



Enabling Effective Consumer Engagement in Public Transport Planning

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Introduction

The Consumer Council is an independent consumer organisation, working to bring about change to benefit Northern Ireland (NI) consumers. Our aim is to make the consumer voice heard and make it count.

We have a statutory remit to *promote and safeguard the interests* of consumers in NI and we have specific functions in relation to energy, water, transport and food¹. These include considering consumer complaints and enquiries, carrying out research and educating and informing consumers².

The Consumer Council is also a designated body for the purposes of supercomplaints³, which means that we can refer any consumer affairs goods and services issue to the Office of Fair Trading⁴, where we feel that the market may be harming consumers' best interests.

In taking forward our broad statutory remit we are informed by and representative of consumers in NI. We work to bring about change to benefit consumers by making their voice heard and making it count. To represent consumers in the best way we can, we listen to them and produce robust evidence to put their priorities at the heart of all we do.

¹ The Consumer Council undertakes its specific functions in relation to food recognising the role of the Food Standards Agency (FSA). The FSA has responsibility for the development of food policy and for the provision of advice, information and assistance, in respect to food safety or other interests of consumers in relation to food. Therefore, to ensure good value and use of public money, the Consumer Council and FSA have a memorandum of understanding and the Council's strategic focus on food is primarily in relation to food prices and customer experience.

² The General Consumer Council (Northern Ireland) Order 1984, 1984 No. 1822 (N.I. 12), <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1984/1822/contents>

³ The Enterprise Act 2002 (Part 9 Restrictions on Disclosure of Information) (Amendment and Specification) <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2003/1400/schedules/made>

⁴ The OFT is the UK's consumer and competition authority. Its mission is to make markets work well for consumers. It is a non-ministerial government department established by statute in 1973 <http://oft.gov.uk/about-the-oft/>

Background

Government policy aims to make public transport people's first choice, not last resort. Ensuring Northern Ireland has an affordable, accessible and integrated public transport network will be vital to enable the government to meet a number of policy ambitions. These include reducing the environmental impact of our travel, improving access to key services including health, education and employment and reducing the social exclusion that a lack of transport can create.

The Department for Regional Development (DRD) is responsible for the planning, delivery and governance of public transport in Northern Ireland. To make the most effective use of public funding and ensure a focus on meeting consumers' requirements in how public transport is planned and delivered, DRD is developing structures to allow for coordinated planning of public transport at a regional level. To allow consumers to contribute to future transport planning, integrated local transport plans will be developed to ensure local travel needs are recognised. Developing a passenger-focussed public transport network will require effective mechanisms for consumers to contribute to the development of local transport plans which facilitate and encourage consumer input.

The need to engage consumers in transport planning and the benefit this brings has been recognised by a range of organisations representing young people, older consumers and those with a disability. The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, for example, recommends that government develop "strategic approaches to participation to ensure that all Government departments and public bodies establish structures to consult with and include the views of children"⁵. The Age Sector Platform highlights that "the voice of older people needs to be heard far and wide"⁶ in how services are designed and delivered. The Inclusive Mobility Transport Advisory Committee also stresses the need for "policy makers and transport providers to ensure that accessibility for disabled people and older people is a major consideration in the development of transport policy and transport services"⁷. Wider Government policy has also recognised the need to place consumers' views at the core of transport planning.

The revised Regional Transportation Strategy released in 2012⁸ includes a strategic objective to "develop transport programmes focussed on the user". The strategy recognises that services and infrastructure should not be designed to

⁵ 'Policy Briefing – Having a Say, 2010', NICCY, 2010.

⁶ <http://www.agesectorplatform.org/index.php/News-headlines/heated-discussions-expected-at-2012-ni-pensioners-parliament.htm>

⁷ <http://www.imtac.org.uk/aboutus.php>

⁸ 'Ensuring a Sustainable Transport Future: A New Approach to Regional Transportation', Department for Regional Development, 2012

suit policy makers, planners or engineers and instead “*focus on the user, understand their needs and... provide transportation services that meet the needs of people, businesses and the community as a whole*”.

The Consumer Council’s Policy Manifesto (July 2011) highlights the need for service providers and government to use plain English and eliminate jargon when communicating with consumers, proactively engage with consumers in an open and transparent manner and demonstrate how consumers views have been listened to. The manifesto also indicates the need to provide a range of ways in which consumers can contribute their views. Other organisations have raised the need for government to encourage and facilitate active participation in planning and policy development, across all citizens and for specific target groups.

Research Objectives

The aim of the research was to gather a snapshot of consumer views of current public transport services along with their views and experiences of current engagement methods used to plan public transport. This includes what is considered effective, any barriers or issues which prevent or discourage participation and also how these may be overcome to better facilitate engagement in the future development of local transport plans. The findings may also be applicable across wider areas of strategy and policy development which seek to meet the needs of local communities.

