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“A kick in the teeth for Rural Ireland”

If the aim of the report from An Bord Snip Nua is to cut Government expenditure it has made the wrong recommendation in identifying the Rural Transport Programme as expendable.

Jack Roche, Chairperson of the Rural Transport Network stated that *“It seems ludicrous to axe a programme which has been an outstanding success and has brought a ray of sunshine into the lives of so many people”* he continued to say that *“this recommendation is a kick in the teeth for the many volunteers who have invested so much time and commitment into the programme through 37 non for profit companies nationwide. Almost half a million people in rural Ireland do not have access to transport. The success of this programme was independently verified by a report commissioned by the Department of Transport in 2007.”*

An Bord Snip Nua 's report fails to address the ability of the Rural Transport Programme to feed in to the national transport network which opens up public transport to communities previously excluded. If the commitment to sustainable travel and reducing carbon emissions is genuine the value of Rural Transport must be recognised. Above all, the fact that it succeeds in providing access to essential services for rural communities, creating a lifeline to so many people previously isolated through lack of transport has been totally disregarded.

Without Rural Transport individuals will suffer, rural communities will suffer, we will be at a disadvantage nationally and our obligations to tackle environmental impact and develop sustainable transport through EU agreements will not be met.

The Rural Transport Programme provides access to essential services through cost effective transport. It combats rural isolation and enables people to participate and live independently in rural Ireland. These services make a key contribution to the local economy by supporting and promoting access to vital community services and business.

The Rural Transport Programme has actively sought developing links with other transport operators such as Bus Eireann. Further development of this process will only be possible through an integrated approach to transport at National level.

The findings in the report regarding the Rural Transport Programme are incorrect. The only availability of private sector bus alternatives would involve passengers having to collectively pay the full cost of respective services to local private operators. Obviously Rural Transport Programme passengers cannot afford to do this in the vast majority of cases; if they could, they would have developed these services themselves years ago. Therefore a real alternative is not available as the report suggests.

In addition, the vast majority of regular Rural Transport Programme passengers are not car owners and do not have access to a car owned by a family member or friend. Therefore this is not a reasonable argument. For the small percentage of regular Rural Transport passengers who do have access to a car, we should be continuing to persuade them to leave the car at home and travel on shared affordable and accessible bus services which are more sustainable in the long run, both environmentally and economically. It is bizarre to think that the Government is currently about to roll out funding for Smarter Travel to get people out of cars and yet the report suggests putting regular bus users back into cars again! Rural Ireland is in a state of shock at the blatant anti rural bias of this report, which contradicts existing government policy on so many levels.

It must be understood that the people of rural Ireland will strenuously resist axing a service, which is justly theirs

The Rural Transport Network prepared this press release

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