



The Consumer Council

Response to the Department for Regional Development on the Regional Transportation Strategy 2011 – A Sustainable Transport Future

By the
Consumer Council
for Northern Ireland

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Introduction

The Consumer Council welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Department for Regional Development (DRD) consultation on the Regional Transportation Strategy 2011 – A Sustainable Transport Future.

The Consumer Council is an independent consumer organisation working to bring about change to benefit Northern Ireland's consumers. We campaign for high standards of service, protection and a fair deal for all. We also carry out research, give advice and publish reports and other information. We deal with individual complaints about electricity, natural gas, water, coal and passenger transport.

We seek to ensure that the voice of consumers is heard in the formulation of government strategies and plans and that these deliver real benefits for consumers.

This response includes the views of consumers which have been collated through a range of research projects on transport needs in Northern Ireland undertaken by the Consumer Council. In addition to the research into young people's views of transport undertaken with YouthAction N.I. which resulted in the "Transport Matters"¹ report, a workshop was held with YouthAction in Fermanagh to specifically gather young people's views on the revised Regional Transportation Strategy for inclusion in this response.

The Consumer Council supports the aim of the consultation to produce a revised Regional Transportation Strategy that is "inclusive, realistic, meaningful and relevant" along with the recognition that any revised strategy cannot be developed in isolation from budgetary considerations.

The Consumer Council agrees that particular interests such as freight, active travel and the needs of older and disabled people are contained within the overall strategy. This would also enable further recognition of that fact that many transport

¹ "Transport Matters – Young People's Experiences, Attitudes and Ideas for Improving Public Transport", Consumer Council, January 2011.

interventions designed to benefit specific groups such as those with a disability also provide benefit to others, such as ramps on buses and in stations and the provision of audio and visual information for public transport users. Containing these measures within the overall strategy will ensure that progress against targets is regularly monitored and reported. Specific action plans and resources must still be dedicated to addressing the needs of older and disabled people and the use of separate working groups to development these plans would ensure that these issues are given due consideration.

Developments since in the introduction of the Regional Transportation Strategy in 2002

The Consumer Council commissioned research to find out how public transport is viewed by those who use it regularly and by those who rarely, if ever, travel by public transport. The aim of the research was to identify what progress had been made since the introduction of the original RTS in 2002 and identify what issues remained to ensure future policy could focus on addressing these. This research was published in June 2009 in the report “Public Transport - On the Right Track? Attitudes to Public Transport in Northern Ireland”². The research findings show people in Northern Ireland still largely depend on the car. Three-quarters travel by car at least three times a week.

Despite private car use remaining the dominant mode of travel, there has been a positive shift in the number of people using public transport:

- In the first five years of the current Regional Transportation Strategy the total number of journeys passengers made using public transport grew by almost 7 million to 79.4 million in 2007/2008;
- Buses are used by more than half (55 per cent) of the population, while trains by more than a third (37 per cent).

² “Public Transport - On the Right Track? Attitudes to Public Transport in Northern Ireland”, Consumer Council, June 2009

A mixed view emerged about the standard of public transport in Northern Ireland. Improvements to public transport highlighted since the launch of the Regional Transportation Strategy in 2002 include:

- An improved public transport system (Metro) in Belfast;
- Regular bus services between major towns;
- Investment in new trains;
- Free travel for the over 60s; and
- Good bus service from Belfast to Belfast International Airport and George Best Belfast City Airport.

However, in rural areas there is greater dissatisfaction with choice, convenience, and frequency of service.

Key concerns for consumers included:

- Value for Money (identified as the top concern for passengers);
- Customer service (an area of concern for people with disabilities and older people which put them off using public transport);
- Information provision (passengers felt that the provision of information could be improved);
- Condition of facilities (the condition of bus stops and shelters was a concern for all bus users, in particular rural passengers);
- Poor integration of bus and train services.