Methodology

The research was undertaken through a number of focus groups with consumers who had made use of public transport within the last two years. Participants had varied experiences of engaging with transport operators and wider policy makers previously. This included individuals who had responded to formal consultations, attended public meetings or provided their views online as well as others who had little or no previous experience on providing their views on public transport or wider policy issues.

Location	Date	Age Range	Demographic profile
Belfast	Nov 2011	18-25	Younger people
Enniskillen	Dec 2011	18-25	Younger people
Omagh	Jan 2012	18-74	General sample
Belfast	Feb 2012	18-85	General sample
Coleraine	Feb 2012	19-77	General sample
Enniskillen	Feb 2012	22-65	General sample

In addition, relevant findings from other research or events along with views from business representatives have been included where appropriate.

Key Findings

- The majority of those involved in the research expressed a willingness to actively contribute to the planning of transport services in their areas and a desire for greater engagement from transport planners and operators.
- A range of issues with current engagement methods prevent or discouraged participation in transport planning:
 - Use of technical terms and jargon in publications such as consultation documents was viewed as alienating and discouraged participation. Many printed documents were also thought to be unwieldy in size which discouraged many from engaging with the information provided.
 - There was a lack of awareness of how to participate in transport planning at present. This included specific opportunities to respond to consultations, attend public meetings or other events held or more informal opportunities to discuss transport services with providers such as Translink.
 - Many participants expressed doubt over the level of influence their contributions would have on final outcomes, with a belief that in some instances decisions are already taken prior to engaging with consumers.
 - Where participants had previously contributed to transport planning exercises or wider public consultations, a lack of feedback regarding their input and final outcomes discouraged future participation.
- There was a view that a lack of engagement in transport planning to date meant that many public transport services did not fully meet the needs of passengers, along with limited awareness of how to raise concerns to influence future transport planning.

Findings

Consumer views on current public transport services and regulatory structures

Views on the regulation of public transport

Those involved in the research expressed a desire and willingness to contribute to transport planning. The main focus was on how services can better meet their travel needs with many participants taking the view that delivery of effective services was their priority as opposed to any specific views on how regulatory structures should be configured to deliver public transport.

Views on current public transport provision

Participants gave a range of views on current services, including issues regarding service levels, how well services integrated where journeys required more than one bus or train service, the cost of travel, customer service from drivers and staff and accessing information.

Service Levels

Most participants were dissatisfied with current services, stating that issues including the frequency of services and the time at which services ran meant that public transport did not always enable them to undertake the journeys they needed to.

“In my area the service is rubbish, there is hardly anything” **Belfast focus group participant, February 2012.**

“Buses don’t run late enough” **Belfast focus group participant, February 2012.**

“After six o’clock there isn’t any more buses” **Coleraine focus group participant, February 2012.**

“Translink’s pretty poor, in fact Translink’s terrible. To the major airports it’s non-existent unless you live in Belfast. The Northwest is pretty poorly served in general” **Coleraine focus group participant, February 2012.**

Participants in Omagh expressed more positive views on service levels, especially to access other major towns or cities such as Belfast. The main concern for participants in Omagh was accessing these main routes if they did not live close by.

“The bus service is not bad, unless you have a very early appointment somewhere and then you have to get a taxi in. Other than that, it’s not bad”
Omagh focus group participant, January 2012.

“There is a good bus service from here to Belfast”
Omagh focus group participant, January 2012.

Journeys which required the use of connecting services was also raised as an issue by a number of participants, such as timetabling of services not allowing for onward journeys or issues accessing main transport routes which meant journeys could not be undertaken using public transport.

“It’s hit and miss if you have to get a few different buses”
Belfast focus group participant, February 2012.

“I live at the very back bottom of the town and the depot is the whole way down to the other end of Ballyclare. I’d have to walk there, the only other option is a local bus that goes there but it goes through all the estates on the way which would take ages”
Belfast focus group participant, February 2012.

“When you arrive at the station in Portstewart the bus to Belfast left three minutes ago”
Coleraine focus group participant, February 2012.

“They need more local buses, there’s a lot of old people that live round my way and there’s no accessibility for them to get to the bus stops”
Belfast focus group participant, February 2012.

Accessibility of vehicles

Recent investment in new buses with improved accessibility features was noted as a positive development.

“When I was on the bus they actually brought out a slope for somebody going up in the wheelchair and that's only recently in this past couple of years I've seen buses changing for disabled people and giving seats for people with walking disabilities, the front seats are kept, which I think is a brilliant idea” **Coleraine focus group participant, February 2012.**

“Most of the Goldline buses are really narrow, its hard to even walk down it so they definitely not suitable for a wheelchair, but the town service buses are alright, they have the low floor and the double-deckers have plenty of space too, just not the Goldline buses” **Omagh focus group participant, January 2012.**

Customer Service

Both positive and negative examples of customer service from bus drivers and other staff were provided by participants, with a general consensus that positive customer services improved passengers travel experience and encouraged greater use of services in future.

