Silver Service?
Are supermarkets meeting the needs of older shoppers?

A Consumer Council research report in partnership with Age Concern
Background

With an estimated annual spend of £5.7 billion\(^1\), older consumers are big players in the Northern Ireland economy. They are set to become even more important to local businesses because older people will outnumber younger people by 2023\(^2\). Despite this, many older consumers still find it difficult to get the food they need for a healthy diet and better quality of life. That's why the Consumer Council has worked in partnership with Age Concern to identify the barriers that older people face and see what supermarkets can do to remove these barriers. The research looks at everything from getting to and from the store, the layout inside, types of special offers, packaging and how easy it is to provide feedback to the stores themselves.

The strategic direction and priorities of the Programme for Government for Northern Ireland for the next three years reflect the issues raised by older people in our research. Tackling these issues will help to increase social inclusion, enhance quality of life, reduce disadvantage and support the local economy.

The Consumer Council wants to thank Age Concern, our Older People’s Consumer Panel and the Consumer Studies Division at the University of Ulster for their help in conducting this research. We are also grateful to the retailers who allowed us to carry out research in their stores and the consumers who gave their time and views so generously. This report summarises older people’s views and recommendations on how to make shopping for food a more positive and enjoyable experience.

The challenge now is for the industry to listen to what their older customers are saying and we welcome their commitment to work with us, Age Concern and older shoppers themselves to respond to the issues raised.

The Research

In partnership with Age Concern, the Consumer Council conducted a programme of qualitative and quantitative\(^3\) research with older consumers\(^4\) across Northern Ireland.

The research objectives were:

- To identify and investigate barriers to food access; and
- to identify measures to help retailers overcome these barriers.

The Findings

Shopping is much more than a series of transactions; it is often a form of social interaction for most age groups. Older people in particular can view shopping as an opportunity to interact with people and it can be an important social activity for people living alone. As the number of older consumers will grow in the coming years, their needs must be taken into account.

Issues like low income, poor health and reduced mobility can restrict access to certain food stores. Activities that most people take for granted like getting on a bus, steering a trolley or lifting things off shelves can be difficult or impossible for some older consumers. These barriers can reduce the variety of shops and the choice and price of foodstuffs available to older people resulting in them becoming ‘access poor’.

This research looked at the whole shopping journey from physically getting to the store, the in-store experience and returning home. It provides a better understanding of the access issues faced by older consumers and helps identify solutions. A key outcome of this research will be to develop best practice guidelines with retailers to address the issues identified in this report.

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\(^1\) Age Concern England (2005) Older richer fitter. David Metz and Michael Underwood – reported that UK people over 50 spend £175 billion a year, accounting for 45% per cent of total consumer spending.


\(^3\) Survey of 420 older people in retailers across NI, focus groups and shoppers diary survey.

\(^4\) For the purposes of this research, an older consumer is considered to be someone aged 50+.
Food Access Issues

"Food Access" means someone’s ability to get fresh, adequate and affordable food that represents a balanced diet and good health. For example, having enough money to buy food, being able to walk, use public transport or drive to shops and understanding how to prepare and use healthy food⁵. These were issues raised by older consumers throughout the research.

Overall, there are three main food access barriers, physical, financial and informational.

### Getting to the store

- The majority of older consumers do not shop locally. Only 16 per cent of people surveyed did their main food shopping in their neighbourhood shop or local shopping centre. These findings reflect the trend of a move away from local shops to larger supermarkets located on the high street or in out-of-town locations.

- The majority of respondents (68 per cent) travelled to the store in their own car. Other ways included walking (14 per cent), taking a taxi (7 per cent), a lift from a friend (5 per cent) and taking a bus (3 per cent).

- Eight out of ten respondents (80 per cent) travelled four miles or less to do their main shopping. Half of these respondents (52 per cent) travelled the four miles or less by car but 13 per cent walked and 7 per cent travelled by taxi. Five per cent of respondents had to travel over 11 miles to do their main shopping.

- These findings suggest that older consumers with their own car can take advantage of the larger supermarkets located in town, on the edge-of-town or out-of-town where the survey was conducted. The low numbers of consumers using other means of transport suggest that perhaps older consumers without access to their own transport may be restricted to visiting their local shops.

