

Maximising Mobility and Access to Services IN RURAL REGIONS

A Policy Guideline

Demographic change and limited public funding in remote rural areas threaten the accessibility of goods and social services in many countries in the Baltic Sea Region (BSR). The MAMBA project aims to meet this challenge by promoting sustainable “people-to-service” and “service-to-people” solutions in rural areas.

Our project partners work together to improve local provision by integrating innovative solutions like community buses, Mobility as a Service (MaaS) and ride-sharing applications to the already existing mobility and service provision structures, and by creating new social projects — such as a rural co-working space and a social counselling service.

The availability of good quality mobility options is essential for the rural economy. It provides access to goods and services, to a range of workplaces, and also to social and cultural life. The main challenges to the provision of a reliable transport system in rural areas are:

- Higher service costs for operating in a wider area with a sparse population
- Additional need for public funding because of fewer passengers and fewer earnings on ticket sales
- An increased need for accessible solutions for elderly people
- A decline in population (demographic change), which leads to lower demand for public transport services.

Some of these regions also face economic downturn because of their remoteness and as a result of dependency on an efficient transport system — something which, in practice, they do not have at the moment.

Extensive changes will be needed to the way we understand and plan mobility if we are to find solutions to the mobility and accessibility problems in rural areas, e.g. changes to traffic management, modality, funding and legislation.

These guidelines seek to provide feasible policy recommendations for national, regional and local government bodies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and transport service providers. They offer insights into overcoming legal, financial and governance obstacles to rural transport solutions, and aim to improve and maximise both mobility and access to services in rural regions. They are based on what has been learned



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during the three-year project in the nine regions involved, who have tested pilot schemes and established mobility centres. The pilot actions were part of the MAMBA project co-funded by the Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme and included legislative, economic and social analyses.

The main recommendations for maximising mobility and access to services in rural areas are:

1. Develop long-term mobility planning tools
2. Improve social inclusion and access to services
3. Try out innovative solutions using smaller vehicles
4. Support grassroots initiatives
5. Combine trips to save resources
6. Establish conditions that guarantee mobility
7. Make mobility-related procurement easier in rural areas
8. Take risks and come up with innovative solutions
9. Go digital.

“ The #ArtofPublicTransport for me is about providing mobility for all: the rich and the poor, the healthy and disabled, the elderly and the young, women and men, the daily commuter and the occasional traveler, the student and the worker.

Mohamed Mezghani, UITP Secretary General

1. Develop long-term mobility planning tools

Lack of mobility in rural areas affects their development and economy, including present and future employment prospects. Mobility is also key to improving the quality of life in these regions, enabling people to access public services such as education, health and social services; travel to work or seek employment; take part in leisure activities; visit relatives and friends; buy goods and services and exercise the right to travel freely over greater distances. Due to the remoteness of some regions, local markets are limited, do not attract people and do not create sufficient job opportunities. On the other hand, lack of labour mobility creates difficulties for people who want or need to stay in the area, and this increases the overall unemployment rate.

To tackle this problem, Sustainable, long-term mobility programmes need to be drawn up to ensure mobility for people and business, taking into account the distances to particular sites and their accessibility as factors in assuring a better quality of life for the region overall. Official bodies at various levels, along with NGOs and CSOs, should be involved in the development of these programmes to ensure a full and comprehensive response to identified needs of the population, including different minorities. Long-term mobility programmes should be developed based on similar factors, including population density, types of existing public transport services available in the area, revenue per kilometre, income level of the population and

“ In order to create safer and more secure environments, we need a systemic change. We to look at the transport system in a holistic way.

Anne Berner, Minister of Transport and Communications, Finland

distances to essential services. Based on these factors the needs for public transport can be identified.

Some countries in the BSR, e.g. Germany, have succeeded in developing mobility planning tools. But their development and regular renewal are not mandatory for cities or municipalities. But their nature is mostly not legally binding, which can lead to problems in the implementation of mobility solutions. An obligation to regularly update the mobility plans can ensure flexibility and enable mobility providers to react to the changing needs of the population. In Germany, representatives of disabled people must be included in the public consultation process for such planning processes, so their needs will be considered thoroughly.