“I found a lot of drivers are really ignorant” **Belfast focus group participant, February 2012.**

“They can be horrible but then on the other hand you can get ones that are really, really nice” **Belfast focus group participant, February 2012.**

“When you ask them to move closer to the kerb you have to actually ask them to lower the bus so you can get on, they should be more aware when you're getting on with a pram” **Belfast focus group participant, February 2012.**

“The good ones are few and far between but the majority of the drivers have just no interest in any customer service” **Belfast focus group participant, February 2012.**

“Most of the bus drivers are fine [in Omagh]. I find they're very, very helpful” **Omagh focus group participant, January 2012.**

“I can't say anything bad about them; they're more than helpful” **Omagh focus group participant, January 2012.**

“Some are very ignorant but then again some of them are good too” **Coleraine focus group participant, February 2012.**

Cost of Travel

The cost of public transport was identified as a barrier to uptake of services for some, with a number of participants also unaware of multi journey ticket options which were available which would have proved a cheaper option when they needed to take multiple buses or travel regularly. Many comments raised in relation to cost directly related public transport services to petrol or diesel costs for undertaking the same journey by car.

“I found times that because I'm still at school, I don't have a student ID card and I've had to pay full adult prices just for one way - you don't get any ID to show you're 15” **Belfast focus group participant, February 2012.**

“With the cost of petrol going up so much, I think people are wanting to use the buses more but because of the cost of the buses, the amount that they're charging, the difference in the prices isn't enough for them to try to get them to use the buses” **Belfast focus group participant, February 2012.**

“I know a lot of people would travel up from Bangor on the train and because the trains are near enough as costly as what it would be to take the car up, now they just take the car for the handiness of it. I think if there was more of a difference in price and it was feasible then it would make them use the train a lot more” **Belfast focus group participant, February 2012.**

Accessing information on public transport

Mixed experiences of accessing public transport information were found, depending on the means by which passengers sought to access information. The Translink Contact Centre, which provides information to passengers by telephone received largely positive feedback, whilst issues with the Translink website were raised, in particular with the 'Journey Planner' function which aims to identify the routes or services passengers need to undertake a journey. Issues had also been experienced at stations and depots and when seeking information from staff. These included a lack of staff to answer queries at some locations, or instances where staff at particular stations were unable to provide timetables for services operating in other areas.

"I find the staff at the Contact Centre quite helpful, they're quick to tell you the times of the bus" **Belfast focus group participant, February 2012.**

"Then again, they're only reading what you can read on the website anyway, so if they could say your bus is gonna be 5 minutes and it's got stuck in traffic, they don't know that" **Belfast focus group participant, February 2012.**

"I've phoned them and the information you got was straightforward, no problem at all" **Omagh focus group participant, January 2012.**

"The journey planner is a bit awkward so I always have to search for the old one and use that because the new one is a bit stupid. Sometimes I just give up and phone them" **Coleraine focus group participant, February 2012.**

"There's never anybody to tell you where to go or nothing [at Belfast City Hall]" **Belfast focus group participant, February 2012.**

"See trying to read the time table, flip you'd need a degree to read that" **Belfast focus group participant, February 2012.**

"I used to work in Derry and call at the bus station and asked the guy at the information desk for the bus timetable for Belfast, he went back and checked and said oh we don't have the one for Belfast here. It's not joined up" **Coleraine focus group participant, February 2012.**

Many of the participants felt that enabling greater involvement of passengers in how public transport services are designed and delivered could help to address many of these issues, which in turn could promote greater uptake of public transport and reduce the requirement to travel by car as regularly.

Current process for engaging with consumers

Methods employed to facilitate the engagement of consumers in transport planning to date have included:

- Written consultation documents
- Public meetings
- Public exhibitions / stands
- Engagement with established Community Groups
- Online engagement methods

The above methods were discussed with focus group participants in the following ways (the resulting views of participants are outlined under the heading **Consumer views on current engagement methods** below).

Written Consultation Documents

A common method employed by Government departments seeking to gather the views of the public to develop transport policies and future services is by issuing public consultation documents to which responses are sought.

Advice from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills⁹ on drafting consultation documents states they should be:

Clear in terms of the language used, avoiding jargon, abbreviations and acronyms where possible;

Clear in terms of the scope of the consultation exercise, i.e. what has already been decided upon and therefore cannot be influenced and what you are seeking views on;

Clear in terms of what the Government expects the impact to be of the options under consideration;

Clear regarding how to respond;

⁹ <http://www.bis.gov.uk/policies/better-regulation/consultation-guidance/drafting-consultation-document>

Clear regarding how to get involved in any other activities related to the consultation; and

Clear as to what the Government will do with the responses and how it will follow up the consultation exercise.