A range of other issues were also identified through the research including:

- Lack of public transport services in rural area;
- Frequency of off-peak services;
- The limited coverage of the rail network.

The research also included the views of school age children. There was a general consensus amongst older children that once they had learnt how to drive they did not expect to make regular use of public transport. To examine this further the Consumer Council undertook research with young people across Northern Ireland in conjunction with YouthAction N.I. This research was published in January 2011

in the report “Transport matters – Young People’s Experiences, Attitudes and Ideas for Improving Public Transport”³.

The research found that young people wanted to make use of public transport but faced a range of barriers which prevented them. This included the cost and availability of transport, particularly in rural areas, along with poor customer service or lack of information where services were available. A number of recommendations were contained within the report. The Consumer Council is working with YouthAction N.I. and Translink to address a range of these. This includes the production of a guide specifically targeted at young people on how to save on the cost of travel and make a complaint if they are dissatisfied, and a trial of a new ‘smartcard’ which offers discounted travel for young people aged 16 – 23 on all Translink services in Northern Ireland. A number of other recommendations from the report, such as improvements needed to infrastructure for those walking and cycling to access public transport, need to be addressed by the Department for Regional Development as part of the revised Regional Development Strategy.

Current Context

- Lack of Modal Shift

Despite the investment made to date and the overall increase in the number of journeys undertaken using public transport compared to 2002 levels, the aim of producing modal shift from private car to public transport has not been met. The latest DRD ‘Travel Survey for Northern Ireland’ covering 2007-2009 shows that car travel made up just over four fifths (81%) of the total distance travelled, the same as in 1999-2001, whilst only 7% of the total distance travelled was on public transport (also consistent with earlier years).

The Consumer Council believes the revised Regional Transportation Strategy should include a measurable target for modal shift with time-bound milestones specified so progress can be measured.

³ “Transport matters – Young People’s Experiences, Attitudes and Ideas for Improving Public Transport”, Consumer Council, January 2011

- Public Transport Passenger Journeys

Following a peak in passenger journeys on public transport of 80.74 million in 2008/09, overall passenger journeys have started to fall. Total journeys fell by over 2.5 million journeys in 2009/10 to a total of 78.17 million. This trend is continuing - comparing the most up to date information available for 2010/11, the total passenger journeys on public transport in each of the first three quarters are all lower than the corresponding quarter in 2009/10.

- Budget spending on roads compared to public transport

The initial Regional Transportation Strategy proposed a spending ratio for roads to public transport of 65:35. The average ratio for spending from 2002/2003 – 2006/07 was 72% on roads and 28% on public transport. The Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland moved this further to approximately 80:20, and the latest transport spending plans for DRD show a spending split of 85:15 for roads compared to public transport. The Consumer Council recognises that spending on roads can improve public transport through measures including bus prioritisation and Quality Bus Corridors, but if funding support for public transport is not provided there will be limited services on which public transport passengers can benefit from these measures.

A recent example of road spending was the extensive work undertaken to improve road connections between Belfast and Dublin. This has improved connectivity between the two capitals for those travelling by road but this investment has not been replicated on the equivalent rail link. The result of this has been to improve the attractiveness of private car use on this route, with little equivalent improvement on more sustainable travel options which are available.

The Consumer Council believes the revised RTS must deliver a more balanced funding split towards public transport to deliver a public transport network that will provide a viable alternative to private car use and produce a sustained modal shift.

The Consumer Council believes it is essential that the revised strategy demonstrates cross-departmental planning and working to achieve the best outcome for consumers and integration across government policies.

Transport services are currently provided by a number of agencies including the education sector and health service. It is important that under the new public transport agency a high level, joined up approach to the provision of transport is taken that links in with planning, education, health and other sectors to ensure that consumers have the option to use more sustainable forms of transport to undertake essential journeys and make the most efficient use of resources.

