

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

Westmeath County Report

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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 Westmeath. 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 Westmeath. Chapter 4 summarises key findings and draws conclusions in relation to rural passenger transport services in the county.

1.2 Topography

Westmeath, with a total area of 1,840 km², is one of Ireland's smaller counties. It is the most centrally located county in Ireland and a number of the country's primary road and rail routes pass through the county. It is predominantly low lying. While the Shannon constitutes a natural barrier to the west, topography does not present a significant obstacle to transport infrastructure and accessibility.

1.3 Socio-economic Profile

Co. Westmeath had a population of over 63,000 in 1996. Its population increased by 2.3% since 1991, and the county accounts for about 1.7% of the total national population. It is not as rural as some neighbouring counties, though over 55% of the population lives in rural areas. Population density is 34 persons per km², with rural population density at 20 persons per km² (somewhat lower than the average for rural areas nationally).

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

	County Westmeath	Rural Westmeath	STATE
Population (1996)	63,314	35,122	3,629,860
Overall population density (per km ²)	34.43	-	51.65
Rural population density (per km ²)	-	19.84	21.81
% population aged over 65	11.8%	12.4%	11.4%
- % male	44.0%	47.3%	42.8%
- % female	56.0%	52.7%	57.2%
% population aged 14 or under	24.9%	25.4%	23.7%
% in socio-economic groups A & B	12.7%	10.4%	11.6%
% in socio-economic group G	8.0%	8.7%	5.8%
% in socio-economic groups I & J	12.7%	21.7%	8.2%
% of population with third level education	10.6%	9.0%	12.7%
% of population with access to a car (1991 Census)	68.9%	75.7%	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

The proportion of the Westmeath population as a whole aged over 65 (11.8%) is marginally higher than the national average (11.4%). The proportion of the rural population in this age group is somewhat greater. The percentage of males aged 65+, meanwhile, is much greater than the national average, particularly in rural areas.

The population aged 14 or under, at 25%, is marginally higher than the national average (24%). A slightly higher proportion of rural dwellers falls into this age group.

There is a broad spread of young people throughout Westmeath (see Map 1.1). The older population is proportionately higher in the north and south-west of the county, however (see Map 1.2). Population profiles are noticeably younger along the Co. Westmeath stretch of the N4.

Although the population engaged in farming (12.7%) is higher than the national average, it is much lower than in the other three pilot counties (Kerry, Laois, Mayo). The population classified as “employers and managers” and “higher professionals” is also slightly higher than the national average – 12.7% compared to 11.6%. The percentage of the rural population in these groups is somewhat lower (11.4%), but is higher than for rural areas in other pilot counties.

Unemployment levels are highest in the north and east of the county (see Map 1.3). Unemployment is lower in the south, and around Athlone/Mullingar.

1.4 Spatial Structure

Table 1.2 provides an indicative hierarchy of settlements in Westmeath. Mullingar is the county town, with a population of 8,040 (this refers to the two urban DEDs of Mullingar, ie excluding environs). Athlone is slightly bigger than Mullingar, and is regarded as a county and indeed regional industrial and economic centre. From a Westmeath spatial perspective, however, Athlone is not centrally located and much of its hinterland is in counties Roscommon and Offaly.

Westmeath’s third town is Moate, while other smaller towns in the county include Castlepollard, Rochfortbridge, Kilbeggan and Kinnegad. Many towns in Westmeath have experienced high rates of population increase since the 1996 census, with large numbers of new residents commuting to Dublin for work purposes.

Table 1.2: Hierarchy of Settlements in Co. Westmeath

A.	B.	C.	D.
Mullingar	Athlone	Moate*	Castlepollard Rochfortbridge Kilbeggan Kinnegad Tyrrellspass Killucan Delvin Clonmellon Ballynacargy Raharney Collinstown Glasson

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.

The county is relatively well served by major road routes. Two national primary routes pass through Westmeath – the N4 Dublin-Sligo route passes through

Mullingar and the N6 Dublin-Galway route passes through Athlone. Important national secondary routes serving the county include the N52 Mullingar-Nenagh route, the N55 Athlone-Cavan route and the N80 Moate-Enniscorthy route. The rail network also serves the county at Athlone and Mullingar.

