



# Seamless Journeys Limburg

## LiRa-2 Pilot Action Trial

### Summary



## 1. Introduction

The province of Limburg is in the south-east of the Netherlands. For the most part the province is bounded by other countries; roughly 75% of the province borders on Germany (the state of North Rhine-Westphalia) and Belgium (Flanders and Wallonia). This gives the province a highly international character.

The provincial government of Limburg is one of the twelve regional governments in the Netherlands. The provincial governments constitute the middle tier of government, sandwiched between the central government and the local authorities (the municipalities). The provincial executive of Limburg has powers and duties relating to spatial planning, transport, the environment, welfare and care and also formulates policies designed to boost the regional economy and promote tourism and culture in the province.

In the sphere of transport the provincial government of Limburg is responsible for a network of around 600 kilometres of regional roads. It is also responsible for developing policy to foster mobility in the region and for coordinating its implementation in association with the municipalities. Since 1996 the provincial government has been responsible for public transport in the region. Up to now, this responsibility for regional public transport has involved issuing licences to operate bus services. The provincial government will shortly also be given responsibility for two regional railway lines. In anticipation of the transfer of responsibility for the two railway lines the provincial government of Limburg has spent several years studying the possibility of introducing a light-rail system on one of these two lines, the Maastricht-Heerlen-Kerkrade line. Although the primary focus of this project has been on the railway line itself, the province has also looked into the possibilities of expanding the system in the future, both in Limburg and across the border to the neighbouring cities of Liège and Aachen.

With the increasing integration of Europe there has been strong growth in cross-border traffic. This is particularly true in Limburg given the region's historically close ties with the neighbouring countries, ties which mean that the residents of the Euroregion are more likely than in other places to live, work, shop and spend their free time across the border. However, cross-border public transport has failed to keep pace with the situation that has evolved along the border and it is not easy to make up the arrears. This is reflected in the fact that supply (both in terms of the network and services) is more limited and the quality and image of cross-border public transport are poorer than in similar regional and national situations. The provincial government of Limburg has encountered various problems in its effort to improve this situation. It consequently decided to carry out an in-depth analysis of the factors that hamper improvement of the cross-border public transport system and how they can be resolved in the context of its participation in the LiRa-2 project. It was decided to concentrate in the analysis on two cross-border railway lines, Maastricht-Liège and Heerlen-Aachen.

## 2. Approach

For the survey and analysis of the obstacles to improvement of cross-border public transport various seminars and meetings with experts were organised. The participants included various stakeholders in the region: the transport companies (both bus and rail companies), the regional public transport authorities, the relevant cities and independent experts. The Euroregional public transport platform was established at the beginning of 2003 and its meetings provided an opportunity to assess the results of those discussions in a wider context.

A complicating factor for the implementation of Limburg's LiRa-2 project was the fact that fairly soon after it started the cities of Heerlen and Maastricht separately joined two other projects in the Interreg III-b programme, the HST-4i project and HST-Connect. As part of the HST-4i project Heerlen joined forces with Aachen in an investment project to improve the feeding services to the HST station in Aachen. Maastricht meanwhile launched a research and investment project with Liège to improve the Maastricht-Liège rail link as part of HST-Connect. Consequently there was a need for coordination to avoid overlap in the different projects. At the same time, it provided an opportunity for the two cities to use the results of their respective projects to help each other.

All things considered, Limburg's LiRa-2 project therefore took place in a highly dynamic environment of different public transport concepts, arising from policy plans drawn up by regional authorities, and different concrete projects:

### Plans:

- Public transport vision of the Province of Limburg;
- Plan for the public transport network for the Aachen region (*Euregiobahn*);
- Plan for the public transport network for the Belgian province of Limburg (*Spartacus*).

### Projects:

- Light rail South Limburg;
- HST-4i: improving feeding services to HST station in Aachen;
- HST-Connect: improving Maastricht-Liège rail link.

This created an even greater need for closer alignment of the plans and projects of the different authorities. In 2003 this led to the creation of a Euroregional public transport platform in which all the authorities with powers relating to public transport and the public transport companies were represented. One of the bodies in the Euroregional platform is a coordination committee, whose task is to prepare the decisions of the steering group. The first assignment facing the committee is to draw up a vision for public transport in the Euroregion and a plan for its phased implementation.

Following the discussions on the obstacles to improving cross-border public transport the participants in the Euroregional public transport platform expressed considerable interest in an exploratory study into a second new rail connection between Heerlen and Aachen, which would also provide access to a new cross-border high-tech business park. A feasibility study for this new rail link was therefore carried out as part of Limburg's LiRa-2 project. The study was performed by an external consultant, DHV Ruimte en Mobiliteit BV. The results of the study are published in a separate report.

### 3. Results

In the first place, the project provided a clear picture of the obstacles to improving cross-border public transport in the Meuse-Rhine Euroregion. Four distinct categories of obstacle were identified: physical, conceptual, commercial and institutional.

The physical obstacles in the Meuse-Rhine Euroregion are:

- differences in the voltage of the electrical systems of the railways;
- differences in the traction used for the existing rolling stock (diesel and electric);
- differences in safety technology and related systems;
- limited capacity on the rail network in some places.

The conceptual obstacles are:

- the absence of a joint action plan for improving cross-border public transport;
- a lack of modern trains and other rolling stock;
- the poor image of cross-border public transport due to the poor quality and the use of cross-border connections by drug users.

The commercial obstacles are:

- differences in national and international tariffs and fares;
- the absence of an integrated system for ticket sales;
- problems with the settlement of costs and revenues between the transport companies.

Finally, the institutional obstacles are:

- the absence of subsidies for cross-border routes;
- the absence of international agreements on safety systems;
- the absence of international guidelines on cooperation between railway companies on cross-border tracks.

The most important options that were identified for removing or avoiding these obstacles are:

- improving the communication and coordination among the partners in the Euroregion with respect to planning and projects;
- increasing the involvement of the railway companies in order to improve the operations on cross-border routes;
- securing greater professional, political and financial support for projects.

The first point has to a large extent been taken care of with the creation of the Euroregional public transport platform. Even before the platform was established there was a working group in which the public transport companies in particular made arrangements on the operation of cross-border routes and joint communication about them. The effect of these agreements was limited, however, since they related only to everyday operations. The Euroregional public transport platform provides a broader basis, including political support and also extending to policy. It provides a more robust structural basis for cooperation in the Euroregion.

The railway companies have been involved in the Interreg III-b projects HST-4i and HST-Connect from the outset. Although this is logical since they will have to carry out the projects, all too often in the past the companies have only become involved after the plans for the project had been largely finalised. The

speed of execution of the project suffered as a result. The simultaneous involvement of public and (semi)private parties requires that they are aware of each other's interests and find solutions together.

The closer cooperation and consultation between the parties has, finally, led to the awareness that if we want to bring Europe closer to the citizen, particularly on a regional scale, issues have to be addressed at a cross-border level. This awareness, particularly at political level, has already led to broader support and increased financing (including European!) for projects.

DHV's feasibility study came up with a possible alternative for the problems surrounding the capacity on the track from Heerlen to the German border. This alternative will be considered in the formulation of the vision for public transport in the Meuse-Rhine Euroregion.

The development of the Euroregional public transport plan will probably yield concrete proposals in 2006. The implementation projects HST-4i and HST-Connect will run until 2008. There is therefore enough time to apply the knowledge gained with the LiRa-2 project *Seamless Journeys Limburg* in the concrete plans for improving the cross-border connections in the Meuse-Rhine Euroregion.