Comments on high level transport aims, initial proposed strategic objectives and transport interventions

The Consumer Council supports the high level transport aims and proposed strategic objectives, which will help underpin future projects and achieve a balanced and sustainable transport network:

Improve connectivity within the region

More efficiently use road space and railways

Better maintain transport infrastructure

Improve access in our towns and cities

Improve access in rural areas

Improve connections to key tourism sites

Improve safety

Improve social inclusion

Develop transport programmes focussed on the user

Reduce greenhouse gas emissions from transport

Protect our biodiversity

Reduce noise and air pollution

The Consumer Council views many of these strategic objectives as interlinked. For example 'developing transport programmes focussed on the user' will impact on improving social inclusion, help to reduce transport related greenhouse gas emissions and improve safety by ultimately reducing private car use and increasing use of public transport. With this being the case, the merit of ranking the strategic objectives is questionable in terms of the benefit it would provide in guiding the development of future policy and projects.

The Consumer Council welcomes the commitment from DRD to work with stakeholders in developing the Strategic Objectives that will underpin the revised Regional Transport Strategy. Ensuring that the views of stakeholders are recognised and visible within the revised strategy will help to ensure buy in and support for the strategy going forward.

Transport interventions

Below are comments on some of the initial proposed interventions.

□ Improved Connections between Different Modes of Transport; Introduction of more Park and Ride Facilities

Lack of connectivity has regularly been raised as an issue by passengers who need to undertake journeys using more than one mode of transport⁴. Passengers highlighted difficulties with making journeys which required use of more than one public transport service. Issues raised include issues with the integration of timetables, ticketing and lack of integration in terms of the locations of where services arrive and depart along with the lack of facilities available at modal interchange points. Issues with poor connectivity also have a larger impact on those in rural areas due to the lower frequency and availability of services in these areas. Whilst private car use is a requirement for some consumers, for others it

⁴ The need to improve connections was raised by passengers in the "Public Transport – on the right track?" (June 2009), "Consumer 2010" (October 2010) and "Transport Matters – Young People's Experiences, Attitudes and Ideas for Improving Public Transport" (January 2011) research reports published by the Consumer Council.

represents a more convenient way to travel compared to public transport alternatives which are available. Improving connections between public transport services will help to encourage use by those who currently choose to travel by car.

Improvements are also needed to enable more integration of cycling in to public transport journeys to enable greater access to services. The introduction of more dedicated park and ride sites (such as the facility at Cairnshill) has enabled more car users to make park of their journey using public transport and help to reduce congestion. Development of more sites is required along with improved parking at bus and rail halts and facilities for bicycle parking.

□ Prioritisation of Road Space for Public Transport

More Quality Bus Corridors and bus prioritisation measures will result in quicker, more reliable journey times for public transport users, increase the attractiveness of public transport and provide an incentive for current car users to switch to public transport. To deliver the most benefit, bus lanes, parking and priority measures must be sufficiently, and visibly, enforced.

In addition to bus lanes, car pool lanes present a further opportunity to reduce single occupancy car use (in conjunction with 'park and share' facilities) and reduce congestion and help limit green house gas emissions from transport.

□ Maintenance of Transport Infrastructure to Best Practice Standards

Improving the standards of transport infrastructure will increase the attractiveness and comfort factors of public transport for passengers. Provision of amenities such as public toilets, telephone and internet kiosks and other conveniences have been highlighted by passengers as factors which would encourage greater use of public transport.⁵

⁵ Transport Matters – Young People's Experiences, Attitudes and Ideas for Improving Public Transport", January 2011

Recent upgrades of rail halts and some bus and rail stations have improved the accessibility and attractiveness of public transport. Despite this, accessibility issues remain at some major rail stations and the lack of infrastructure in many rural areas such as footpaths or lighting at bus stops continues to create barriers to accessing transport services⁶. These issues must be addressed to develop a fully accessible public transport network.

□ Introduction of Further Innovative Public Transport Services which meet the needs of communities

The Consumer Council welcomes the provision of further services which will meet the needs of communities. Consideration needs to be given to the use of more flexible, demand responsive services which can present a more efficient and effective way of delivering transport services in some areas.