Regional and local authorities should be encouraged by legal or financial incentives, to work together and combine service offers, e.g. by bringing medical services directly to people, providing services across municipal boundaries and facilitating effective funding.

2. Improve social inclusion and access to services

Long-term mobility development programmes should always incorporate appropriate measures to enable people with disabilities, and the elderly, to live independently, participate in all areas of life and have access to the world around them — as well as transport, information, communication and other facilities or services open to the public. This applies especially to rural areas, where these important resources are sparse, and often spread out across a wide area.

As mentioned above, Germany has already made good progress, including representation for disabled people in the public transport planning process, which became a legal obligation for providers. The country aims for public transport to be



Trelleborg Municipality arranges bus trips for older people in rural areas as an event per se, in order to foster social interaction among participants. Source: Niclas Ivarsson.

fully accessible by 2022, following the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Other activities that improve accessibility should include the development of simple, multi-service information and communication technology (ICT) facilities. When developing accessible services, it can be particularly valuable to involve NGOs and CSOs, because they often bring a unique user-centred perspective. The pilot service organised by Diakonie Schleswig-Holstein is one example of a successful mobility solution in which a key element of managing the process and its organisation was entrusted to a collaboration between an NGO and the municipality.

But meeting the mobility needs of rural populations is obviously not the only way to bring those areas back to life. The Diakonie of Schleswig-Holstein also set up a mobile social counselling service as a pilot scheme. It aims to support sustainable, long-term counselling services in Schleswig-Holstein's rural regions. The Municipality of Trelleborg in Sweden has run a social pilot and offered excursions for elderly people, which addressed the issue of social isolation in the sparsely populated region. These initiatives need funding and staff.

3. Try out innovative solutions using smaller vehicles

Setting up customised mobility services is a way of addressing the situation in sparsely populated areas where transport services are either occasional or non-existent. These services could include:

- Transport-on-Demand (ToD) as part of the public transport system, with buses running on the route (or part of it) when requested. The on-demand aspect helps providers avoid running empty buses,
- Flexible, door-to-door services organised by municipalities,
- Rural car-pooling schemes (a "village car"),
- Combined mobility, using passenger transport options for deliveries and vice-versa,
- Service-to-people and people-to-service transport.

Such services should preferably be run by local authorities (by including it in the public transport system) or regional authorities. Introducing on-demand or rural car-pooling services can maintain access to transport services in sparsely populated areas of the county/municipality, particularly in situations where demand for regular transport is relatively low and irregular. When implementing one of the types of service outlined above, it is advisable to seek funding from the national government, the local authority or a combination of the two.

User payments (buying tickets and partially or fully reimbursing costs) should only be considered if national/municipal co-funding can be maintained because people's ability to pay can be relatively low in rural areas.

One way to involve the private sector in mobility issues is to choose the model carefully – e.g. combining passenger transport with a delivery service. Tax incentives can also help. Among the best examples of effective cooperation between various stakeholders are the MAMBA pilot projects in the Vidzeme Planning Region (Latvia), in the Bielsko District (Poland) and in the County of Cuxhaven (Germany).



*Vidzeme region ran a **transport-on-demand** pilot project, which could actually become part of the public passenger transport model in Latvia. The service comprises a mobility solution based on passengers' needs, is environmentally friendly, economically viable and reduces the total cost to national and local governments while meeting an identified group of people's mobility needs.*

Public transport in rural areas often caters for small numbers of passengers. The lower the profitability, the higher the public subsidies needed to maintain the service, and because national and municipal budgets are insufficient to compensate for losses, routes in sparsely populated rural areas are having to be cancelled more and more often. This decline in public transport in rural areas limits access to local and national services, which are often centralised in larger cities.