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⁵ National Consumer Council (2005) *Putting Food Access on the Radar - How to Target and Prioritise Communities at Risk*, p.3
One of the big issues for focus group participants was taxis. Older consumers who relied on them for food shopping had problems with heavy or bulky bags because taxi drivers’ insurance prevented them from helping people with their bags.

• Six out of ten respondents indicated that they visited their local shop. The majority went once or twice a week for top-up shopping like bread and milk.

• Only one per cent of respondents did their main shopping at their local corner shop.

• Respondents felt that their local corner shop provided enough variety for them to do their top-up shop but the low numbers of people doing their main shopping there suggests that it does not provide the variety or value that they are looking for.

• The preference for supermarkets over local corner shops can also be linked to the high number of respondents who travelled to the shops in their own car (68 per cent). These respondents would have had access to a greater variety of stores than non-car owners and would not be restricted to shopping at their local store.

• It was suggested that symbol group stores have few products to choose from, prices were high and that a lack of adequate public transport means poorer access to shops providing better product variety and prices.

• Focus group participants indicated that they liked to shop around if possible to get the best available deal. Local markets in particular were highlighted as good value for fresh meat, fruit and vegetables. However, mobility and access issues will influence whether older people are able to shop around for the best deal.

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Distance travelled to main shopping store

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Use of local shops

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“\textit{I get all my fresh foods from the market and save around £20}”

(Focus Group Participant)

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A symbol group store is an independent retailer that is effectively a franchise of a larger organisation known as a “symbol group operator” (e.g. SPAR, Supervalu.)
In-store environment

The in-store environment can either help or hinder an older consumer’s ability to get what they need.

Areas of In-store Difficulties

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Rest Areas

- For older consumers with mobility problems and/or chronic conditions, it is important that stores have rest areas. 44 per cent of survey respondents believed that stores did not have enough rest areas. Two-thirds of respondents shopping in multiples¹ believed that more rest areas would enhance their shopping experience.

Product Placement

- How and where things are placed on shelves is a concern for older shoppers. Focus group participants felt that certain products were either too high or too low on the shelves for them to reach easily. One quarter of survey respondents indicated that they had difficulty lifting products off the shelves. This was especially true in one multiple store where 30 per cent of respondents who did their main shopping there had difficulty lifting goods off the shelves. Women also experienced greater difficulty than men in this area.

Aisles

- Long and narrow aisles make it difficult for older consumers to navigate trolleys and identify the things they want to buy. Three out of ten participants in the shopping diary exercise and 23 per cent of survey respondents felt that the length or width of the aisles were not appropriate for them to do their shopping. Long aisles were a particular problem for respondents shopping in larger stores.

Trolleys

- Trolleys can sometimes be hard to steer especially for people with mobility problems. However, most survey respondents felt that the trolleys in the supermarkets were easy to steer.
- Focus group participants felt that the small, more manageable trolleys were often in short supply. The £1 deposit was also considered a nuisance by focus group respondents because of having to remember to have the right change.

¹ Multiples are supermarkets with ten or more branches.

"If the freezers weren’t there to lean on I wouldn’t be shopping"
(Focus group participant)

"Aisles are too long and narrow with three or four different things on each, very confusing..."
(Focus group participant)
Signage and Labelling

- The store layout is important for older consumers especially if they are regular shoppers and are used to things being in a particular place. Such knowledge can make shopping an easier, more pleasant experience for older consumers. Larger stores in particular often change the layout of their goods to encourage impulse buying. When stores do this it is important to take older shoppers’ needs into account and to ensure that in-store signs are clear.

- Reaction to in-store signage was mixed. The majority of survey respondents (87 per cent) stated that they could easily read store information above the aisles; however; some of the focus group participants complained about the width and height of the signs.

- Focus group and shopping diary participants generally felt that some of the information displayed on the shelves was difficult to see or did not relate to the product it was meant to. This makes it difficult for consumers to compare the prices of goods.

- A more significant problem was where the price was not displayed and that people would not know the cost until they got to the till. This is a particular issue for those on a tight shopping budget.

- Poor vision means that older consumers often find it difficult to read the nutritional details or cooking instructions on food labels. This was identified as an issue by focus group participants and by 26 per cent of questionnaire respondents. Inability to read labels can be problematic for those consumers on a special diet who need to check the nutritional content or ingredients in food.

Social Interaction

- For many older people, shopping plays a key part in their social life and this was reflected by six out of ten survey respondents who agreed that shopping was a form of social interaction for them. Shoppers aged between 50 and 59 years were less likely to consider shopping a social activity (46 per cent) than those aged 60 and over (66 per cent).

