ERMN
European Rural
Mobility Network

Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) Explained: From Concept to Daily Operation

SUMMARY REPORT

10th March 2026 | 11:00 – 12:30 CET

Online

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Event: ERMN 2nd webinar — Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) in rural areas, 10th March 2026.
- Attendance: ~80 participants from across Europe (highest representation from Czechia and Germany). Stakeholders included local authorities, LAGs, consultants, transport operators, universities, and institutions.
- Purpose: To showcase practical DRT implementations and lessons for scaling flexible rural mobility solutions.
- Key case studies:
    - Germany (Bürgerbus Kusel): volunteer-run DRT with strong social benefits; digital platform for bookings; human contact essential for inclusivity.
    - Italy (MOM Plus, ValdoBus): pilot DRT replacing off-peak fixed services and seasonal tourist DRT; hybrid fixed/on-demand overlap caused user confusion.
    - Ireland (TFI Local Link Mayo, TFI Anseo): zone-based app DRT in rural island/peninsula; increased ridership and social benefits; infrastructure and connectivity constraints are challenges.
- Cross-cutting lessons:
    - DRT complements fixed-route services and is effective in low-density contexts and first/last-mile roles.
    - Human interface (phone/call support) remains critical to avoid digital exclusion.
    - Clear positioning (replacement vs supplement) avoids user confusion; avoid running both service types simultaneously without clarity.
    - Data from app-based systems supports planning but needs community outreach for adoption.
- Next steps:
    - Next webinar: funding and financing rural mobility (23rd of June 2026).
    - ERMN membership program launch and late-2026 in-person event planned.
- Recommendations:
    - Retain human contact options in any DRT rollout.
    - Avoid overlapping fixed and on-demand services in the same timeslots unless roles are clearly communicated.
    - Validate legal/regulatory claims (e.g., license requirements) with authorities.
    - Standardise data collection and reporting to support evaluation and funding cases.
- Event videorecording: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fIgOl1KWm1k

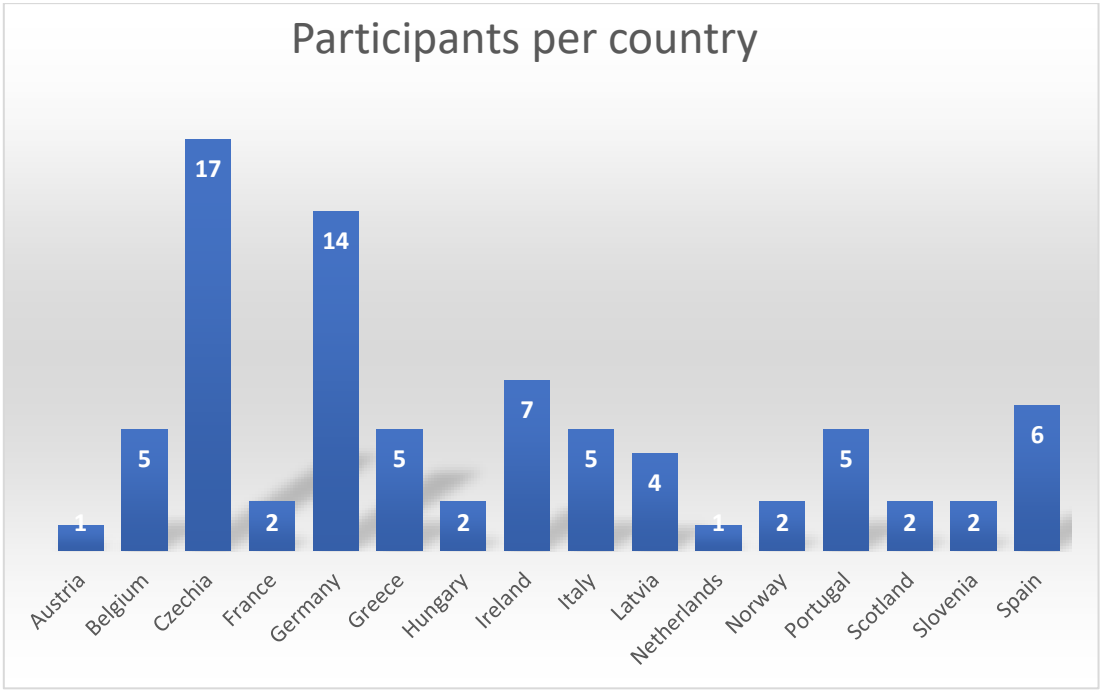
Content

The second webinar organised by the European Rural Mobility Network (ERMN), focusing on Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) in rural areas, provided a rich and engaging discussion among a diverse European audience, including local authorities, transport operators, practitioners and policy makers. Held online and complemented by a live Q&A session, **the event explored how DRT moves from a conceptual framework into real-world daily operations**, highlighting practical experiences, operational models and future perspectives.

Bringing together around **80** participants, the event highlighted the growing relevance of flexible mobility solutions in addressing the specific challenges of rural and low-density areas across Europe.