Table 1.3: Spatial Context of Co. Westmeath

	County Westmeath	State
Area (km ²)	1,839	70,273
Kilometres of National Primary Roads:		
- per 100 km ²	5.25	3.73
- per 100 residents	0.15	0.07
Kilometres of National Secondary Roads:		
- per 100 km ²	4.58	3.81
- per 100 residents	0.13	0.07

Source: Derived from CSO/National Roads Authority

1.5 Transportation Overview

Private car ownership in Westmeath is marginally higher than the national average, at 36 cars per 100 residents. The total number of private cars in the county is almost 23,000, with 28,000 people (44% of the population) holding full driving licences.

The number of privately-owned public service vehicles is 304, 30% greater than in nearby Laois. There are 51 school transport vehicles in the county. The number of school transport vehicles in the county is greater than in Laois, though the total number of primary and post primary school transport routes is lower.

The combined number of Bus Éireann Expressway and local routes is 15. In addition, there are 17 private licensed bus routes in the county.

Table 1.4: Baseline Transport Statistics

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

2. Audit of Existing Services

2.1 Scheduled Services

2.1.1 Description of Bus and Rail Services

There are 17 scheduled Bus Éireann services operating in Westmeath, 13 Expressway services and four local services. The Expressway service is substantially greater than in other similar sized counties because of Westmeath's central location. Athlone is a major national transportation hub, with a number of east-west and north-south bus services passing through the town. The Dublin-Galway route has 14 daily week-day services, for example, and it serves Athlone, Kinnegad, Milltownpass, Rochfortbridge, Tyrellspass, Kilbeggan, Horesleap and Moate. Other services, such as Dublin-Tuam and Dublin-Athlone-Westport, serve the same route.

The Dublin-Sligo and the Dublin-Ballina services operate on the N4 via Mullingar, and serve the north-west of the county. These services also have a relatively high frequency, with other points served on the route being Ballinafid and Rathowen. Furthermore, the north-south routes linking Derry/Belfast with Athlone and the south and west of the country provide a number of other frequent services from Athlone.

There are four local Bus Éireann routes in the county. Two of these have been set up in recent years and originated as community-developed transport schemes. Both are one day a week services operated with a Bus Éireann vehicle and a part-time school bus driver. The Finea-Castlepollard-Mullingar service is a "hail-and-ride" service that operates on Thursdays and includes Mullingar hospital in its itinerary. The Shandonagh-Ballynacargy-Mullingar route operates on Fridays only. A local Bus Éireann service operating on Saturdays also links Athlone to Longford and serves Glasson. In addition, there is a Bus Éireann local service operating on week-days between Athlone and Sligo.

A fifth local route is operated by Bus Éireann and Longford Community Resources Ltd., and is promoted in conjunction with the Midland Health Board. This service is

specifically focused on providing access to hospitals in Tullamore/Mullingar for those living between Longford town and Tullamore. Towns and villages in Westmeath on this route include Rathowen, Mullingar, Ballinea, Dysart, Castletowngeoghan and Kilbeggan. The frequency is one return service each week-day.

In addition to Bus Éireann's scheduled services, a number of private scheduled daily bus services operate the Dublin-Galway and Dublin-Ballina/Sligo routes, making a number of stops in Westmeath. While the majority of other private routes provide school or weekend college transport, though there are a small number that provide daily services to Dublin.

Both of Westmeath's main towns, Mullingar and Athlone, are on the national rail network. Mullingar is the only Westmeath stop on the Dublin-Sligo line, while Athlone is the only stop on the Dublin-Galway/Dublin-Westport routes. There are three return daily week-day services on the Dublin-Westport line, and nine on the Dublin-Galway line. The Dublin-Sligo line has three daily week-day services. The Mullingar-Dublin line is also serviced by suburban rail services, of which there are four.

Free Travel Passes are accepted on all Bus Éireann and Iarnród Éireann services. According to the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs' database of private transport operators participating in the scheme, there are two private operators in Westmeath accepting Free Travel Passes. Over 11,000 people, or 18% of the population, are eligible for a Free Travel Pass (slightly above the national average). About 2,300 Free Travel Pass holders (21%) qualify for invalidity or disability reasons.

Table 2.2: Free Travel Pass Holders in Co. Westmeath

	County Westmeath	County Laois*	State
Number of free travel pass holders	11,090	8,295	586,363
Number of free travel pass holders (per 100 residents)	17.52	15.66	16.15
Number of free travel pass holders qualifying through receipt of invalidity pension or disability allowances/(% of total)	2,297 (20.7%)	1,719 (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, Westmeath is reasonably 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 60% of the population live in DEDs that are served by some form of scheduled service, compared to 63% in Kerry and 66% in Mayo (two much larger counties). The proportion of the population with access to services that can facilitate transport for work/training opportunities, however, is 18%, similar to Mayo but lower than both Kerry and Laois. The county's extensive Expressway links, therefore, do not provide as much scheduled morning and evening peak-time service.