Special Offers

- Offers are often not suited to people living alone. Best value is frequently found in family packs or ‘buy one get one free’ and ‘3 for 2’ offers. Older people living alone often want small quantities and it is often not good value for them to take advantage of ‘buy one get one free’ and ‘3 for 2’ offers, particularly on perishable goods.

- Those ‘buy one get one free’ offers are no good for me because by the time I use one, the other one is out of date” (Shopping diary participant)

- Nine out of ten questionnaire respondents indicated that they would like to see more special offers on individual products. Retailers should consider innovative marketing and pricing strategies for single items and healthy products.

“Signs are too high and there is not enough detail on the sign of what is found in the aisle” (Focus group participant)

“Some prices are not directly displayed under the item” (Shopping diary participant)

“I have shopped in (local store in Lisburn) for 10 years, so I know where the food is. If I shopped in a large supermarket I would not be able to find the goods”. (Shopping diary participant)

“Those ‘buy one get one free’ offers are no good for me because by the time I use one, the other one is out of date” (Shopping diary participant)

“Cooking information is usually small and virtually unreadable, very difficult to compare like with like” (Shopping diary participant)
At home

Packaging

- Focus group participants and questionnaire respondents (65 per cent) agreed that there is too much packaging on products and some are difficult to open. Those with dexterity problems had particular difficulty opening tins and jars and vacuum packed products. A shopping diary participant found that items with easy to open packing (for example, tins with ring pulls) were more expensive than their regular equivalents.

Preparation

- Ability to prepare and cook food will influence the kind of food that shoppers buy. People with dexterity problems may have difficulty with tasks like chopping vegetables and so might opt for pre-prepared food. Those who have few cooking skills or difficulty cooking may opt for easy-to-prepare convenience meals which are often nutritionally deficient. On the whole however, most of the questionnaire respondents had no difficulty preparing food.

Complaints

The 2004 Consumer Council report Consumer Knowledge: Well What Do You Know? showed that older consumers were among those least likely to take action about a complaint. They were also among those who considered themselves least well informed about their consumer rights.

- One third (32 per cent) of survey respondents had complained about a product or service.
- One in five (21 per cent) of respondents had reason to complain about a product or service but did not make a complaint.
- Four out of ten respondents shopping in their neighbourhood shop felt that they had reason to complain but did not.

This suggests that more needs to be done, particularly in local stores, to ensure that older consumers are aware of their rights, know how to make a complaint and feel confident to do so.

- There is scope for retailers to develop a complaint process that is easy for older consumers to understand. Information about the process should be targeted at older shoppers and staff should be specifically trained in handling complaints made by this group.

Improvements

Focus group participants and survey respondents were asked how their shopping experience could be improved. Survey respondents were presented with a number of possible improvements and were asked to consider if each would enhance their shopping experience.

Access

- Even though the majority (68 per cent) of respondents were car owners, 44 per cent believed that a bus provided by the retailer or the local Council would improve their shopping experience.
- Of the survey respondents, 41 per cent believed that better parking facilities would improve their shopping experience.
- Focus group participants also had suggestions for improving access to shops.

Financial Access

- Focus group participants suggested that supermarkets should have a discounted shopping day for older shoppers.
- Respondents felt that having more special offers on individual items and more loose products would enhance their shopping experience.

“A buddy to assist with shopping would be good, however if you are unwell home deliveries should be available”.

(Focus group participant)

“Supermarkets should have a discounted shopping day like B&Q for example. Perhaps in the morning when it is quieter”.

(Focus group participant)
In-Store

- It is important for older consumers with mobility problems to have access to rest areas within the store. Six out of ten respondents agreed that more rest areas would help them when shopping.
- Almost half of respondents (48 per cent) felt that having a specific section of the store for older consumers would enhance their shopping experience. There was also a consensus among the focus group participants that supermarkets should have a section or counter for older shoppers.
- However, desire for an older section of the store decreased with age. Six out of ten respondents aged between 50 and 59 were in favour compared to three out of ten respondents aged 80 years and over.
- Having a map of the store layout would improve the shopping experience for 48 per cent of respondents. Colour-coded aisles identifying the location of products would improve the experience for 40 per cent of respondents. This would be particularly beneficial in stores where the layout changed frequently.
- Some 64 per cent of respondents agreed that they would like help with packing their groceries.