The geographic distribution of attendees reflects a strong and diverse European engagement. Participation was particularly high from **Czechia** (17 participants) and **Germany** (14). Notable contributions also came from **Ireland** (7) and **Spain** (6) and smaller yet meaningful representation from countries like **Belgium**, **Greece**, **Italy**, and **Portugal**, **Austria**, **Netherlands**, and **Slovenia** demonstrate the broad reach of the network and its appeal across different regional contexts.

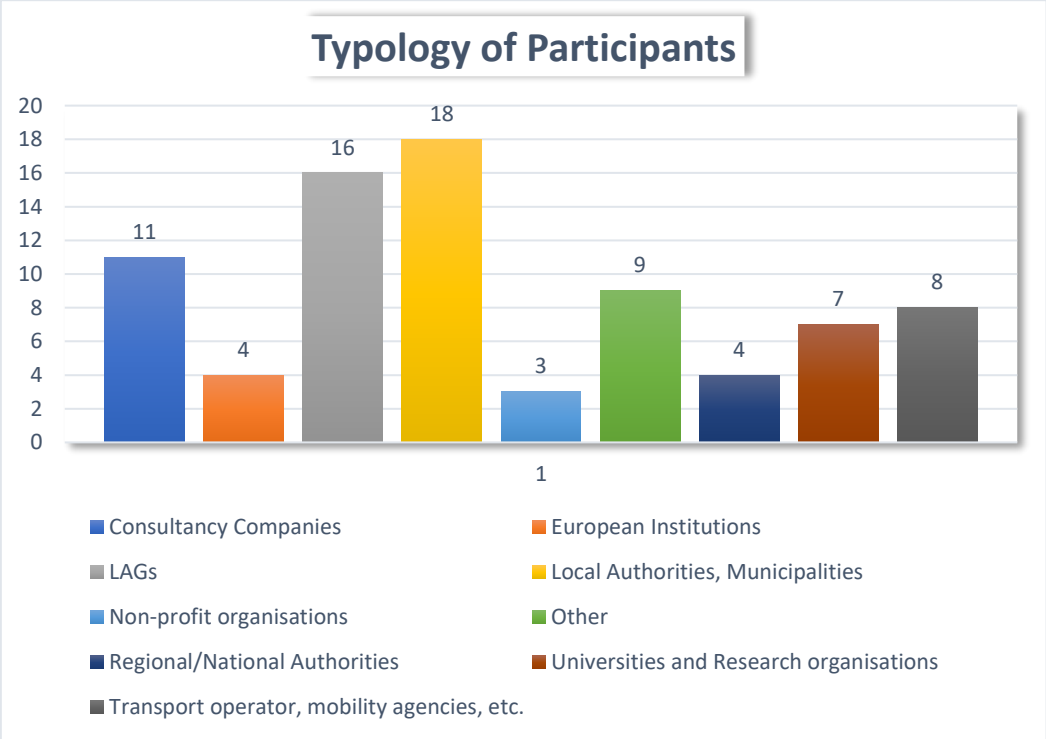
Figure 1 – N° of participants per country



Equally important is the diversity of professional backgrounds represented. Local authorities and municipalities (18 participants) and Local Action Groups (16) formed the largest segments, underlining the key role of local governance and community-led initiatives in implementing DRT systems. Consultancy companies (11), transport operators and mobility agencies (8), and universities and research organisations (7) added technical and academic expertise, while contributions from European institutions, regional/national authorities, and non-profit organisations ensured a well-rounded exchange of perspectives.

Overall, the strong turnout and balanced stakeholder representation confirm the increasing momentum behind Demand Responsive Transport as a practical and scalable solution for sustainable rural mobility in Europe.