Providing public transport using smaller vehicles, e.g. five or nine-seater passenger vehicles can save a lot of money in rural regions because there are usually not enough passengers to fill a larger bus. In addition to the financial benefits, smaller vehicles also have environmental benefits. In some countries in the BSR, passenger cars do not qualify as public transport vehicles. However, regulatory changes like those taking place in Latvia, mean that the use of passenger cars for public transport could now become an option.

4. Support grassroots initiatives

In areas with very few mobility options, locals may take it into their own hands to bring about change. These "bottom-up" initiatives rarely have a commercial motivation. They are more a case of boosting local communities and helping people who cannot drive because of their age (too old or too young), inability or lack of money. However, these types of initiatives often face legal and financial problems because of their informal and non-commercial nature – something that does not fit well with a strict regulatory framework for passenger transport.

Possible solutions for supporting grassroots initiatives include:

- Provide more legal options for revenue generation or reimbursing community buses,
- Create opportunities to share resources and know-how with existing transport companies,

CASE STUDY



County of Cuxhaven, Germany: A rural car-sharing service, known as "the village car". This pilot project involves the creation of an association- or cooperative-based car-sharing service. It could also be described as a voluntary shuttle-service which aims to increase access to and from rural areas with a decreasing population density. Source: Landkreis Cuxhaven.



Source: Christian Wiediger/Unsplash.

- Support them with local government funding, resources and information,
- Ease up on the rules for public transport permits for small and non-commercial bus schemes in rural areas,
- Create more legal opportunities for the provision of innovative mobility solutions.

Citizen-based initiatives are often a good start in revitalising rural areas. They are cheaper than regular public transport because the drivers are volunteers. However, the public sector should not rely on volunteers alone because it is difficult to provide a reliable service if for instance drivers are sick or simply too old to do it anymore. It is important to remember that public transport is a government duty, so the long-term goal of re-establishing a public transport system should still be pursued.

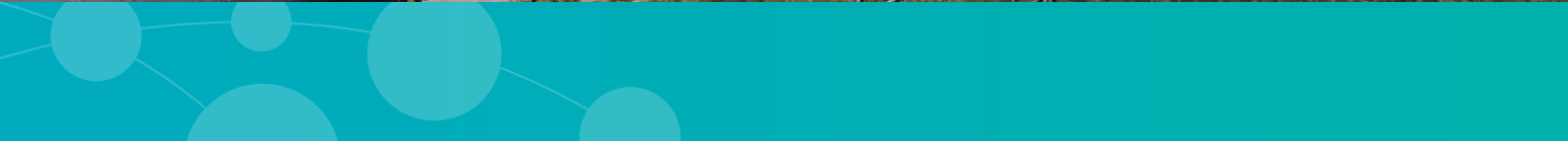
5. Combine trips to save resources

Another option to lower the costs of mobility in rural areas is to combine modes of transport. For example, services can be combined by using existing public transport to carry goods, including buses in remote areas. Conversely, delivery or other services could start to carry passengers. However, none of this is possible without a solid **legal basis for the combined transport of goods and people**.

The strict regulation of passenger transport forbids the combination of different modes of transport in many countries throughout the BSR. This makes it difficult to get combined transport initiatives off the ground because they are usually not legally eligible for transport permits. In practice, this means the service cannot be offered



Source: Rafelia Kurniawan/Unsplash.



against payment, and so there is no financial incentive for service providers. The need for additional passenger insurance in some countries is also a prohibitive factor.

Commercial carriage of groceries on public transport is mainly limited by hygiene laws. The use of public resources for such purposes is often limited by procurement law, too. The MAMBA pilot in Trelleborg, which tried to use public school buses for other trips, had to reconsider its approach when it faced this obstacle.

Possible solutions making combined mobility options more readily available include:

- Create legal incentives for service providers to carry passengers, e.g. tax cuts or compensation,
- Allow small-scale commercial services to recover their costs without the need to acquire a passenger transport licence,
- Create legal options for commercial services to acquire passenger licences for different modes of transport.

6. Establish conditions that guarantee mobility

In several countries of the BSR the law clearly states that public transport also fulfils a social function, and that passenger transport should be available in sparsely populated areas and on routes where – under competitive conditions – it would not be possible at reasonable prices. This is known as the state's **public service obligation**.

