



Consultation: Accessible Transport Strategy 2015

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Contact: Scott Kennerley

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Introduction

The General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland (the Consumer Council) is a statutory body whose main function is to “promote and safeguard the interest of consumers in Northern Ireland”.

In taking forward our statutory remit we work to bring about change to benefit consumers by making their voice heard and making it count. The Consumer Council represents consumers’ views by obtaining and researching consumer opinions so that we can robustly reflect consumers’ views.

Need for an Accessible Transport Strategy

The Consumer Council recognises the substantial investment that has been made in public transport and associated infrastructure since the publication of the 2005 Strategy.

Improvements over the last decade have made the public transport network increasingly more accessible for all passengers. However, the Consumer Council recognises that there is still more that can be done to make Northern Ireland’s public transport network fully inclusive and accessible to all. With increasing pressures on Departmental budgets there have been reductions in funding from the Rural Transport Fund and the Transport Programme for People with a Disability over the last couple of years.

In 2013 the Consumer Council published a report on rural and disability transport services which concluded the services are a lifeline for many rural dwellers, older people and those with a disability. The Consumer Council reviewed the provision of these services again in 2014, following the changes to the Door to Door service. This research confirmed that rural and disability transport continues to provide a vital service for many people that have no alternative.¹

Vision and Themes

We welcome the level of engagement that has taken place with organisations and individual consumers during this consultation phase. We support the DRD's vision to deliver a *'transport network in Northern Ireland that is inclusive and accessible to all'* and broadly agree with the themes that are outlined within the proposed strategy. In order to deliver a transport system that is *'inclusive and accessible to all'* there will need to be detailed understanding of consumers' travel needs. Making the transport system inclusive and accessible will require different interventions in different areas based on the needs of all passengers.

The Consumer Council appreciates that a corresponding detailed action plan will be produced to deliver the actions identified within this consultation.

¹ The research involved carrying out a number of focus groups with consumers and interviews with transport providers and stakeholders

However, the Consumer Council believes that inclusion of output based targets within this strategy setting out what DRD aims to achieve in the short, medium and long term up to 2025 will help consumers understand when actions are likely to be delivered.

Theme 1 – Enhancing the accessibility of the public transport network

The Consumer Council supports DRD's commitment to work towards 'step free public transport vehicles' as we have received several complaints that relate to the ability to access public transport vehicles. To ensure there is complete clarity on this access standard the Consumer Council would ask DRD to define what is meant by 'step free public transport' to ensure that it supports a transport network that is accessible to all.

There have been complaints from consumers over the inconvenience of having to provide 24 hours' notice to be able to use some bus services (eg Goldline). The requirement to pre-notify Translink in these instances presents passengers with an additional barrier to travel. The Consumer Council therefore would ask Translink and DRD to specify the current percentage of step free vehicles and to outline its timetable for providing step free public transport vehicles. The Consumer Council would ask that DRD ensure public transport is fully available to all passengers without the need for pre-notification and that this requirement is reflected in the new Accessible Transport Strategy.

In the interim we support DRD's commitment to improve detail about accessibility of services and infrastructure (Theme 4); this should be clearly communicated to passengers.

Theme 2 – Improving accessibility of the wider transport network

Research undertaken by the Consumer Council² in 2013 has shown that specialist rural transport services and transport services for passengers with a disability are essential lifelines for consumers that often have no alternative means of travel.

Therefore, transport providers that are funded from the public purse to deliver transport services in rural or isolated communities and to passengers with a disability or reduced mobility should be obligated within this strategy to demonstrate that services will be operated with a fleet of vehicles that meets the needs of the targeted passenger groups. As these services are specifically for passengers who cannot access mainstream public transport, the service provided must use vehicles that all passengers can fully access.

The Consumer Council supports the work of the DRD to improve interdepartmental cooperation in the provision of transport services to passengers in rural and isolated communities and to those with a disability.

²Transport Services funded by the Rural Transport Fund and the Transport Programme for People with Disabilities - Views from passengers, operators and stakeholders – July 2013 (updated August 2014) <http://www.consumercouncil.org.uk/publications/transport-services-funded-by-the-rural-transport-fund-and-the-transport-pro/> and [Transport Services and the Transport Programme for People with Disabilities - 2014 Review](#)

We welcome the ongoing examination of options to deliver integrated transport and we welcome that this is included as part of the strategy, this should include looking at short term options to support passenger need.

In 2011, we identified through our “Transport Matters” research³ a need to develop an integrated approach from all sectors providing transport including Translink, community transport, education and health transport and taxis to ensure services meet the needs of young people in rural areas.

The need for an integrated approach to the planning, funding and delivery of transport services was further highlighted in our 2013 research entitled “Transport Issues in Accessing Health and Social Care Services⁴”. This research was conducted in partnership with the Patient and Client Council and it recommended that the relevant departments should develop a co-ordinated strategic approach to transport and health and social care in NI.