More promotion and provision of information on services which are currently available is also needed. Investment in new buses and trains, improvements in stations and at rail halts across the network have improved the accessibility of many public transport services. Many potential users of these services are unaware of the improvements made and more promotion of the accessibility of mainstream public transport is needed.

Research the Consumer Council conducted with young people⁷ found that many young people are unaware of services which are already available or face difficulties in accessing information on these. Young people were also unaware of many of the ticketing options which are available to them which are more cost effective than paying for individual journeys, such as the Translink 'SmartLink' and 'iLink' cards and other multi-journeys tickets. The Consumer Council has worked

⁶ The need to improve infrastructure and lighting to access to rural bus stops was raised by passengers in the "Safer Journeys to School" (June 2006), "Public Transport – on the right track?" (June 2009) and "Transport Matters – Young People's Experiences, Attitudes and Ideas for Improving Public Transport" (January 2011) research reports, published by the Consumer Council.

⁷ "Transport Matters – Young People's Experiences, Attitudes and Ideas for Improving Public Transport", January 2011

with young people from YouthAction N.I. and Translink to develop a guide⁸ specifically for younger people, highlighting a range of ticketing options and concession passes available which can save on the cost of travel and encourage more use of public transport. Improving access to accurate, timely and accessible information on services and the cost of travel will play an important role in encouraging and enabling greater use of public transport.

Further promotion is also needed of other, flexible services which are available including Door To Door transport and the Dial-A-Lift service provided by Rural Community Transport Operators. These services play an important role, enabling many people to access local services and the wider mainstream public transport network.

One of the key challenges for the new public transport agency will be the development a contact centre which can provide passengers with accurate information on *all* forms of public transport available including those provided by Translink, Door to Door, community transport and private operators. The difficulties some passengers found in accessing accurate information on public transport services during disruption caused by extreme in December 2010 and January 2011 highlights the importance of improving information provision for passengers.

During both the research which resulted in the “Transport Matters” report⁹ and the focus group held to specifically discuss the revised RTS, young people highlighted expansion of the rail network as a key factor which would encourage modal shift from private cars. Whilst recognising that this would require considerable investment and current budgets are limited, expansion of the rail network should be considered in longer term plans to increase usage of public transport. Recent investment has proved successful with NI Railways recording record train passenger journeys of 10.4m journeys in 2010/11, in comparison to an overall downward trend in bus patronage over the last two years.

⁸ “The Consumer Council’s Guide to Public Transport for Young People”, June 2011

⁹ “Transport Matters – Young People’s Experiences, Attitudes and Ideas for Improving Public Transport”, Consumer Council, January 2011

□ Working with Communities to Better Understand Their Needs

Development of 'Local transport plans' with local communities will form a key responsibility of the new public transport agency. Stakeholders will require guidance on how these will be developed and what weight they will be given in the planning and provision of services. Work will also be required to promote the development of local transport plans to encourage participation from a wide range of stakeholders and public transport users in the development of these plans and high level government strategies. This view was echoed by young people from YouthAction N.I. who highlighted the need to engage young people and other stakeholders directly when developing transport plans.

□ Improved Accessibility for Older People and People with Disabilities;

Investment has delivered new buses and trains along with improved transport infrastructure including new bus and rail stations and improved rail halts which have all improved the accessibility of transport for older people and those with disabilities.

Despite this a range of barriers still exist which limit the accessibility of transport. There is a need to look at the accessibility of entire journeys which includes the accessibility of the journey to reach a train or bus stop and how different services integrate such as Door-2-Door transport and mainstream public transport services. Improving integration across services will provide greater confidence to older people and those with a disability that all sections of their journey can be undertaken. Improved accessibility of vehicles will be of little benefit to those who are unable to access services due to lack of infrastructure such as footpaths, lighting and sheltered bus stops. Improved parking enforcement at bus stops is also required to ensure these are not blocked due to parked vehicles which can prevent those with a mobility impairment accessing the vehicle.