To fulfill this obligation, the first step would be to develop a minimum level of guaranteed local public transport provision to meet the demand arising from mobility needs of the population. Its assessment can be based on the actual demand for public transport, the intensity and regularity of services required on the route network, the volume and quality of the services and the economic viability of the transport system, which can be based on economic performance and passenger flow.

To ensure a sense of stability, it is important that the service will be offered on a daily basis. Transport should at least be available on working days offering the flexibility to adapt to the population's needs. For example, the service should fit

with the working hours and days of an average employee and adapt to changes in working time. At an EU level, further criteria can be laid down, in addition to *Regulation (EC) No 1370/2007 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 October 2007 on public passenger transport services by rail and by road and repealing Council Regulations (EEC) Nos 1191/69 and 1107/70*, to ensure a common understanding of the criteria for a minimum of guaranteed mobility across the European Union.

Since the state is responsible for providing public transport, the next step could be establish complete guaranteed mobility services. In urban areas, access to public transport at any time of the day may seem common. But people in rural areas do not have the same access to public transport offers. Therefore, we have to think about new ways of creating equal access to mobility for all – in the countryside as well as in the towns and cities. ToD and ride-pooling solutions using smaller vehicles can both play an important role in attaining this goal and should be integrated into the public transport system and made eligible for public funding.



Source: Mak/Unsplash.



Source: Manki Kim/Unsplash.

7. Make mobility-related procurement easier in rural areas

In general, rural mobility solutions in the countries of the BSR are funded through public funding, with calls for procurement from service providers. The purpose of the regulatory framework for public procurement is to guarantee an open and transparent process, free competition between suppliers, equal and fair treatment, and the effective use of the contracting authorities' funds. However, in the field of public procurement, it is more and more evident that the actual process often fails to achieve these key objectives. Resources are spent on organising the procedure, but supplier interest is usually low, especially in less profitable rural areas. It also needs to be recognised that suppliers in sparsely populated areas are usually required to make huge financial contributions to the preparation of their tenders and additional specialists may need to be involved in order to draw up the documentation specified.

A new public procurement framework is needed. This would greatly improve the process for suppliers and customers alike. Procurement thresholds for government or municipal services need to be reduced or removed so that mobility solutions (ones which currently require procurement) can be made available in rural areas. As one way of ensuring competition and transparency, reducing public or municipal spending and supporting the efficient use of funds, *Directive 2014/24/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 February 2014 on public procurement and repealing Directive 2004/18/EC* should provide for a simplified price comparison (quotation) procedure, in which the invitation to submit a tender would be sent to at least two or three potential service providers. This ensures competition and the efficient use of resources while reducing the administrative burden on service providers (without losing the element of competitiveness).

8. Experiment with innovative solutions

In many of the countries in the BSR, the possibilities of trying out innovative mobility solutions are limited because of strict passenger transport laws. The transport sector as such is highly and tightly regulated, with national, regional, local and private regulation running alongside that of the European Union. At the same time, adopting changes to legislation can be a lengthy process – one that does not allow for rapid responses to citizens' needs.

Often, a new service has to integrate with pre-defined types of transport (buses, taxis, car rental), and there are rules associated with each classification, which define the boundaries within

which the solution has to operate. This can cause problems for new solutions, such as Transport-on-Demand. If they do not fit into the criteria of a certain type of mobility, they will not be granted permission to provide passenger transport services.

Possible ways of encouraging experimentation with innovative solutions include:

- Options to try out new solutions via experimental clauses in legislation
- Planning and control tools for municipalities when dealing with private innovative mobility solutions, ensuring they are not a threat to the existing public transport system,
- Options to integrate experimental mobility classifications retrospectively into the traffic and regulatory network once they have proven useful.



Source: Nazar Sharafutdinov/Unsplash.



Source: Chapman Chow/Unsplash.