Table 2.1: % 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

Maps 2.3-2.5 attempt to quantify the extent to which the needs of particular target groups are being met by existing scheduled services. Service accessibility is still an issue for key target groups (eg older people, the unemployed). In Westmeath, scheduled services to education/training facilities are less available to 15-24 year olds in the south and west of the county, for example. Likewise, many older people and unemployed across Westmeath do not have access to a scheduled daytime service to the major towns.

2.1.3 Other Scheduled Services

There are 81 Department of Education licensed school bus routes in Westmeath, 35 post-primary and 46 primary routes. Over half of all school transport vehicles are owned by Bus Éireann, with the remainder owned by sub-contractors.

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

Table 2.1: School Transport Routes in Co. Westmeath

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

2.2 Non-scheduled Services

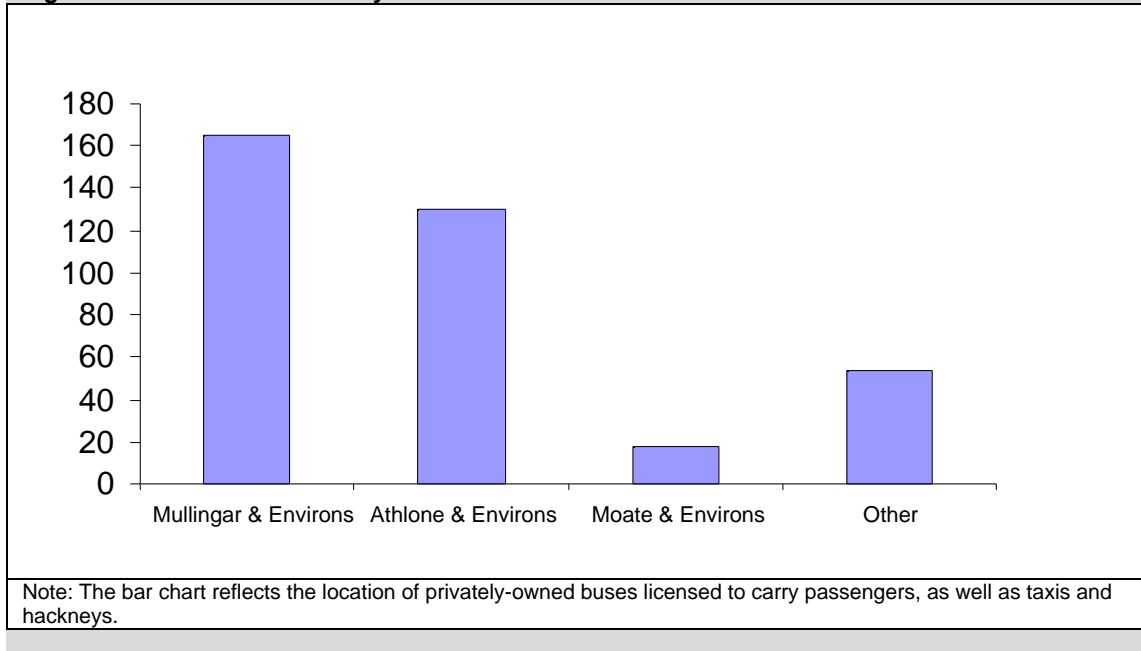
There are 367 privately-owned public service vehicles (ie taxis, hackneys and private buses) operating in Westmeath. This includes 270 taxis/hackneys and 97 private buses. On a per capita and per unit area basis, this compares favourably with the national average and with capacity in other pilot counties (it has the most taxis/hackneys per capita of any of the four pilots). Average private bus fleet size is 3.1 vehicles, but only a small number of operators have more than five vehicles.

Table 2.3: Privately-owned Public Service Vehicles in Co. Westmeath

	County Westmeath	County Laois*	State
Number of hackneys and taxis:	270	136	13,076
- per 100 km ²	14.67	7.91	18.61
- per 100 residents	0.43	0.26	0.36
Number of private licensed bus operators	31	39	-
Number of private licensed buses:	97	93	-
- per 100 km ²	5.27	5.41	-
- per 100 residents	0.15	0.18	-
Average fleet size of private licensed bus operators	3.1	2.4	-
Number of privately-owned public service vehicles [†]	367	229	-
* A similar pilot county for rural transport audit.			
† Taxis, hackneys and buses combined.			

