price Sensitivity

Target Group	Extent to Which Fares Would Determine Willingness to Use a New Service (Average of Four Counties)
18-24	27%
65+	26%
People with illness/people with disability	33%
Medical card holders	32%
Free travel pass holders	25%
AVERAGE	25%

Source: Local Transport Survey

3.5 Rural Transport Workshop/Consultations

In order to assess the current rural transport situation in Laois and to determine county-level opinions on future rural transport options, a workshop was held in the county. The workshop was attended by a number of key public sector, local development, community and business representatives, including private transport operators, and this was supplemented by selected bilateral consultations where required. A number of salient points emerged from the discussions:

- the central rural transport issue in Laois is access to services. The types of service for which better access is required include health, shopping, social welfare (eg pensions), social/recreational and other services (eg banking). The

⁶ Results for all pilot counties are used because the individual county sample sizes do not allow cross-tabulation to

people most seriously affected are older people (particularly widows who may never have learned to drive), people with disabilities, people living in isolated areas and those on lower incomes who cannot afford to run a private car;

- existing public transport services are not perceived as meeting the needs of key target groups requiring, for example, door-to-door access or assistance with shopping (eg older people, people with disabilities);
- the scale of the problem in Laois needs to be measured comprehensively at the local level (ie parish, community level) so as to demonstrate what the needs are in different areas of the county;
- the key features of a good rural transport service were identified as accessibility, affordability, efficiency, reliability and punctuality. Some form of subsidy may be required to support this;
- the types of service needed generally lend themselves to a taxi/hackney type, door-to-door operation. Expansion of scheduled public transport services (ie Bus Éireann) is probably not viable, and the answer lies more in the improved utilisation of existing under-utilised capacity (eg school buses);
- a two-tiered approach might be useful. The first tier would transport users from outlying areas to smaller population centres (eg small towns, villages), with the second tier linking these centres to larger centres;
- a key argument is that the free travel pass system should be expanded beyond the public transport system to include a much wider range of taxi/hackney and private bus operators. This could be run on a voucher basis (eg for a set number of weekly round-trips only, such as weekly round-trips to the nearest town or large village, for particular trip purposes) to ensure that it is not abused by those who qualify;
- no strong evidence exists that the solution to the problem lies in greater use of lift giving or car pooling. Indications are that personal pride, declining goodwill and possible insurance implications pose obstacles;
- it should also be recognised that some parts of the county can be better served within the hinterland of some of the major towns outside of Laois;
- planning and co-ordination is essential. National government can play a role through necessary changes to the travel pass system. Local government should focus on maintaining a suitable transport infrastructure (eg roads), while local development and community groups could play a role in identifying specific needs and co-ordinating a service response.

4. Conclusions

4.1 Key Findings

- Laois is a very rural county, and its rural population contains a number of key target groups (ie groups where the availability of a private car for transport is limited) that have a greater need for rural transport services, eg older people, people with disabilities, lower income groups, young people. The main types of journey needs include work, shopping and social activities.
- The county is both small in size and low-lying, with no major physical obstacles to transport and with good links to major centres in surrounding counties. Population densities are low, however, and its rural population is spatially well spread. This means that the availability of rural transport services is an issue for rural dwellers, particularly those in the key target groups.
- While scheduled services provide reasonably good links between certain parts of the county (ie those situated along the main national primary routes), many areas have very little availability of scheduled services. Many rural dwellers in the key target groups therefore have needs that have to be met by non-scheduled services, where available. Most “non-scheduled” capacity in Laois (ie taxis, hackneys, private buses) is based around the main population centres in the county, however.
- Where transport services do exist, there is a general lack of accessible vehicles and accessible infrastructure, prohibiting usage by people with disabilities.
- Those who rarely/never have a car available in Laois make about 14 weekly trips on average, compared to 18 weekly trips for those who have a private car available for transport. Trip-making among older people, people with illness or disability, and lower income groups, without a car available, tends to be even lower, however. These groups would make other trips, were it not for a lack of suitable transport.
- The preferred mode of transport for these target groups is a pre-booked, door-to-door, direct service (ie equivalent to current taxi/hackney operations). A direct service with no pre-booking and a nearby stop is the next preference.

4.2 Unmet Needs in Co. Laois

Table 4.1 gives an estimate of the number of people in rural Laois who have unmet rural transport needs. To arrive at these estimates, a number of steps were taken:

- the Laois population in each of the key target groups – young people, older people, people with illness and people with disabilities, and lower income groups – was identified, based on the results of the 1996 Census of Population and the county rural transport survey conducted as part of this audit;
- the proportion of these target groups who rarely/never have a car available was then estimated using the results from the survey. This figure is used as a proxy for people with unmet needs within the target groups;
- two-thirds of those in the target groups who live in DEDs with a suitable work-type journey or daytime journey opportunity are then removed from the estimate on the basis that their needs are in some way met;
- the survey is also used to remove double-counting (eg older people who are also people with illness/disabilities and/or have a medical card).

Table 4.1: Target Groups with Unmet Needs in Co. Laois

Priority Group	Type of Service	Population	Car Rarely/Never	In DEDs with a Suitable Service Already	People with Unmet Needs
Young people	Daily morning	6,504	1,236 (19%)	203	1,033
Older people	Daytime	6,255	1,681 (27%)	460	1,221
People with illness/people with disability	Daytime	4,321	1,296 (32%)	324*	972
Low income	Daytime	9,178	1,560 (34%)	390	1,170
Daytime with double-counting removed		12,325	3,711 (30%)	967	2,744

* It should be noted that the ability of people with illness or with a disability to avail of transport services may be less than for the other target groups (eg due to lack of wheelchair access). This figure may therefore be conservative.

Source: Derived from CSO Census of Population/Local Transport Survey

It is estimated that there are nearly 3,800 people living in rural Laois who have unmet rural transport needs (based on the 1996 Census). The target groups with the greatest needs are older people, lower income groups, young people and people with illness or with a disability. In each of these groups, it is estimated that around 1,000 people in Laois need some form of rural transport service provided.

Annex 1 GIS Maps