

Sustainable multimodal mobility



RURACTIVE

RURACTIVE Forum
Background document



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This document outlines key rural mobility challenges and opportunities, drawing on policy research and evidence from RURACTIVE activities and rural innovation hubs (Dynamos). It presents mobility as a Rural Development Driver (RDD) and shows how insights from different territories contribute to broader policy discussions.

The RURACTIVE Forum – Third meeting is part of a four-session co-creation process exploring early directions for rural mobility policy. Results will inform policy recommendations to be validated at the Fourth meeting on 30 June 2026.

1. Introduction

Sustainable multimodal mobility is a key enabler of access to services, social inclusion and balanced development across rural Europe. It **comprises public transport, shared and demand-responsive options, walking and cycling networks, and digital tools that support accessibility**. Many rural areas face persistent disadvantages (limited public transport, long distances, sparse networks, among others) that affect daily life and deepen social inequalities. Within RURACTIVE, this topic is explored across multiple territories (Dynamos) as one of the six thematic areas (Rural Development Driver, RDDs) shaping local challenges and opportunities. Evidence emerging across Dynamos highlights recurring needs such as safer walking and cycling routes, more flexible and reliable mobility options, and information systems that address diverse user profiles.

2. Strategic EU policy context

The **Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy** defines the EU vision for a clean, smart, and resilient mobility system. Its flagship initiatives cluster around (1) Sustainability: zero-emission fleets, alternative fuels, modal shift; (2) Smart mobility: digitalisation, automation, data-driven multimodality; (3) Resilience and fairness: safety, affordability, and universal access.

Changing postpandemic mobility patterns—remote work, e-commerce, and flexible mobility reinforce the relevance of **flexible, shared, and digitally enabled mobility options** in rural areas.

Climate legislation provides a decisive policy anchor. The **European Green Deal** targets climate neutrality by 2050, while **Fit for 55** mandates a 55% emissions reduction by 2030. Transport represents roughly a quarter of EU emissions and remains the only major sector where emissions have increased historically, amplifying the urgency of mobility decarbonisation. Recent EU competitiveness and industrial strategies also link transport decarbonisation with innovation, digitalisation and clean technologies, emphasising the need for mobility systems that support economic resilience across all territories. Rural areas, however, face inherent constraints (low settlement density, long distances, limited modal alternatives) which complicate the simple transfer of urban solutions.

Additionally, the **Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) framework** shapes mobility investment priorities but continues to underserve rural nodes.

2.1 Evolving EU policy instruments and opportunities

Recent and forthcoming EU initiatives may significantly affect the enabling environment for rural multimodal mobility. Upcoming EU actions highly relevant to rural mobility include:

- **Sustainable Transport Investment Plan** - prioritises climate-aligned transport funding, with potential to include rural nodes.

- **Phase-out of combustion vehicles by 2035** - accelerates transition to clean fleets but raises affordability and infrastructure challenges for dispersed territories.
- **Single Digital Booking and Ticketing Regulation** - facilitates multimodal integration, improving user information and journey planning.
- **Intelligent Transport Systems (ITS) expansion** - improves safety, traffic management and service information in low-density areas.
- **Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) funding** - offers funding for transport infrastructure and digital innovation, including smaller regional connections.

3. RURACTIVE integrated approach to sustainable multimodal mobility

In RURACTIVE, sustainable multimodal mobility is approached through a **collaborative and place-based process** that brings together public authorities, transport operators, community groups and representatives of different user needs. Across Dynamos, mobility challenges are first identified through local discussions, where residents and organisations highlight issues such as limited transport options, car dependency, accessibility barriers and safety concerns.

These insights form the basis for **co-developing practical mobility solutions**, ranging from improvements in walking and cycling conditions to shared and demand-responsive mobility options or better information and service coordination. The approach emphasises inclusive participation, recognising the differentiated mobility needs of women, young people, older adults, migrants and people with disabilities.

By grounding work in the everyday experiences of rural communities, RURACTIVE supports Dynamos in shaping mobility responses that reflect local priorities, strengthen accessibility, and contribute to wider territorial wellbeing

3.1 Cross-cutting priority considerations

These wider priorities are considered when RURACTIVE communities identify their main mobility challenges, when ideas for solutions are explored together, and when those solutions are refined into practical plans:

- **Climate mitigation:** modal shift to active, shared, and zero-emission transport.
- **Climate adaptation:** resilient infrastructure (flooding, heat, seasonal access).
- **Biodiversity:** route planning that avoids habitat fragmentation.
- **Social justice and inclusion:** gender-balanced participation, universal accessibility standards.

4. Structural sustainable multimodal mobility challenges in rural territories

Evidence emerging from project activities points to a highly consistent pattern of structural barriers affecting rural mobility systems across diverse territorial contexts.

