



Demand for Local Link bus grows as service supports isolated communities

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IT'S become an important part of life in rural Clare and demand for the Local Link bus service is growing all the time.

Transport for Ireland (TFI) Local Link Limerick Clare was set up for the express purpose of providing transport to communities within Limerick and Clare.

Local Link took over the running of the Clare service in 2019.

It is a not-for-profit company, one of fifteen Transport Coordination Units for rural transport, funded by the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and administered by the National Transport Authority.

A key principle of the company is to provide innovative community based initiatives for transport services in rural areas with a view to addressing the issue of social exclusion in rural Ireland caused by a lack of access to transport.

And with services expanding across Clare, Local Link have their eye on expansion to meet the different demands of a customers living around the county.

To that end, the service now accepts Leap visitor cards, free travel pass, TFI Go while the recommended 20% reduction in fares has been passed onto Clare passengers.

"It's growing continuously" Anne Gaughan, manager of TFI Local Link Limerick Clare ex-

plains, "In Clare we have five rural regular services that run day to day, Monday to Sunday, sometimes three to four times a day. We have three demand response services, which run daily throughout Clare. And then we have another five that run once or twice a week".

Anne says the service is used by all ages and demographics, highlighting its importance to rural communities and businesses.

"We saw a slight shift in demand after covid. It wasn't so much commuter type passengers - people going to work or college - people were looking to get to their local towns or local facilities. But that demand for commuter type services is still there. So it is very mixed in terms of the demand. We have all demographics of passengers from school kids to people going to work or college. Later on in the afternoons we have mothers with toddlers going into town. We

have people with disabilities. Some routes are busier than others and we try to make sure we have the capacity to deal with that"

A regular and reliable public transport service plays a role in making rural communities more attractive to live and work in.

It can also help with environmental goals such as driving down emissions.

Anne explains, "Before, when people looked at living in isolated areas, they thought 'I'll have to have a car' but with the bus service that is no longer the case. We can accommodate people to get where they need to go".

"We are growing all the time and there is a commitment from the government to invest in rural transport services. The available transport in Clare is expected to increase by 50% over the next few years and we will play our part in that".

"The need is definitely there for the services. The more people see the vehicles out and

about, the more awareness there is and the more people are ringing up and asking us if we stop here or there. Demand response is a big part of what we do and it's about getting to know where the demand is and what people want".

As part of that larger service offering, Local Link is looking at bring-

ing tourists to parts of the county that don't usually benefit from the surge of summer visitors.

"We are going to the beauty spots in Clare and providing access to the Shannon walkways and places like the Vandeleur gardens and Loop Head. We are looking at tying into the big coastal routes that are serviced by Bus Éireann. Not only are we talking about bringing tourists to some of the more well known places in Clare but also bringing them back to towns and villages that maybe they wouldn't normally visit", Anne says.

She continues, "Bus stops are key and they are a bit of an issue but they are earmarked to be addressed for next year. On the higher frequency routes you have the bigger bus stops that Bus Éireann use and in the more demand response routes, the people who live there will know exactly where the bus will stop. It's different, let's say, when you are responding to a tourist, someone who might not know the area well and won't know where the local community centre or church is".

For more information visit <https://www.locallinkclc.ie/> or call 065 6719101.



Calls for more 'social farmers' in Clare

NO TWO days on a farm are the same and it's an experience Clare farmers are being encouraged to share with others.

Social Farming Ireland provides people who use services with the opportunity for inclusion, increased self esteem and better health, by taking part in day to day farm activities on a family farm.

Social Farming Ireland are asking more farms in the banner county to get involved.

Farms in Ennis and Killaloe are currently participating in the nationwide programme funded by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the CEDRA fund.

Eadaoin O'Connell, regional development officer with Social Farming Ireland, south west region, says interest in social farming is growing all the time.

"We have over 120 farms taking part nationally and that is growing every month. In the south west we cover Limerick, Clare, Cork, North Tipperary and Kerry and that includes over 30 farms. It's very active in the region. In Clare we have three social farmers. It's probably one of the areas where we could do with a few more farmers getting involved. In 2022, we brought groups from different counties to

Clare and there was great interest in it".

Social farming also provides an opportunity to diversify the income earning capacity of a farm. According to Social Farming Ireland, sources of funding and payment arrangements vary hugely but there are potential opportunities to make a level of income from social farming enterprises.

Participants can choose to go to the farm from one to five days per week and a typical social farming day begins about 10 in the morning with a cup of tea, a chat and a review of the day's activities.

Every social farm is unique and offers its own mix of activities and opportunities. Equally, participants have an input into the activities they wish to take part in on a given day.

Activities vary from day to day and season to season and can be weather dependent.

Eadaoin explains that Social Farming Ireland works a lot with social care services, disability groups, local schools and newly arrived asylum seekers and refugees who are looking to learn about life on an Irish farm.

She says, "We offer family run farms as a place people can visit, work on and learn about. It's a form of social support. You're

talking about people who maybe have felt isolated from society or cut off or who are vulnerable, or may have been out of work for a while. Social farming gives them an opportunity to meet new people. It's a fun, active way of making a connection with someone in an outdoors setting."

There are benefits, both mental and physical, to spending a day on a busy family farm.

Eadaoin explains, "A big part of the day is just sitting down and having a cup of tea and a chat with new people, making that connection. That social connection is hugely important and it gives those people taking part an opportunity to make new friends. It's an opportunity to expand their social circle. At the same time, there are mental health benefits and it is good for self-esteem. There are a lots and lots of different activities you can do on a farms so these visits are engaging and they're a lot of fun. The groups that take part get an awful lot of enjoyment out of it".

"No day is the same as the next on a farm and that definitely applies here! One of the huge benefits is obviously from a physical health point of view. Farming is a very physical job. You find that out very quickly! But that has

all sorts of other benefits such as improved sleeping patterns. At the same time, you are learning about where our food comes from, growing food and all the health benefits associated with that"

"The big thing in Clare is getting more farms involved. It's something that is growing all the time. The people we have going to farms range in age from 14 to older people in their 70s and 80s. Social farming has a broad appeal and we're looking to meet that interest", Eadaoin adds.

More information available on socialfarmingireland.ie or call (0)71 9641772.