Figure 2 – Typology of participating organisations



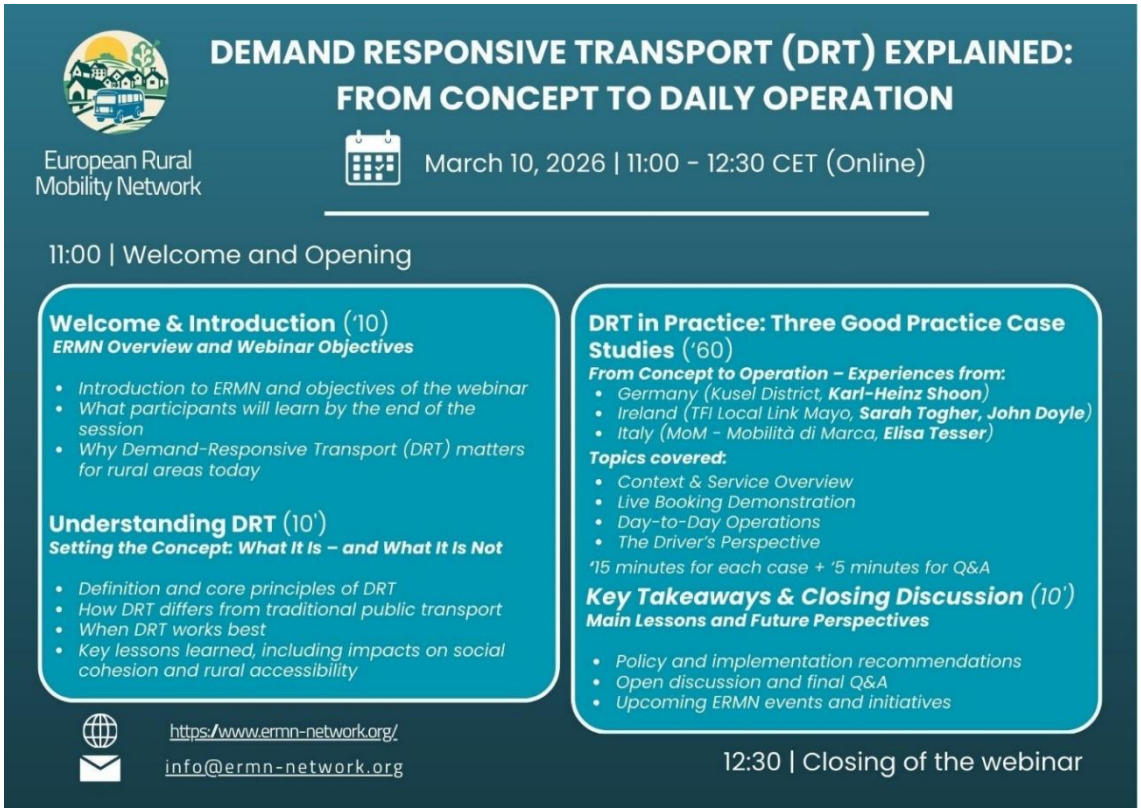
1. Welcome and Introduction

The event was opened by Maria Siti, researcher at the Technical University of Athens (NTUA) and one of the core members of the European Rural Mobility Network (ERMN). Maria firstly presented the **ERMN as a network, the Mission and challenges** as well as its **core activities**.

If you want to know more visit https://www.ermn-network.org/our-activites/ to see past webinars, in-person events, ERMN activities, etc.

Maria ended the first session with the presentation of the webinar agenda and next interventions.