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

About 80% of all privately-owned public service vehicles are based in either Athlone or Mullingar. Therefore, very few public transport vehicles, whether taxis, hackneys or private buses, are based in smaller towns or rural areas.

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

The Midland Health Board is involved in the provision of non-scheduled transport. This mainly involves transporting patients between hospitals in the Health Board area, and transporting foster children between homes etc. The Health Board operates a tendering list of 4-5 operators. A separate contractor also provides a specialised flexible taxi service to the Dublin hospitals for dialysis patients. FÁS also has an involvement in transport in the area. It provides transport for people attending the FÁS Training Centre in Athlone, through contracting private transport operators. FÁS does not operate its own vehicles.

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 Westmeath, 9% of the sample respondents live in households with no car, whilst over half live in households with two or more vehicles. This compares favourably with the other pilot counties (Kerry, Laois and Mayo).

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

	Westmeath		Average of Four Counties	
	Number	%	Number	%
0	28	9%	121	9%
1	107	35%	482	37%
2	133	43%	517	40%
3+	40	13%	172	13%
TOTAL		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 25% live in households with no car;
- people with illness and people with disabilities³, where 23% live in households with no car;
- lower income groups (using medical card holders as a proxy), where 32% live in households with no car.

² A total of 1,955 survey forms were mailed out to individuals in rural Westmeath DEDs. Individuals were sampled systematically from the electoral register database. The analysis is based upon 315 completed forms - a response rate of 16.1%. 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 Westmeath.

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

	Westmeath (%)	Average of Four Counties (%)
Age Group		
18-24	4	4
25-44	5	4
45-64	6	6
65+	25	27
Sex		
Male	10	8
Female	8	11
Disability		
Able-bodied	7	6
People with illness/people with disability	23	30
Free Travel Pass?		
Yes	32	31
No	4	4
Medical Card?		
Yes	32	27
No	4	3
AVERAGE	10	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 therefore be unavailable to other members of the household during the main part of the day. Around 13% of the rural population of Westmeath report that they “rarely” or “never” have a car available for their personal use. This is less than the average across the pilot counties.

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

	Westmeath		Average of 4 Counties	
	Number	%	Number	%
Always	213	76%	851	70%
Often	29	10%	145	12%
Rarely	21	7%	105	9%
Never	18	6%	110	9%
TOTAL	280	100%	1,211	100%

Source: Local Transport Survey

Car availability is highest for 45-64 year olds. Lower income groups, young people and older people have the lowest levels of car availability, with 34%, 22% and 23% respectively having little or no access to private transport. For 18-24 year olds, car availability is higher than the average for the pilot counties, however. People with

illness or with a disability are less likely to have a car available than are able-bodied people, though the gap between them is much lower than in other pilot counties.

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

	Westmeath (%)	Average of Four Counties (%)
Age Group		
18-24	22	41
25-44	10	8
45-64	7	10
65+	23	27
Sex		
Male	11	17
Female	16	20
Disability		
Able-bodied	11	15
People with illness/people with disability	17	32
Free Travel Pass?		
Yes	35	32
No	8	14
Medical Card?		
Yes	34	34
No	10	12
AVERAGE	14	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 Westmeath, people who rarely/never have a private car available make about seven trips per week, compared to 16-17 trips for the population generally. This gap appears to be more pronounced than for the other pilot counties.

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

	Westmeath	Average of Four Counties
All respondents	16.69	16.96
Car available rarely/never	6.99	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 v. 16.9 trips)⁴. For other sub-

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

groups, especially older people and people with illness or with a disability, lack of access 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, including Westmeath, followed by sports and social activities. For older people, people with illness or with a disability, 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

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

The county town is the most important destination for most journey types. The exceptions to this are food shopping, where all other settlement types (especially medium-sized towns) are of importance, 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

Typically more than 40% of the key target groups in rural Westmeath 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, though the level for 18-24 year olds in Westmeath is much lower than for the average of the pilot counties (ie possibly in line with their greater relative access to private cars).

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

Target Group	% Incidence of Unmet Demand for Trips	
	Westmeath	Average of Four Counties
18-24	15	35
65+	42	37
People with illness/people with disability	45	38
Medical card holders	44	40
Free travel pass holders	46	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 Westmeath (30% 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 (24% of respondents).