4.1 Limited public transport coverage

Sparse networks, long waiting times, and discontinued services produce widespread **transport poverty**. This undermines access to jobs, education, healthcare, retail, and civic services.

4.2 Structural dependence on private cars

In the absence of cycling networks, walkable streets, shared/micro mobility, or demand-responsive services, residents have few alternatives. This **increases emissions and entrenches social inequity**, disproportionately affecting non-drivers.

4.3 Foundational infrastructure deficits

Typical issues include missing sidewalks, inadequate lighting, unsafe crossings, fragmented cycling routes, and poor road safety. Even **basic interventions** (signage, mapping, safety audits) are often **missing** but can unlock broader upgrades when institutional capacity exists.

4.4 Social and gendered mobility inequalities

Mobility exclusion affects **older adults, youth, women, disabled persons, migrants, and long-term unemployed groups**. RURACTIVE exchanges highlight the need for gender-sensitive and inclusive planning standards capable of addressing differentiated mobility needs.

4.5 Lack of granular mobility data

Stakeholders report persistent **gaps in demand diagnostics, especially regarding service providers, care workers, and underrepresented groups**. Without such evidence, planning remains supply-driven and often misaligned with real accessibility needs. Strengthening the rural evidence base is essential.

The examples presented in Table 1 illustrate some of the challenges collaboratively diagnosed in two different rural innovation hubs (Dynamos) as well as various proposed solutions to address them.

Table 1 Sustainable multimodal mobility examples from RURACTIVE Dynamos

Dynamo 7 Zakarpattya, Ukraine		Dynamo 2 Südburgenland, Austria	
Identified challenges	Solutions developed	Identified challenges	Solutions developed
Absence of sidewalks and unsafe pedestrian conditions: accidents involving children; missing crossings, poor lighting.	Public Transport Improvement Package: safety audits, signage upgrades, mobility survey, feasibility study for transit services.	High rural car dependency; need to reduce private motorised travel.	Green Food Cruiser (electric mobile service for cyclists): real-time tracking app; supports active mobility and local producers.
No public transport between or within villages: strong accessibility barriers for work, school, and services.	Mobility-Integrated Tourism Route: new walkable routes, signage and navigation upgrades improving local accessibility.	Car-free arrival and exploration of nature parks is currently impossible.	Improved public transport communication: enhances visibility and usability of regional transit.
Lack of cycling infrastructure and services: no cycling lanes, no parking, no repair options.		Insufficient services for cyclists along the <i>Bahntrassenweg</i> .	

5. Emerging innovation pathways and local responses

Across the territories involved in RURACTIVE, several innovative mobility responses are emerging:

Digital and service integration	Community-led and shared mobility
<p>Digital inclusion is treated as a precondition for rural multimodality:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> integrated journey planning tools, user-centric information platforms, digital literacy programs. 	<p>Regions experiment with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> demand-responsive transport (DRT), carpooling platforms, pooled mobility schemes, integrated social/care + transport models.
Active mobility as territorial development	Tailored solutions for geographically constrained regions
<p>Investments in walking and cycling are linked to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> sustainable tourism, short food-supply chains, community health. 	<p>Mountainous, island, and peripheral territories focus on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> micromobility, climate-resilient planning, solutions addressing seasonal and weather-driven inaccessibility.

6. Persistent gaps in EU funding and Performance Framework

Notwithstanding positive policy momentum, many stakeholders identify structural **shortcomings in EU transport funding and monitoring systems**. The **proposed Performance Framework** remain heavily supply-oriented, focusing primarily on infrastructure outputs such as kilometers built or vehicles deployed. Shortcomings in current EU performance frameworks:

- Overemphasis on **infrastructure outputs** (km built, vehicles deployed);
- lack of metrics for **accessibility, affordability, or social equity**;
- missing indicators** for Demand Responsive Transport (DRT), carsharing, multimodal coordination, or transport poverty;
- weak visibility of rural nodes** in Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) extensions.

7. Implications for proto-policy development

Evidence suggests that rural mobility transitions require a **shift from infrastructure-centric to service-centric and socially grounded ecosystems**. Rural areas may leapfrog directly into **flexible, digitally enabled, community-led models**, raising key questions for policymaking:

- How can EU mobility policies better reflect the realities of low-density territories**, where public transport alone cannot meet accessibility needs?
- What support is needed to scale flexible, shared and demand-responsive mobility services**, which communities see as viable alternatives to car dependency?
- How can EU initiatives ensure rural residents benefit from digital mobility tools**, despite uneven connectivity and varying digital skills?

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- **What measures can strengthen safety and basic walking/cycling infrastructure**, responding to gaps identified across rural areas?
 - **How can EU performance indicators evolve toward accessibility and equity**, not only infrastructure outputs?

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