Figure 3 – 2nd ERMN Webinar Agenda



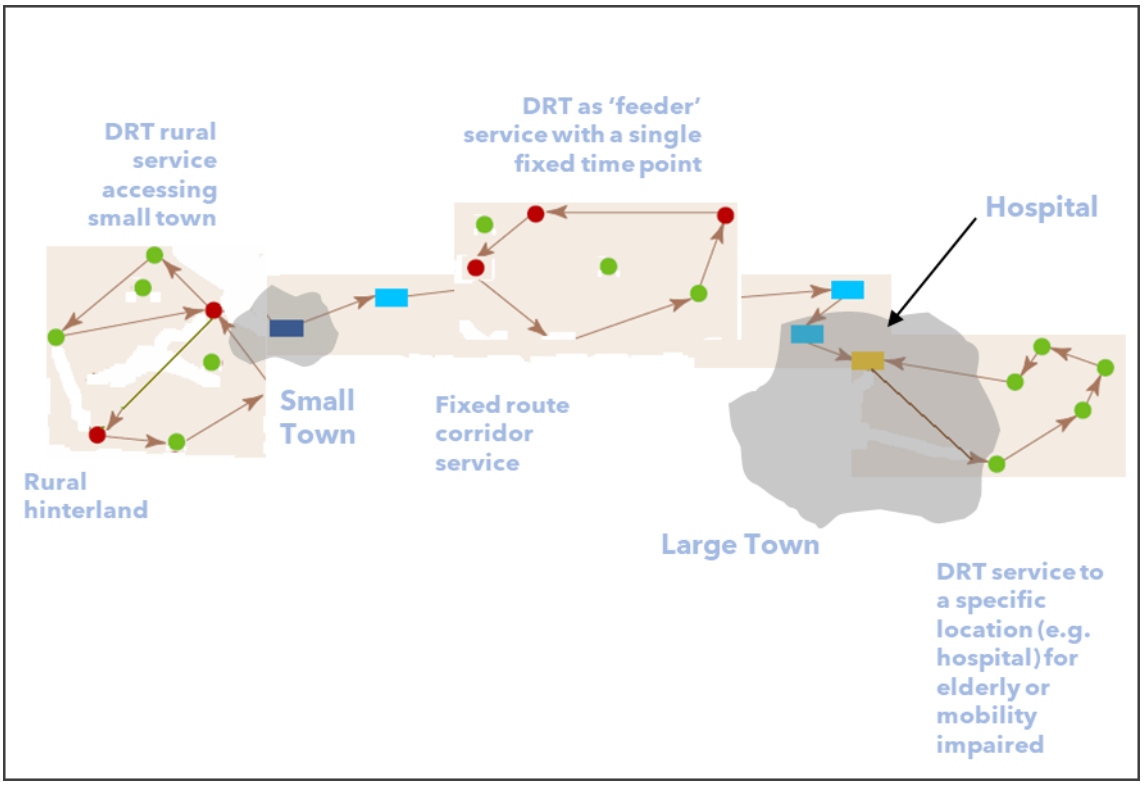
2. Understanding DRT

The first presentation was delivered by **Andrea Lorenzini** (MemEx Srl, Italy), ad-interim President of the European Rural Mobility Network, who provided a comprehensive and structured overview of Demand Responsive Transport (DRT). He described **DRT as a flexible mobility solution that sits between traditional fixed-route public transport and taxi services**, distinguished by its ability to adapt routes and schedules dynamically in response to user demand. This makes it particularly well suited to rural and low-density areas, where conventional transport services often struggle to operate efficiently.
Visit the event webpage to have a look at the presentation.

Rather than following a single rigid model, DRT can take different forms depending on the level of flexibility required. In some cases, services operate along fixed routes and timetables but are only activated when a booking is made. In others, routes remain predefined but can deviate to accommodate specific user requests. At the highest level of flexibility, services operate without any fixed routes or schedules, with journeys entirely generated in real time through optimisation algorithms based on incoming requests. This range of configurations allows DRT systems to be tailored to local conditions and user needs.

Such adaptability makes DRT particularly valuable for a wide range of users, including residents of rural areas and the outskirts of small and medium-sized towns, elderly people, and individuals with reduced mobility. It is also especially effective in providing first- and last-mile connections to conventional public transport networks, as well as in replacing low-frequency services, such as bus routes that operate only a few times per day or during limited time windows like evenings and weekends.

Figure 4 – DRT various types of services



However, the implementation of DRT is not solely a matter of introducing new technology. It requires a well-defined organisational framework that combines operational efficiency with a strong focus on user needs. Key components include customer care, booking and dispatch systems, vehicle and fleet management, IT maintenance, and coordination among stakeholders. From an organisational perspective, different governance models are possible, ranging from fully outsourced services managed by contracted operators to hybrid arrangements, community-led initiatives, or systems operated directly by local authorities.

From the user's perspective, the functioning of a DRT service typically follows a structured process. A journey begins when a user submits a request, either through a digital platform or via phone. This request is received and processed by a booking or dispatch system, which generates a proposed trip based on available resources and other user requests. The proposal is then communicated back to the user for confirmation. Once accepted, the trip details are transmitted to the driver, and the service is carried out accordingly. While this process is supported by technology, its effectiveness ultimately depends on how well it is integrated into the broader operational system.

Finally, DRTs were presented within a broader European context. Although often perceived as an emerging innovation, **DRT has in fact been present in Europe for over 40 years**. Its development has

been supported and accelerated by various EU-funded projects, such as MAMBA, particularly for last-mile connectivity. Today, a substantial body of knowledge, guidelines and practical experience is available at European level, providing a solid foundation for further development and scaling of DRT solutions.

3. DRT in Practice: Three Good Practice Case Studies

Germany — Bürgerbus Kusel District (Community Volunteer Bus)

The German case study was presented by **Mr Karl-Heinz Schoon** from Kusel District and one of the core member of the ERMN, who illustrated the Bürgerbus initiative as a compelling example of a community-based approach to Demand Responsive Transport. Operating for nearly a decade, the service demonstrates how rural areas can successfully organise accessible and reliable local mobility solutions with limited institutional resources.

The Bürgerbus is entirely run by volunteers—around 50 individuals—who operate two small minibuses and collectively cover approximately **40,000 kilometres each year**. One notable aspect of the German regulatory framework is that drivers are not required to hold a special licence beyond a standard car driving licence, which significantly facilitates volunteer participation.

A distinctive feature of the service is its organisational simplicity. There is no formal call centre; instead, bookings are managed by volunteers working from home through a dedicated digital platform known as "Bürgerbus Digital." This system supports multiple functions, including passenger registration, trip booking, driver scheduling and shift coordination. Given that most volunteers are over the age of 55, the **usability** and **simplicity** of the digital tools are critical to ensuring smooth operations.