In addition to the promotion of the accessibility of public transport, travel training schemes are a further opportunity to give people the confidence to make use of services.

The cost of travel is a further issue for many passengers with a disability. Whilst recognising that current budgets are limited, the Consumer Council believes that consideration should be given to providing free concessionary travel to all those with a disability with the aim of reducing the financial barriers to travel many people with a disability face.

□ Expansion of Travelwise Initiatives; Promotion of Walking and Cycling

Educating consumers about the impact of their travel choices, and providing information and training on alternative options will play an important part in encouraging more sustainable travel.

The Consumer Council shares this focus on educating consumers on the impact of their travel choices and alternatives available and would welcome the opportunity to develop areas where we can work together with DRD's Travelwise initiative on this.

The Consumer Council believes that all government departments should develop travel plans to educate their staff about more sustainable options for undertaking work-related journeys. This would help to show best practice to other employers and demonstrate that there is real cross-departmental buy-in to strategies such as the Regional Transportation Strategy.

In recent research with young people¹⁰, it was recommended that DRD should work with Translink to ensure that cycling can integrate with public transport through the provision of more facilities to safely park bicycles in rural areas, and bicycle hire schemes in urban areas which are located at public transport stations.

Bicycle hire schemes which have been introduced in London and Dublin have been successful in encouraging cycling, either for entire journeys or as part of longer journeys undertaken in part by public transport. The Consumer Council would

¹⁰ "Transport Matters – Young People's Experiences, Attitudes and Ideas for Improving Public Transport", Consumer Council, January 2011

support the implementation of similar schemes in Belfast and other town and cities. This view was echoed by young people from YouthAction N.I. who were involved in the workshop to give their views on the revised RTS.

Greater integration of land use planning and public transport planning also provides a further opportunity to encourage and enable greater use of public transport and active travel. Creating “walkable communities”¹¹ will encourage more active travel, and enable more people to walk to locations where they can access public transport.

□ Restricting Car Parking in Towns and Cities

The Consumer Council is not opposed to measures to discourage or restrict usage of private cars but only where there is an affordable and accessible public transport alternative available for those who need to travel. The consultation document recognises that this is not the case in many town and cities, as “while the Sub-Regional Transport Plan suggested increased public transport services in towns and cities outside Belfast, funding constraints have either prevented their implementation or meant that services which were initially introduced have subsequently had to be withdrawn”.

Many consumers feel that there is no viable public transport alternative to car use for some journeys¹² and more work is needed to enable consumers to travel using public transport.

Recognition must be given for the need for adequate provision of blue badge parking for those with a disability or mobility impairment, along with adequately resourced enforcement to prevent abuse of these spaces.

¹¹ Some characteristics of a “walkable Community” are clear systems of footpaths and roads which accommodate and encourage walking and which provide pedestrians with protection from vehicles and bicycles (Adapted from “Creating Walkable Communities”, The Mid-America Regional Council, 1998).

¹² The lack of a viable public transport alternative to car use for many journeys was indicated by consumers in “Public Transport – on the right track?” (June 2009), “Consumer 2010” (October 2010) and “Transport Matters – Young People’s Experiences, Attitudes and Ideas for Improving Public Transport” (January 2011) research reports published by the Consumer Council.

Prioritisation Framework

The Consumer Council welcomes the proposed approach of using a Policy Prioritisation Framework to identify programmes and projects that fit with the overall direction of the Regional Transportation Strategy. Evaluating projects purely on financial terms has meant that road building projects have traditionally scored more positively than those relating to public transport. The new framework must give greater consideration to wider societal benefits that projects may produce such as tackling social exclusion, ensuring access to education, health and employment, wider health benefits brought about by the use of public transport, reduced congestion and reducing road traffic accidents by producing a sustained modal shift to public transport.