As part of the focus groups, participants were provided with a number of recently released public consultation documents¹⁰ which would impact on consumers. An opportunity was provided for participants to peruse their contents at the outset of the group.

Participants were asked to discuss their views of the documents and any other consultation documents or similar publications they had read. This included discussion of the style of language employed, length of the documents and questions asked within the documents (if applicable), along with how these may influence their decision to contribute their views. Feedback from participants is detailed under the heading **Consumer views on current engagement methods** below.

Public Meetings

A further method employed by Government departments, transport operators and other service providers to consult with the public and stakeholders is through public meetings. During focus groups, participants were provided with examples of advertisements placed in the local press and flyers for public events which had previously been held. Typically these meetings can include a presentation by staff or Government officials followed by an opportunity for members of the public to question those present and raise any concerns or questions they may have. Public meetings have been used in addition to other methods such as consultation documents to allow for face to face discussion of the issues contained in the literature, or as a main forum for discussion of issues where a written consultation exercise may not be deemed appropriate. Venues utilised have included hotels, community centres, town halls or other Government buildings. Transport operators such as Translink have also undertaken public meetings in or near to public transport stations to discuss transport services and answer questions. Public meetings can allow for in-depth discussion of issues which can provide the organisation conducting the event a greater understanding of any issues which consumers or stakeholders may have and allow for their deliberation in an open forum.

¹⁰ Documents included the 'Draft Programme for Government 2011-15' (OFMDFM), 'Taxi Fare and Taximeter Consultation' (DoE) and 'Belfast Rapid Transit – Public Consultation on Route Options' (DRD)

Public meetings have received mixed levels of support. An example of the use of public meetings to engage with consumers and stakeholders in transport planning can be found in the consultation on proposals for Public Transport Reform in 2010. In addition to the publication of a written consultation document, eleven public meetings were held across Northern Ireland with meetings held during a variety of morning, afternoon or evening sessions. The consultation exercise was publicised through newspaper advertisements and press releases in the Belfast Telegraph, The Irish News and the News Letter, as well as local newspapers in circulation in the areas hosting the consultation events. Three thousand flyers publicising the consultation exercise and listing the meeting venues were also produced which were distributed to bus / railway stations and libraries. Attendance varied from 7 to 35 at each meeting, with 194 participants in total across the eleven meetings. Evaluation forms completed by attendees show a broadly positive view of the meetings, with 89.6% of responses indicating that they felt the workshop discussion gave them an adequate opportunity to express their views, and 96.4% stating they found the presentations either 'informative' or 'very informative'¹¹.

Public meetings were also used to discuss the draft Programme for Government in February 2012. Events in Belfast and Enniskillen attracted around 20 participants at each, whilst a meeting held in Ballymena was less successful with three attendees,¹² despite the significance of the plans in determining priorities for future public expenditure.

Public Exhibitions / Stands

Public exhibitions and stands have been used to display information on transport services and government plans in a variety of locations including community and leisure centres, town halls, civic centres and council buildings, libraries and shopping centres. During the focus groups, participants were provided with a photo of an exhibition stand in use in a public location.

In addition to displaying information, stand and exhibitions can also provide an opportunity for members of the public to interact with transport staff and government officials and pose questions and discuss transport services.

Community Groups and Community Leaders

Community groups can be found across Northern Ireland, comprising both formal and informal groups. Particular groups may aim to address a specific issue

¹¹ *Public Transport Reform – Final Consultation Report*, Department for Regional Development, 2010

¹² 'After three months of meetings, just three people turn up to hear how Stormont is planning to spend billions on our future', Liam Clarke, Belfast Telegraph 21 February 2012.

whilst others will have a focus on a range of issues which affect a local area or particular demographic. Groups may have been formed for one-off purposes or take place on a regular basis to keep people and communities involved. The majority of focus group participants were aware of at least one community group during the discussions. During focus groups, participants were asked to consider any community groups they are currently aware of.

The Citizen Planner Institute¹³ (Philadelphia, USA) has developed effective practices for incorporating grassroots community-based planning techniques in land use and transportation policy. This involves training citizens from a wide range of community groups to act as facilitators, who then provide input from their groups on how services can be designed and delivered to meet the needs of neighbourhoods.