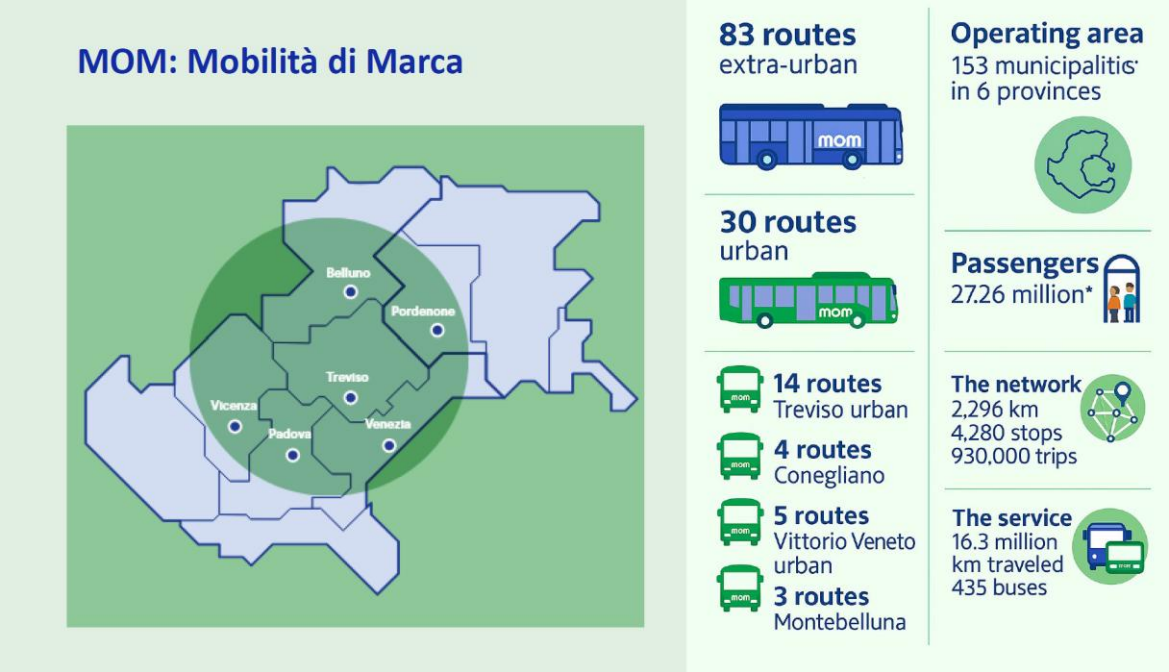
Figure 5 – Bürgerbus service

Beyond its functional role, the Bürgerbus also serves an important **social purpose**. Human interaction is at the heart of the service model, contributing not only to mobility but also to community cohesion and social inclusion. This aspect was strongly emphasised during the discussion, highlighting how transport services in rural areas often fulfil broader social needs.
A key takeaway from the Q&A session was that, while a formal call centre is not strictly necessary for operating a DRT service, maintaining a human connection with users remains essential—particularly for older passengers. Relying exclusively on app-based booking systems may risk excluding certain groups, reinforcing the importance of offering accessible and inclusive service options.

Italy — Mobilità di Marca (Veneto Region)

The presentation was delivered by **Ms. Elisa Tesser**, Urban Planner in the Innovation and Development Department at Mobilità di Marca (MOM), the public transport operator for the Treviso area in Veneto Region (Italy). MOM manages an extensive network covering more than 2,000 km of routes across over 150 municipalities, carrying approximately 27 million passengers annually.

Figure 6 – MOM services



In 2024, MOM introduced a demand responsive transport (DRT) pilot service called “MOM Plus”. This initiative was developed in response to declining ridership observed on certain routes and during specific off-peak time periods. The pilot aimed to test more flexible, demand-led solutions in areas where traditional fixed-route services were underperforming.
Four pilot areas were selected based on demand analysis. In Villorba, near Treviso, the MOM Plus service replaced Line 12 during off-peak hours, specifically between 9:00–12:00 and 15:00–20:00. The

system retained existing bus stops while also introducing new ones. The results were positive, with increased passenger numbers in the afternoon and improved efficiency in the morning, as buses did not operate when no bookings were made.

In Vittorio Veneto, located in the Alpine foothills, the DRT service was introduced to complement three existing circular bus lines during off-peak hours. Due to the presence of an older population less accustomed to using mobile applications, some fixed-route services were maintained alongside the on-demand option. While younger users showed a clear preference for the DRT model, the coexistence of both systems within the same timeframes created confusion among passengers. This highlighted that a hybrid approach may not be suitable as a long-term solution.

A third pilot was implemented in Valdobbiadene, within the Prosecco wine region, under the name "ValdoBus". This was designed as a seasonal DRT service targeting tourists, operating from May to October on weekends (Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays). Developed in partnership with the local municipality, the service used dedicated stops separate from the regular public transport network and was primarily aimed at international visitors. The first season yielded very positive results, demonstrating strong demand for flexible transport options in tourist areas.

Finally, an urban pilot in Treviso tested an evening DRT service, which eventually replaced a conventional fixed bus line. However, this case was not explored in detail during the session.