9. Go digital

The mobility centres set up as part of MAMBA are platforms that provide local people with an overview of the available mobility services — in some cases also to order ToD or car pooling rides as required. In Vejle and the South Denmark region or in the Eastern Finish region of Joensuu, user-friendly mobile apps were developed. These digital mobility centres made it possible to integrate existing mobility options on a single platform and made information about options comprehensive and more easily accessible.

Policymakers should definitely support the establishment of new, integrated mobility platforms, since they can provide flexible, efficient and climate friendly mobility solutions. The Finnish Legislator has already taken a first step toward defining regulatory obligations on all mobility service providers. At a minimum, they should provide essential data, including information about routes, stops, timetables, prices, availability and accessibility. This data must be freely available from an open interface information system in a standardised, easy to edit, ICT-readable format. Such infor-

mation can become a starting point for developing a nationwide mobility platform, to which a booking system can then be added. At a later stage, this system could work as a MaaS system, if the booking of the entire travel, using a combination of different mobility services like bus, train or rental bike, in only one step is made possible.

In Finnish law, the interoperability of ticket and payment systems has also been introduced as a criterion in public procurement procedures. Through this step, the parliament tied a requirement for open interfaces directly to financial consequences.

Possible ways of supporting the digitalisation of mobility offers include:

- Improve legislation for digital mobility platforms, with Finland as a best practice example,
- Set out general technical requirements for open interfaces,
- Build a national mobility platform and develop a MaaS system in the future,
- Regulate data-based mobility services as a part of the passenger transport law.



Source: Victor Ene/Unsplash.



Source: Clay Banks/Unsplash.

Key lessons learned from the MAMBA project

Develop long-term mobility planning tools. Mandatory mobility planning programmes should be established for people living in areas with low population density in order to guarantee their mobility.

Improve social inclusion and access to services. People with disabilities and the elderly should be included in the planning of new mobility services. Rural areas can also profit from new social services.

Try out innovative solutions using smaller vehicles. To avoid empty buses, and to operate according to demand, smaller vehicles and mobility solutions are worth exploring. The introduction of a flexible approach in sparsely populated areas provides an opportunity to ensure accessibility where otherwise the service would not be available at all.

Support grassroots initiatives. The first step to revitalise public transport, or to offer new social services in rural areas can be grassroots initiatives. Provide volunteers with information, guidance and resources, but bear in mind that public transport is fundamentally a task for the state.

Combine trips to save resources. To use the few available resources effectively, find ways to combine the transport of goods and people – and create legal solutions to enable this!

Establish conditions that guarantee mobility. To ensure equal living standards in urban and rural areas, the an important step is to revitalise the rural public transport system and develop a framework for determining the minimum for a guaranteed, local public transport service.

Make mobility-related procurement easier in rural areas. To save resources and to reduce the administrative burden on service providers (while still guaranteeing competition), the procurement process in rural areas with few competitors should be simplified to a price comparison (quotation) procedure, in which the invitation to submit a tender would be sent to at least two to three potential service providers.

Take risks and come up with innovative solutions. Experimental clauses in public transport legislation can offer the freedom to explore new ideas within a legitimate legal framework.

Go digital. Find ways to provide citizens with information, combining the already existing mobility offers and make it easy to buy tickets for all of them. Digital apps can also play a large role in establishing a MaaS system with ToD elements.

Work together. The issue of rural mobility and accessibility of services should be addressed by representatives of national, regional and local governments, NGOs and CSOs, and the private sector. Therefore necessary formats and structures should be established and a culture of collaboration should be fostered.

Share what you learn. Since it is important to support each other and to share knowledge and experiences concerning new mobility solutions in rural areas, we have set up a database at: <https://www.mambaproject.eu/database/>.



Source: Raitis Lapans.

MAMBA

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About this guidance document:

These guidelines are based on the pilot actions implemented during the MAMBA project, including legislative, economic and socio-cultural analyses. This document shall assist policy-makers, government ministries, transport service providers and municipalities when working on mobility solutions in rural areas, and encourage all stakeholders to become more open to alternative transport solutions and to expand their traditional services.

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