Online Engagement Methods

Transport operators, Government departments and other organisations from the private, public and voluntary sectors are increasingly offering facilities for consumers to contribute views online. Examples which have been used include online questionnaires and surveys, forums where participants can post their views and respond to other people's comments, petitions and opinion polls to gauge views or priorities. Social media sites are also increasingly providing another avenue through which consumers can provide comment on transport services. Emerging methods also include interactive consultation websites which allow for individuals to make comments or interact with maps, plans and videos.

Online tools can provide a low cost option for engaging with larger numbers of consumers, particularly if they are geographically dispersed or it would be difficult to bring participants together for a meeting or event. Online options can also be useful if there is a short timeframe in which to gather views and allow participants to contribute at a time which is convenient for them with no requirement to attend or participate at a specific time or venue.

¹³ <http://citizensplanninginstitute.org>

Consumer views on current engagement methods

Written consultation documents were seen as unwieldy and full of jargon

The majority of participants in all six focus groups indicated that the length, language and format of the documents provided dissuaded or discouraged them from investing time in reading and responding to the documents.

“You read this jargon and you just think, what is that actually about?”

Enniskillen focus group participant, February 2012.

“The language in those consultations isn’t something you could even follow”

Enniskillen focus group participant, December 2011.

“I find here’s a lot of kind of jargon in these type of documents, it’s hard to understand sometimes what the point is which puts you off reading it”

Belfast focus group participant, February 2012.

“In that document, there’s 34 pages of rubbish before it gets to the actual questions they’re asking. Most people would manage get to about page 10 and get bored or just skip to the questions and then just answer them without even reading it” **Enniskillen focus group participant, December 2011.**

One individual also expressed concern regarding the publication of the full name and home addresses of individuals who respond to public consultation exercises, noting this as an issue which discouraged them from providing responses in an individual capacity:

“When you do respond to government consultations, they’ll put your name and address in there as having been consulted. I’m not sure that they give you a choice not to have your details published. I’ve only ever contributed on behalf of a group so you wouldn’t necessarily want your name and address included”

Belfast focus group participant, February 2012.

Public Meetings

Views of focus groups participants were varied regarding their interest in engaging in this manner on transport planning and wider government policy. One participant provided details of how this method had proved effective previously:

“I was involved two weeks ago with a consultation from the General Medical Council. There was 39 of us in the room and they said that was the best attendance they had down here in Fermanagh. Two doctors were there from London and they are going to be rewriting the guidelines on how doctors work with patients and what we thought about them. They said they hadn’t got the guidelines rewritten yet when they were doing the consultation and wanted our input, it was great that they came from London way down to Fermanagh”
Enniskillen focus group participant, February 2012.

Most other participants felt they would only attend if the issue directly affected them or was a particular concern for them:

“A public consultation in a hall somewhere, that just doesn’t appeal to me”
Enniskillen focus group participant, December 2011.

Those most affected by poor transport provision may also be limited in their ability to travel to public meetings which are held.

Public Exhibitions / Stands

Some focus group participants indicated an unwillingness to engage with policy makers or transport operators in a public setting such as this:

“I’m not inclined to stop at anything like that to be honest, I’d just walk on”
Enniskillen focus group participant, February 2012.

“I’d go out of my way to avoid them”
Enniskillen focus group participant, December 2011.

“How many people are you going to actually reach by having a stand there, you might get maybe a dozen people in the course of a day but I think most people are too busy to stop” **Belfast focus group participant, February 2012.**

A common perception amongst focus group participants was that they would associate stands in shopping centres with other commercial stands which are common in this type of setting and view attempts to engage with them as a sales tactic.

“It’s similar to cold selling the way they do that in the shopping centre. It’s like a cold sale, if somebody came to your door like that there’s not many people that will open the door. It’d be same in a shopping centre” **Enniskillen focus group participant, February 2012.**

Participants also recognised that public exhibitions stands could help to raise visibility for an issue:

“At the same time, you can’t fault Government departments when they are trying to get out and meet the public” **Belfast focus group participant, February 2012.**

Online Engagement Methods

Online engagement methods were particularly favoured by younger participants of the focus groups, many of whom will have “grown up with digital communications and have different expectations and needs in terms of how they engage, converse and expect information to be presented” according to a YouthNet¹⁴ report.