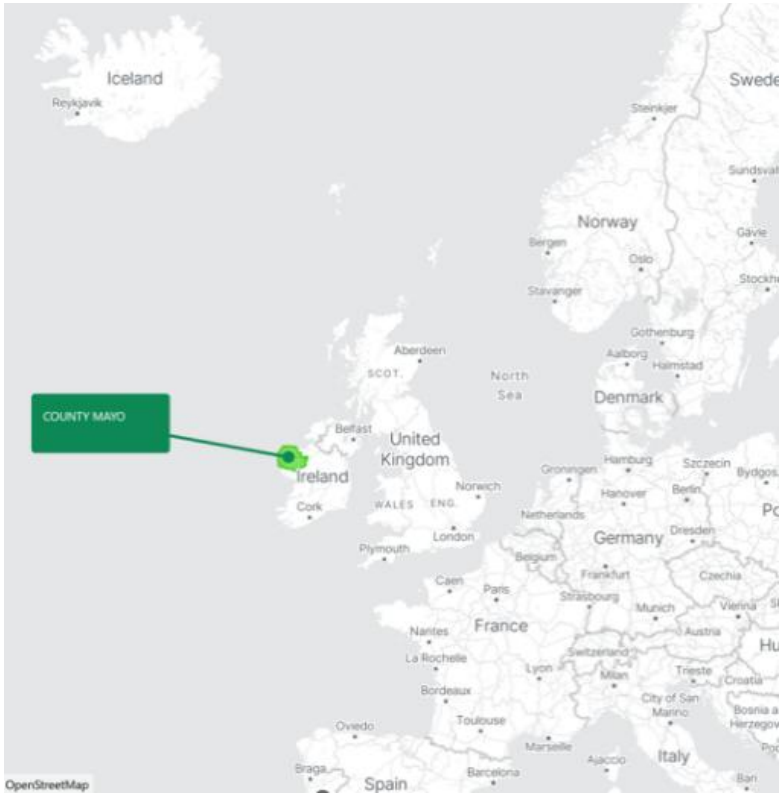
Overall, some key lessons emerged from MOM's experience: i) demand responsive transport services tend to be most effective when applied to short-distance trips and when clearly positioned as a replacement rather than a supplement to traditional fixed routes; ii) introducing both fixed and on-demand services within the same time slots can lead to user confusion and should be carefully managed or avoided in future implementations.

Ireland – TFI Local Link Mayo

The presentation of the Irish good practice was delivered by **John Doyle** and **Sarah Togher** from TFI Local Link Mayo. Ms Sarah Togher is also one of the core members of the ERMN.

It related to County Mayo in Ireland, located in the Northern and Western Region. Covering an area of 5,588 km² and featuring an extensive coastline of 1,168 km, it is the third largest county in the country, with a population of 137,231 according to the 2022 CSO data. Transport services in the area are delivered by Mayo Community Transport, operating as TFI Local Link Mayo, a non-profit registered charity. The organisation works in collaboration with Mayo County Council and is primarily funded by the National Transport Authority (NTA). It provides both community-based and public transport services.

Figure 7 – County Mayo, Ireland



The presentation offered a comprehensive overview of TFI Local Link Mayo, including its service portfolio, operational performance, the introduction of the TFI Anseo demand responsive transport (DRT) pilot, and its partnership activities across the county. The organisation delivers a diverse range of transport services, including regular and door-to-door public transport routes, HSE-related transport services for people with disabilities, mental health needs, and older persons, as well as hospital transport services such as renal trips. Additional services include community and one-off transport, as well as dedicated transport initiatives introduced in response to Ukrainian arrivals, including both closed and shuttle services. Overall, 166 services operate weekly across these categories.

In terms of performance, TFI Local Link Mayo recorded 227,857 passenger journeys in 2025. Service delivery is supported by 18 contracted operators and 110 drivers. Data trends presented for the period 2018 to 2025 show a marked increase in passenger numbers, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic. A breakdown of passenger journeys in 2025 indicates that 122,063 trips were made on public transport services, 57,558 on HSE-related services, and 23,959 on Ukrainian closed services, with smaller volumes across other categories such as ad hoc, renal, and pilot services.

Demand responsive transport has seen notable growth, with an 18% increase in ridership between 2024 and 2025. This growth is attributed to five key strategic pillars: community consultation, the use of community champions, identification of unmet needs and service design, the development of local partnerships, and the promotion of positive impacts through media and events.

A key innovation presented was the TFI Anseo pilot, a one-year smart DRT initiative funded by the NTA and operating in Achill and the Currane Peninsula. This service provides flexible, technology-enabled, on-demand public transport within defined zones, rather than along fixed routes. Its objective is to improve access to employment, education, healthcare, shopping, and social activities. The service operates seven days a week between 07:00 and 20:00 (depending on the vehicle schedule), using two fully wheelchair-accessible vehicles. Bookings are made via the TFI Anseo mobile application, with a one-hour booking window.

From a technological and user experience perspective, the app is available on both iOS and Android platforms, although there is no desktop version. Booking is linked to a mobile phone number. The

presentation included visual demonstrations of the app interface, operational coverage areas, and vehicle branding, illustrating the overall user journey.

Customer feedback highlighted several positive outcomes, including increased independence, enhanced social connections, improved access to shops and medical appointments, and strong appreciation for drivers. Overall, the service was seen to have a meaningful positive impact on local communities.

Key stakeholders involved in the delivery of services include the National Transport Authority, Mayo County Council, the HSE, community and voluntary groups, and transport operators.