³Transport Matters – January 2011

http://www.consumercouncil.org.uk/filestore/documents/Transport_Matters_%28web%29.pdf

Transport Issues in Accessing Health and Social Care Appointments – March 2013

⁴http://www.consumercouncil.org.uk/filestore/documents/TRANSPORT_ISSUES_IN_ACCESSING_HEALTH_AND_SOCIAL_CARE_SERVICES_REPORT_FINAL.pdf

Our work with Translink and DRD on the Dungannon Integrated Transport Pilot⁵ showed the need for greater integration of planning, funding and delivery across all relevant Departments and providers, and the need to further understand passengers' travel needs in order to design and deliver services that meet these needs. This integrated partnership approach to transport across all needs to be fully reflected within the strategy, and its associated action plans, so that it meets the needs of all passengers in NI.

Theme 3 – Enhancing the customer experience

It is important that the provision of disability training and equality training continues to be provided to all frontline staff. As DRD's own research⁶ showed, 20% of respondents cited the 'attitudes of bus drivers or other Translink staff' made it difficult or prevented them from using public transport.

The Consumer Council therefore would ask that further investigation is undertaken into why staff attitude was considered to be a barrier for passengers, in order that the Strategy is ultimately successful in enhancing customer transport experiences for all passengers.

⁵ Travel Patterns and Transport Needs in the Dungannon and Cookstown Area - August 2014
http://www.consumerCouncil.org.uk/filestore/documents/INTEGRATED_TRANSPORT_PILOT_PROJECT.pdf

⁶ Attitudes of Disabled and Older People to Public Transport, November 2014 – January 2015 (published April 2015)
<https://www.drdni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/drd/Attitudes%20of%20Disabled%20and%20Older%20People%20to%20Public%20Transport%2C%20November%202014%20%E2%80%93%20January%202015.pdf>

Theme 4 – Enhancing the accessibility of information

Information is key in allowing consumers to make informed travel decisions. Therefore, we welcome any improvements to make information more accessible and easy to understand.

Overall, this will be of benefit to all consumers and help remove barriers for those wishing to use public transport. Exploring new ways to provide information in different media or formats should be an ongoing process which is carried out in consultation with both public transport users and the Consumer Council.

DRD's own 2015 research demonstrates the demand and need to continue distributing printed information with 40% of respondents stating that they used 'printed timetables/other printed guides'.

Research undertaken by the Consumer Council in 2014⁷ found that a number of focus group participants with a disability stated that large print hard copy timetables were their preferred source of travel information.

⁷ Consumers' Views Concerning Translink Timetabling Information - November 2014 - In 2014 the Consumer Council conducted a series of focus groups to identify the key issues for public transport users and potential users concerning the accessibility of timetable information for Translink services. One of these focus groups comprised of people with a disability that impact on their everyday life.

As the complaint handling body for transport services the Consumer Council would be keen to share our expertise and work with DRD in delivering the aim of ‘considering how best to address queries and complaints about accessibility issues.’

We have extensive experience of handling complaints from air, sea and public transport passengers in relation to access issues and have worked effectively with stakeholders to deliver real changes for passengers that have improved access and benefited service providers.

For example; we have conducted a focus group with passengers with a disability or reduced mobility to review airlines’ websites specifically looking at the information about special assistance services. We have also conducted site visits at the two Belfast Airports in with passengers with a disability or reduced mobility examined the Special Assistance services provided at the airport. Using this information the Consumer Council visited the City of Derry Airport to carry out a similar exercise and a number of the suggestions have since been implemented.

Theme 5 – working in collaboration with partners and stakeholders

The Consumer Council welcomes DRD emphasis on working in collaboration with partners and stakeholders to help deliver the overall intended vision of the strategy. Understanding the individual needs of passengers is central in order to deliver a public transport system that is fully inclusive and accessible.

We appreciate DRD's intention to 'engage positively with older people and people with a disability in the design or delivery of transport services'. The Consumer Council will work with DRD to engage directly with older people and people with a disability as well as partners and stakeholders to help deliver this strategic theme.

Conclusion

The Consumer Council welcomes the important changes that have occurred in the last number of years to make passenger transport within NI more accessible, particularly for older consumers and people with a disability. Unfortunately, there continue to be barriers preventing people from fully utilising the available services. The Consumer Council recognises DRD's continued focus in this area and the development of this new Accessible Transport Strategy.

The Consumer Council remains committed to working with DRD, transport providers and other stakeholders to developing the best possible public transport system for all public transport users. We welcome the development of DRD's Accessible Transport Strategy as having a key role in achieving this.

If you wish to discuss any aspect of this response in more detail please do not hesitate to contact Scott Kennerley (Head of Transport Policy) on 028 9025 1653 or via email on scott.kennerley@consumercouncil.org.uk.



Floor 3
Seatem House
28-32 Alfred Street
Belfast
BT2 8EN

Freephone: 0800 121 6022
Switchboard: 028 9025 1600
Fax: 028 9025 1663
E-mail: info@consumercouncil.org.uk
Website: www.consumercouncil.org.uk