Whilst supportive of increasing use of online tools, many focus group participants also recognised that lack of internet access or computer literacy can create barriers to online engagement for some consumers. To address this many participants expressed the need for additional approaches to be offered in addition to online options:

¹⁴ ‘Life Support – Young people’s needs in a digital age’, YouthNet, 2009

“I think it would work, but not just online” **Enniskillen focus group participant, February 2012.**

“I used to work for a website and did all the media and marketing and it was far easier to get younger people involved” **Enniskillen focus group participant, February 2012.**

Lack of Feedback

During discussions, many focus groups participants felt that they had not been provided with a response or adequate feedback on outcomes where they had contributed views previously. This resulted in an unwillingness to contribute to planning in future for many who had experienced this:

“You only get feedback if you see the thing actually being done most of the time” **Enniskillen focus group participant, December 2011.**

“We just said no we aren’t taking part because we’ll never get anything back from it. The lack of feedback does put you off, yes” **Enniskillen focus group participant, December 2011.**

“Not hearing anything back definitely puts you off” **Belfast focus group participant, February 2012.**

A further avenue through which this was raised included the ‘Pensioner’s Parliament’ event held by Age Sector Platform in Cookstown on 29 March 2012. Attendees at that event noted that they rarely received any feedback from surveys they had completed or research they participated in regarding transport services or wider policy proposals. This was viewed as disenfranchising and negatively impacted on their willingness to participate in future.

Concern that decisions are already taken prior to consultation

Many focus group participants indicated a belief that decisions were already taken prior to any consultation exercise with any contribution they were to provide having little influence on the planning process:

"I don't believe in consultations because any decisions are made long before ever anyone gets consulted about it, so to me there's no need to claim to consult people" **Enniskillen focus group participant, February 2012.**

"The way the response forms are structured prevents you contributing properly, its like they know what they want as their answer" **Belfast focus group participant, February 2012.**

"Do they ever really take any of notice of what you say though, I really doubt they do" **Enniskillen focus group participant, December 2011.**

"In a way it seemed they just met us because it meant that our professional body was put on the list of people that were consulted with, but in terms of whether anything was changed; absolutely not, it's already agreed by that stage" **Belfast focus group participant, February 2012.**

Lack of awareness of consultation and engagement exercises

Many participants felt there were low levels of awareness of events and consultations which were being undertaken amongst the public which limited their ability to contribute. Many felt that greater efforts to publicise opportunities to contribute views would result in greater levels of participation:

"Sometimes those public meetings do actually happen but there's just a wee ad on the back side of the South Belfast News that's saying Public Meeting but you might not see it, you miss it and then half a dozen people turn up and they think that no one is concerned" **Belfast focus group participant, February 2012.**

"Here's another idea, everybody in the community gets the Fermanagh Advertiser. I think if they put a programme or article in there saying that something was changed to let them know that it's actually changed that would work, because that's delivered free to everybody's home" **Enniskillen focus group participant, February 2012.**

"Yeah, there is definitely a need to advertise issues more" **Enniskillen focus group participant, December 2011.**

"[events / public meetings] need to be well advertised" **Enniskillen focus group participant, February 2012.**

Consumer views on how to effectively engage the public in developing Local Transport Plans

Increase efforts to publicise opportunities to contribute to transport planning

There was a common consensus that more effort was required to raise awareness of opportunities to contribute to future transport planning. Many of the options suggested can be undertaken at little costs, such as securing media coverage in local newspapers or providing information in magazines produced by local Councils which are distributed to households within their area.

Produce shorter documents with clear language

A number of focus group participants felt that producing shorter, more succinct documents and with clearer language and less jargon would prove more appealing to consumers and encourage a greater level of response:

“If they limited it down and made it really eye catching then they'd get it out there more” **Belfast focus group participant, November 2011.**

“They need to simplify stuff, that's the way forward. Foolproof the language so everyone can read it” **Enniskillen focus group participant, December 2011.**

Increase the range of issues to be discussed at public meetings

Participants at the focus group held in Enniskillen during December 2011 indicated that public meetings may prove more attractive where multiple issues were discussed; similar to ‘hustings’ events held prior to elections where individuals can question political representatives or the ‘*Question Time*’ format used by the BBC. This could include debates regarding public transport planning as part of wider discussions of relevance to the local community.

Other participants also suggested a more open approach where members of the public could suggest a wider range of options for consideration at events:

“In terms of decision making, there's actually a very good option for informing where all the options are listed called de Borda¹⁵. What it does in terms of consultation is it gets all the options out so that everybody is satisfied that their option is there. For the individual voter, you have to vote for all the options to maximise your say, because if you only vote for one option out of ten then what you go for only gets one point but if you vote for all ten then your first choice gets ten. So it's a way of encouraging participation. I've seen it work and it's a very interesting possibility. So it wouldn't be appropriate in everything but in some things something like that is actually an amazing mechanism because it will establish what are the options which get the broadest support” **Belfast focus group participant, February 2012.**

Greater inclusion of online services and text messaging as an option to contribute to transport planning

Many participants were in favour of options to participate in transport planning via social media:

“I think I'd rather use Facebook or Twitter than go to a public consultation in a hall somewhere, that just doesn't appeal to me” **Enniskillen focus group participant, December 2011.**

“There definitely needs to be more use of social media and online” **Enniskillen focus group participant, December 2011.**

Text messaging was also suggested as an effective way to raise awareness of consultation exercises and allow for views to be provided:

“Texting is quite a good way of finding out about things as well because I know our schools use that all the time to parents no matter what's on in the school they text you about three times to remind you” **Enniskillen focus group participant, February 2012.**

“You'll not get everyone but if it's relevant then people would definitely want to comment on it by text” **Enniskillen focus group participant, December 2011.**

¹⁵ Further information available from The de Borda Institute website <http://www.deborda.org>

During focus groups, participants were asked if they would consider it useful to have an online facility where they could record journeys they needed to make which were not currently possible by public transport. This could record cumulative details of journey requirements which could help identify unmet transport need in future planning of services and routes. Many participants had used similar mapping sites which are currently available such as GoogleMaps and MapMyRun and felt there would be merit in using a service such as this to identify unmet demand for public transport:

“That would be excellent” **Enniskillen focus group participant, February 2012.**

“Oh definitely, especially for people who are dependent on public transport but can’t always get where they need to go” **Belfast focus group participant, February 2012.**

Build realistic expectation of what engagement can influence and highlight positive outcomes achieved

Focus group participants also highlighted the need to provide clarity on the scope of planning exercises and consultations to influence outcomes and manage expectations of what can be achieved:

“It’s about being clear with people about what they can actually influence”
Enniskillen focus group participant, December 2011.

There was also recognition from participants that consultation exercises could not be undertaken on all aspects of transport planning and policy development:

“You can’t consult everyone on every decision and every penny that’s spent”
Belfast focus group participant, February 2012.

Highlighting where positive outcomes have been achieved could encourage greater participation in future planning and tackle concerns that views aren’t given proper consideration. One positive example was provided during the focus groups:

“There was a consultation about the libraries in Fermanagh, Enniskillen and Lisnaskea. The hours were going to be cut and we did all write letters in and now Lisnaskea’s hours are going to be kept so sometimes maybe they do listen”
Enniskillen focus group participant, February 2012.

Greater engagement with established community groups and leaders

There was consistent support for greater engagement with established community groups and representatives during focus group discussions. Participants felt that community groups provided an opportunity for wider discussion of transport plans and government policy proposals. It was also felt that discussions undertaken with community groups can facilitate engagement with consumers who may otherwise be deterred by use of jargon in consultation documents. Some focus group participants also stated the need to tailor information and presentations to the needs and priorities of the group involved to highlight the issues of most relevance to the group. Participants were also broadly supportive of more engagement with other groups, such as local Councils and business representative bodies in future transport planning.

“Accessing some of those policies and breaking them down and using workshops with young people to get them to understand what that the consultations mean in everyday life, that’s what is needed”
Belfast focus group participant, November 2011.

“Community groups would very worthwhile, schools as well, maybe church groups too”
Enniskillen focus group participant, February 2012.

“There’s dozens of community groups in Fermanagh that could get involved, there’s a lot of volunteers in this part of the country out doing great work”
Enniskillen focus group participant, February 2012

“I think that there should be more community groups involved”
Belfast focus group participant, February 2012.

During discussions it was recognised that difficulties would remain in reaching interested individuals who were not part of any group and that using a variety of methods to raise awareness and facilitate input would help to address this rather than exclusively engaging with community groups.

Focus exhibition stands and events at community based venues

Despite reservations expressed about interacting with staff at stands / exhibitions in retail outlets, focus group participants felt that community based venues may provide more suitable environments to discuss transport services and government policies.

“In a shopping centre, yeah, you’ll walk past but if something like that is specifically set up in a community centre for a certain issue then I might go to something like that” **Enniskillen focus group participant, February 2012.**

Encourage public transport operators to engage directly with passengers

In addition to engaging with Government departments and political representatives to develop transport plans, focus group participants expressed a desire for greater engagement with transport operators. Public transport operators such as Translink currently engage with customers using a variety of methods including social media, responding to emails, providing information stands at stations and through meetings of passenger groups who represent users of a number of bus and rail routes. Translink has also encouraged passengers to contact local area managers to discuss service needs where current routes or service frequency are not meeting their needs.

There was limited awareness of these options for engaging with transport operators to discuss services from those involved in the research, none of whom had directly contacted Translink or other transport providers to discuss services. There was consistent support for transport operators to increase direct engagement with consumers in future planning:

“Bringing Translink into the community more, directly talking to people, I really do think it would work” **Belfast Focus group participant, November 2011.**

“They [Translink] should link to groups that are out in the communities” **Belfast Focus group participant, November 2011.**

“All the home safety fairs we’ve had and the health fairs we’ve had, Translink haven’t been at any of them. I think it would get a great response from the community” **Enniskillen focus group participant, February 2012.**

“Translink should be coming out to us in the community so they should, we have plenty of things going on in Lisnaskea, plenty of groups. They should be actually trying to get themselves invited out there because they talk about people not using the bus enough” **Enniskillen focus group participant, February 2012.**

Conclusion

The research found that consumers are eager to engage with transport providers and policy makers to provide views to ensure services meet their needs. A number of factors prevent or discourage participation from consumers, many of which can be addressed at little cost. Employing clear and accessible language, producing documentation in a manageable size and increasing the visibility of consultation exercises were found to be some of the main issues which can increase participation. Consumers also felt there was need to increase the ways in which they are able to contribute their views, along with greater clarity on the scope of the exercise and how much room there is to influence decisions.