- Four out of ten respondents felt that having electronic price checkers in the store would improve their shopping experience but this decreased with age. Of those respondents aged between 50 and 59, 44 per cent were in favour of electronic price checkers compared to 25 per cent of those respondents aged 80 and over.
- Six out of ten respondents agreed that less packaging on goods would enhance their shopping experience. Excess packaging not only causes environmental problems but certain types of packaging can be difficult for older consumers to open.

Conclusions

Getting to the store

- One of the main issues to emerge from this research is the need for an accessible transport system to meet the needs of older consumers and allow them to access a range of food stores. Government, retailers, the community and transport providers must work together to develop appropriate transport networks and to tackle the barriers that prevent older people from getting to shops.

In-store

- In-store issues like lack of rest areas, poor signage and labelling, inappropriate product placement and long, narrow aisles can hinder an older consumer’s shopping experience. Retailers must take these factors into account when designing the store layout. Keeping in touch with older consumers will help to identify their needs and generate suggestions for improving their shopping experience.

At Home

- Dexterity problems mean that some older people have difficulty opening, preparing and cooking food. The research found that two out of three respondents (65%) agreed that there was too much packaging on food products and some are difficult to open. Retailers and manufacturers should reduce excess packaging and take the needs of older shoppers into account when designing packaging.

Older consumers’ shopping experience would benefit from key but achievable changes in the retail environment. A partnership approach involving retailers, local Government and other key players is required to target and breakdown food access barriers.

“A section of the store should be conveniently laid out for older and disabled consumers”
(Focus group participant)
Recommendations

The following recommendations are designed to tackle the combination of factors that prevent some older consumers from accessing food.

Physical Access

- As a result of the Review of Public Administration (RPA) local Government will take on the new function of community planning. In developing a Community Planning Model for Northern Ireland, the local Government Taskforce should ensure that local Planning Authorities are required to consult with older consumers and the community about their needs when determining the location of shops. Retail planning should also involve other key stakeholders, like public transport providers, to develop appropriate transport networks. This could make a significant contribution to promoting social inclusion and reducing inequalities.

- The vision of the Accessible Transport Strategy is - “To have an accessible transport system that enables older people and people with disabilities to participate more fully in society, enjoy greater independence and experience a better quality of life”. The Department for Regional Development should work with stakeholders to ensure speedy implementation of the policies and actions that support this vision.

- Retailers should work with the local community and transport providers to develop additional fully accessible transport services to help older consumers to get to the shops.

- Retailers should provide a home delivery service that can be accessed by telephone as well as online, at little or reasonable cost to the older consumer.

- Retailers should ensure that the shopping environment meets the needs of older consumers by taking into account factors such as aisle length, number of rest areas, signage and product placement.

- Retailers should ensure that older shoppers have access to smaller, more manageable trolleys. Staff may be required to monitor the trolley bays to periodically ensure that smaller trolleys are always available for older shoppers.

- Where possible, retailers and manufacturers should reduce excessive packaging and take the needs of consumers into account when designing packaging. Retailers should also provide in-store assistance to older shoppers who find it difficult to manage their shopping due to dexterity problems.

- Retailers should have a transparent complaints procedure and develop more innovative ways of communicating with older consumers to get feedback about their shopping experience.

- Retailers should ensure that staff are trained to deal with the particular needs of the older shopper.

Financial Access

- Retailers should provide more special offers on individual items, particularly healthy foods and devise innovative pricing strategies for certain products that older shoppers regularly buy.

Information

- Retailers should consider promoting a specific shopping time for older shoppers when the store is quieter.

- When the store layout is changed, retailers should make the changes clear to customers, particularly older consumers. Retailers should consider providing store maps (in leaflet or poster format), or having staff members throughout the store to advise about the changes and direct older consumers around the shop. In-store signage should also be clear and easy to read.

- Prices must be clearly displayed and correctly positioned.

- Manufacturers should ensure that food labels are easy to understand and are in a clear, appropriate sized font.

- Retailers and manufacturers should investigate innovative ways of providing product information so shoppers are well informed on nutritional content and cooking instructions.

1 Department for Regional Development (2005) Accessible Transport Strategy for Northern Ireland
Silver Service? - Are supermarkets meeting the needs of older consumers?
Making the consumer voice heard and making it count