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

Service Description	% Stating They Would 'Very Likely' Use New Service Westmeath	Average of Four Counties
A. Pre-booked/Door-to-door/Direct	30	30
B. Pre-booked/Nearby stop/Direct	11	15
C. No pre-booking/Nearby stop/Direct	24	26
D. No pre-booking/nearby stop/interchange required	13	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 or with a disability 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 Results of Previous Studies

In 1997 Westmeath Community Development commissioned a report to examine accessibility and mobility issues in Co. Westmeath. In particular the study focused on the transport requirements of the Finea/Castlepollard area. A survey of residents in this area found that there was a high level of demand for a transport service between Finea and Mullingar. This service has since been established, in partnership with Bus Éireann.

The majority of the survey respondents indicated that they would use this service at least three days per week, while 25% indicated a need for a daily service. Shopping or personal business purposes were the activities that were listed as being most important for residents in the area. This would appear to be very similar to the

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

information contained in Table 3.7 above, where transport for shopping purposes was found to be the second most important journey purpose.

The survey identified reliability as a critical feature of a proposed service, while acceptance of the bus pass by private transport operators was seen as a high priority. Less than 20% of respondents identified cost as being a priority issue – a finding very similar to that in Table 3.11.

3.6 Rural Transport Workshop/Consultations

To assess the current rural transport situation in Westmeath and to determine county level opinion on future rural transport options, a workshop was held in the county and was attended by a number of key community, public sector and business representatives. The following were the central issues to emerge from the workshop:

- the issue of rural transport is primarily concerned with the provision of access for rural dwellers to services available in urban areas;
- services such as health care, education, training and social and recreation were deemed to be the most important;
- older people, people with disabilities, young people and those unable to afford to own a car were identified as being the groups worst affected by inadequate rural transport services;
- it was felt that the existing services were not frequent enough, did not cover enough routes and lacked flexibility;
- an effective local transport service should allow free travel pass holders to avail of free transport with private bus operators;
- the service should constitute a two pronged approach whereby a dedicated local transport service would collect people living in isolated areas directly from their homes and take them to local villages and a scheduled service would provide access from villages to nearby towns;
- it was felt that some level of government subvention would be required in order for the rural transport services to operate effectively, but customers would be willing to pay a “reasonable amount”;
- the issue needs to be considered in the context of the overall county spatial pattern and in the context of wider transport issues (eg housing and public service locations) and to be planned in conjunction with this.

- there is a need for county and sub-county co-ordination, and for local authorities to get involved in facilitating this.

4. Conclusions

4.1 Key Findings

- Westmeath is a relatively rural county, with an urban structure dominated by Athlone and Mullingar. The rural population contains a number of key target groups (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, unemployed, lower income groups, young people, women.
- The county is both small in size and low-lying, with few major physical obstacles to transport. Population densities are low, however, and the 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.
- Westmeath's central location has resulted in levels of scheduled Expressway services that are greater than in other similar sized counties. These services operate on the national routes passing through the county, and there are a limited number of dedicated pick-up locations. Besides this, there are only limited possibilities for local trip-making in the county based on scheduled services. Many people in the key target groups have needs that would currently be met by non-scheduled services. Most non-scheduled capacity in Westmeath is based around the two 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 Westmeath make a lot less trips on average than those who have a private car available for transport (7.0 v 17.0). This is also lower than for similar groups in the other pilot counties. Unmet demand for trips is higher in Westmeath, however, with 40-50% of key target groups identifying trips which they would otherwise make if suitable transport was available.
- 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. Westmeath

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

- the Westmeath population in each of the key target groups – young people, older people, people with illness or with a disability, 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 also have an illness or a disability and/or have a medical card).

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

Priority Group	Type of Service	Population	Car Rarely/Never	In DEDs with a Suitable Service Already	People with Unmet Needs
Young people	Daily morning	8,873	1,686 (19%)	407	1,279
Older people	Daytime	7,442	2,009 (27%)	967	1,042
People with illness/people with disability	Daytime	2,666	853 (32%)	390*	463
Low income	Daytime	5,427	1,845 (34%)	844	1,001
Daytime with double-counting removed		10,663	3,078 (30%)	1456	1,622

* It should be noted that the ability of people with illness or people with disabilities 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 2,900 people in key target groups living in rural Westmeath who have unmet rural transport needs (based on the 1996 Census). The target groups with the greatest needs are young people, older people, lower income groups and people with illness or with a disability.

Annex 1 GIS Maps