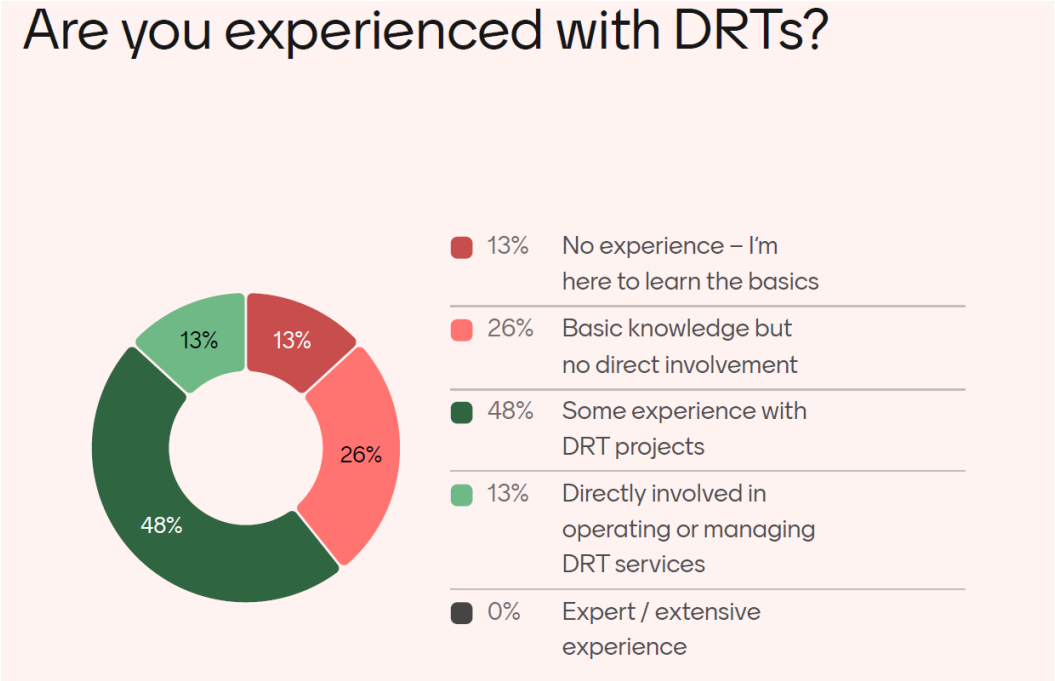
However, the presentation also identified several challenges associated with delivering rural transport in County Mayo. These include a sparse population and low demand density, long travel distances between homes and essential services, and difficult terrain such as mountainous, coastal, and bogland areas with winding routes. Infrastructure limitations also pose challenges, including the quality of rural roads, limited bus stop facilities, and insufficient signage, lighting, and shelters. In addition, limited broadband connectivity can hinder the use of app-based booking systems. Service frequency, particularly for door-to-door transport, is not always sufficient to meet community needs, while coordination issues and service fragmentation persist. Disadvantaged communities remain highly dependent on subsidised transport, reinforcing the need for affordable and frequent services. A lack of sufficient funding investment further constrains service development.

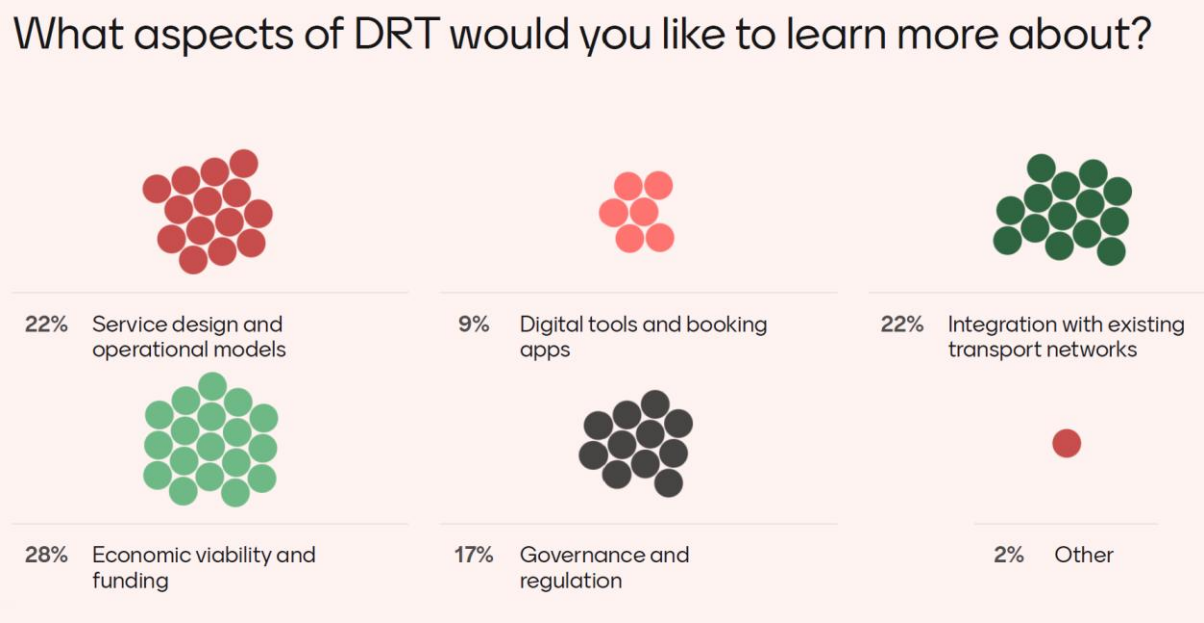
4. Key Takeaways and Cross-Cutting Lessons