To ensure consumers recognise the benefits that can be achieved through effective consultation, clear, timely feedback is vital to demonstrate that consumers' voices have been heard and encourage future input. There is a need for transport operators and policy makers to highlight where consultations have lead to improved outcomes for consumers to demonstrate the value of engagement and address the concern from many consumers that consultation exercises have little chance of influencing final decisions.

There is also a role for the Consumer Council to encourage and enable greater involvement from consumers through facilitating debate and providing a platform for consumers to discuss their views in accessible language.

Recommendations

The Department for Regional Development should consider the following recommendations when developing Local Transport Plans to enable consumers to effectively contribute to the process:

- **Improve awareness of consultations and opportunities to contribute to transport planning amongst the public**

Where specific consultation exercises are undertaken, a need to raise awareness early in the process was indicated.

Many focus group participants highlighted low-cost or free options for achieving this, such as the use of Council magazines which are provided to households. Examples include “City Matters” produced by Belfast City Council, “*The Cutting Edge*” produced by Banbridge District Council and “*Source*” produced by Newtownabbey Borough Council.

(It is recognised that consultations are widely published in national and local newspapers)

There is also a need for transport operators such as Translink to ensure passengers are aware of how they can share their views on public transport services and highlight where services are not meeting their requirements to inform future planning prior to the development of Local Transport Plans.

- **Ensure language is clear and accessible and that documents are a manageable size**

A common barrier to participation highlighted by consumers involved in the research was the level of jargon, ‘policy speak’ or technical terminology in consultation literature. Ensuring language is accessible will encourage a greater level of participation in transport planning and provide clarity as plans are developed and debated. The research found that tailoring information to specific audiences would also allow for a greater level of involvement.

Ensuring any literature or publications produced is not seen as unwieldy is also important to encourage consumer involvement. Smaller documents with clear and focused information were more likely to illicit a response and mean contributing does not pose an undue burden. Conversely, larger documents with multiple areas requiring a response were viewed as a barrier to encouraging wider participation.

- **Employ a variety of engagement methods to allow for a broad range of consumers to contribute**

The research found that no one method will enable all consumers to contribute to the development of Local Transport Plans. Participants indicated that use of a range of methods of engagement presented the best opportunity to capture a depth of views and ensure planning and consultation outcomes accurately represented consumer views.

There was also support for use of new and emerging options for engagement such as via text messaging and social media to supplement more traditional methods. This was particularly favoured where it was combined with options for those without internet access to contribute, for example also accepting written submissions where a consultation is mainly internet based, which could be facilitated at little cost. Consumers also expressed an interest in use of online sites where they could record journeys which were not currently possible by public transport to identify unmet transport need, along with text messages as way to involve the public in transport planning in future.

- **Make greater use of existing networks and groups**

Consumers involved in the research indicated knowledge and involvement in a wide range of established community groups, forums and other networks. These were viewed as an effective means for facilitating ongoing community involvement in planning and policy making.

Participants expressed a willingness to engage with transport operators, planners and elected representatives through established groups. Significant support for engaging with young people through schools was expressed.

There was also support from focus group participants and stakeholders for greater involvement of local Councils and business representative organisations. For example, the Federation of Small Business (with over 8000 members in Northern Ireland) and the Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association (with over 1100 members) could contribute views in regards public transport needs for both staff and customers from their members. Local 'Chambers of Commerce' were also noted as a further avenue for engaging with local businesses. Many of these organisations do currently provide views to transport operators and transport policy makers, although participants were generally unaware of this and were supportive of more engagement in this area.

- **Provide clear and timely feedback to those who participate**

Participants felt there was a need to provide more feedback to consumers who participate in consultations and other transport planning exercises.

Consultation reports are usually produced for public consultation exercises which provide details of the responses received and information on how this will impact upon the final decision taken. These reports are typically provided to those who have responded. Those who contributed to smaller or more informal exercises, or through other mechanisms such as public meetings indicated that they rarely received feedback which discouraged future involvement.

Demonstrating that views submitted have receive fair consideration, along with details of how outcomes have been influenced by these is vital to encourage greater involvement in future planning.



The Consumer Council

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