The final part of the webinar, presented by Matilde Vezzani (MemEx Srl, Italy), focused on key takeaways and cross-cutting lessons emerging from the different case studies. A central point was clarifying what demand responsive transport (DRT) is—and what it is not. DRT was defined as a flexible, demand-driven form of public transport that complements rather than replaces existing fixed-route systems. Its core principles include flexibility, efficiency through shared rides, a strong user-centric approach, and integration with wider transport networks. Unlike traditional services, DRT operates without fixed routes or timetables and requires advance booking, typically via app, phone, or call centre. It is particularly well suited to rural areas and first- and last-mile connections, while it is less effective as a standalone solution in contexts already well served by fixed transport. Several important lessons emerged from the case studies. First, the human dimension remains essential: while a formal call centre may not always be necessary, some form of human interaction is crucial, especially for older users or those at risk of digital exclusion. This is important not only for operational efficiency but also for social inclusion. More broadly, DRT was shown to have a strong positive impact on social cohesion, helping to reduce isolation and strengthen community connections, as illustrated by the German volunteer-based model. Understanding users is another critical factor. Effective DRT design depends on careful user profiling and a clear understanding of local mobility needs. The combination of fixed-line and on-demand services must also be handled with care: running both simultaneously in the same time slots can create confusion, and a clear distinction between service types is generally preferable. At the same time, DRT can successfully serve multiple user groups. For example, the Italian "ValdoBus" case demonstrated how a seasonal service can meet the needs of both tourists and local residents. Data also plays a strategic role. App-based DRT systems generate detailed information on travel behaviour, which can be used to improve service planning and target promotional activities more effectively. However, the adoption of such technology is not automatic and requires active support, including community engagement, outreach, and time for users to adapt.

A Mentimeter poll conducted during the session highlighted participants' priorities. Service design and operational models emerged as the main area of interest, followed by economic viability and funding, which was identified by approximately 29% of respondents and will shape the focus of the next webinar.

Figure 8 – Mentimeter poll results





The session included a question-and-answer segment that addressed several key issues raised by participants. One of the main topics concerned the feasibility of operating rural Demand-Responsive Transport (DRT) services without a traditional call centre. Drawing on the German experience, it was highlighted that a formal call centre is not strictly required, as its functions can be effectively distributed among volunteers working remotely. However, the importance of maintaining a human interface was strongly emphasised. This is particularly relevant for older users, for whom DRT services often fulfil a social role in addition to providing transport. While app-based booking systems may be

suitable for younger users, the availability of a human alternative remains essential in order to prevent digital exclusion.

A further discussion point focused on the extent to which young people use DRT services to access education and employment opportunities. Insights from the Local Link Mayo pilot area indicate that young users already benefit from dedicated school transport services. Consequently, their use of DRT is largely oriented towards social and recreational activities rather than essential mobility needs. In practice, services such as TFI Anseo are mainly used by young people to attend youth clubs, participate in sports activities, or visit local amenities such as beaches, with demand being particularly concentrated during weekends.

5. Next Steps and Upcoming Events

Eleonora Ercoli (MemEx Srl, Italy) outlined the next steps and upcoming activities. The third ERMN webinar is scheduled for **23rd of June 2026** and will focus on **funding and financing rural mobility** solutions, directly reflecting participant interest in this topic.

Figure 9 – 3rd ERMN webinar Save the Date

In addition, a pan-European in-person event is planned for the end of 2026, aimed at municipalities and rural communities. The objective will be to bridge European-level policy discussions with local challenges and translate them into concrete actions and funding opportunities.

The ERMN will also launch its official membership programme, introducing two categories: **full members**, who will actively contribute to governance and strategic direction, and **affiliated members**, who will support the network through their expertise.

Membership benefits will include priority access to events, targeted resources, and access to a restricted section of the ERMN website.
Fees will be kept intentionally **low** to accommodate the limited budgets of rural municipalities, with additional benefits for early subscribers. Applications are expected to open by the end of April.
For organisations not seeking full membership, an alternative option will be available through the "**Friends of the ERMN**" initiative, allowing them to stay informed and engaged with network activities. Registration can be completed by email, with the option to have the organisation's name and logo featured on the ERMN website.

6. Closing Remarks

The webinar concluded with closing remarks by Maria Siti who reiterated a key message emerging from the session: **rural mobility is not about replacing existing public transport, but about addressing gaps in underserved areas**. The broader goal is to move from car-dependent rural systems towards more people-centred models, ensuring that residents have both the right to remain in rural areas and the ability to move in a way that is sustainable, inclusive, and equitable.

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