



**Transport Services funded by the Rural Transport Fund
and the Transport Programme for People with
Disabilities**

Views from passengers, operators and stakeholders

July 2013

Alternative Formats

This report is also available in braille, large print and audio CD on request.

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1. 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/>

2. Background

The Consumer Council has a statutory role to represent all passengers travelling to, from and within Northern Ireland. This includes users of public transport and those who travel using the Door-2-Door Transport scheme in urban areas and community transport including the Dial-A-Lift scheme operated in rural areas. Dial-A-Lift (operated by a number of community transport providers) and the Door-2-Door Transport scheme are membership based services which receive funding from the Department for Regional Development. Full details of the Dial-A-Lift and Door-2-Door Transport services can be found in Appendix A.

3. Aim

The aim of this project was to seek views from passengers of the Door-2-Door Transport and Dial-A-Lift services on how the services operate and highlight areas where passengers believe there is potential for transport operators and the Department for Regional Development to make improvements.

4. Research Objectives

The aim of the research was to gather views from passengers who use the Dial-A-Lift service and other transport options provided by Rural Transport Partnerships in rural areas. The research also sought views from passengers of the Door-2-Door Transport service which operated in urban areas across Northern Ireland at the time the research was undertaken.

This included passengers' views on customer service from drivers and booking staff, the appropriateness of vehicles used, operating hours and operational areas in which passengers can travel, the cost of travel and how well passengers thought the service operates in practice.

Further areas for discussion included how passengers accessed information on transport services, if they ever had reason to make a complaint and how they believed this had been handled and any ways in which they believe the services can better meet their transport needs.

The research also sought to determine how users of Community Transport and Door-2-Door Transport regularly travelled, and whether this included use of mainstream public transport services provided by Translink, taxis or any other

forms of transport. A further objective was to establish if how people travelled had changed in recent years and if so, what was the cause of this.

The research also gathers views from transport operators who provide Community Transport and Door-2-Door Transport services, and other stakeholders to gather their views on how the service can effectively meet passenger demand.

Based on the issues and views raised, a number of key findings have been outlined at the end of this report together with a response from the Department for Regional Development. The Consumer Council will work the Department for Regional Development, transport operators and stakeholders to address the issues identified by passengers in this report.

5. Methodology

The research was undertaken through six focus groups with passengers who were members of community transport or Door-2-Door Transport across Northern Ireland, along with interviews with transport operators and representatives from other stakeholder organisations.

Focus Groups

Location	Profile
Newtownards / North Down	Community transport passengers
Omagh	Community transport passengers
Lurgan	Door-2-Door Transport passengers
Derry/Londonderry	Door-2-Door Transport passengers
Cookstown and Dungannon	Community transport passengers
Bangor	Door-2-Door Transport passengers

Each focus group included 10-12 people. Participants represented a range of age brackets with varying mobility impairments or disabilities including urban and rural dwellers and participants with a variety of travel needs. Focus group participants were recruited through transport operators, community groups and other groups comprised of older people, rural dwellers and those with a disability or mobility impairment. Focus group participants took part in an individual capacity, expressing their own personal views on the issues discussed.

Interviews with transport operators

Operator	Service
Easilift	Community transport provider
Down Community Transport	Community transport provider
Bridge Accessible Transport	Door-2-Door Transport provider
Cookstown Rural Community Transport	Community transport provider
Dungannon & District Community Transport	Community transport provider
Disability Action	Door-2-Door Transport provider

Interviews with stakeholders

Stakeholder Organisation	Remit
IMTAC	The Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee is a committee of disabled people and older people as well as others including key transport professionals, whose role is to advise Government and others in Northern Ireland on issues that affect the mobility of older people and disabled people.
Community Transport Association (CTA)	The CTA exists to support operators and passengers and acts as the lead UK body for voluntary and community transport. The CTA's vision is of "A fairer society free of social exclusion and injustice where everyone has personal choice, mobility and access to the services they require".

6. Key Findings from the Focus Groups

- All the groups felt the Dial-a-Lift and Door-2-Door Transport services contributed positively to the social inclusion of rural dwellers, older people and those with a disability.
- For some individuals, the services represent the only viable way in which they can travel and the social benefits of travelling with others on the vehicles was raised as an important benefit for passengers.
- A number of operational issues were raised by passengers including:
 - Lack of capacity on both services which means some passengers face difficulties booking journeys;
 - Door-2-Door Transport failing to arrive when booked; and
 - Vehicles not always being appropriate to meet the needs of passengers due to a lack of low floor vehicles.
- The reduction in the availability of transport and the resulting impact on passengers was an issue highlighted consistently in all six of the focus groups.
- Customer service from drivers on both services received universal praise.
- Many believed that there were individuals using the services who could use other means of transport, which restricted the availability of transport for those who most needed it. There was a view that the services should be targeting at those for whom there was no other viable means of transport.
- Improvements in the accessibility of mainstream public transport were not always known, with limited knowledge of the ability to contact Translink to arrange an accessible journey in advance. This meant that some passengers who could potentially use public transport were instead having to rely on other services.
- As both services were considered to be operating at full capacity, this meant that only minimal advertising of the schemes was undertaken. This means that some individuals who may require the service are unaware that these services exist.

- There was a view that a number of improvements in mainstream public transport services could enable more older and disabled people to travel, reducing the demand for the Door-2-Door Transport and Dial-A-Lift schemes. This included:
 - Audio and visual announcements on buses;
 - Use of smaller buses to allow local bus services to reach more areas; and
 - Improved frequency in rural areas, particularly during evenings and weekends.

- There was very limited knowledge amongst those who took part in the focus groups that the Consumer Council could assist with complaints regarding community transport or Door-2-Door Transport where the individual remains unsatisfied after raising a complaint with their transport operator.

7. Departmental Response

The Department notes the comments in regard to the Door-2-Door service. As readers may be aware the Door-2-Door scheme ceased on 31 March 2013.

As an interim measure, until such times as the Department considers how best to address the transport needs of people with disabilities across Northern Ireland, Disability Action will be operating the Disability Action Transport Scheme which is grant aided by the Department.

Given this the comments and issues raised in this report will be considered as future plans are developed.

8. Findings

8.1 Consumer Views on Dial-A-Lift and Community Transport

How participants currently travel

The majority of participants in each of the three groups indicated that community transport was their main form of transport.

Types of travel used varied across individuals in each of the focus groups held. Participants in each of the groups indicated they made some use of taxis, although the cost incurred in this meant use was limited. In all areas, participants noted there was a lack of accessible taxis in their area which impacted on their ability to travel.

“When I tried to go from my home out in Moortown and go up the Toome Bridge Bypass to meet the express bus to Belfast there, to make that connection and back again it was £50 round trip for a taxi and a person can’t sustain that”,
Cookstown Focus Group Participant.

There was some use of Ulsterbus amongst those in the Omagh group. In the Newtownards and Cookstown groups this was less prevalent, with comments noting there were limited routes on which the participants could travel. The lengthy distance to the nearest route or bus stop for some individuals also meant this was not considered a viable option for them.

In each of the groups, some members also availed of lifts from friends or family, whilst for others this option was not available. A significant number of individuals had never driven, whilst others indicated that they had previously been car drivers and subsequently had to stop driving due to varying health or mobility issues.

Awareness and usage of Dial-A-Lift and Community Transport

The majority of passengers involved stated they were first made aware of community transport through word of mouth from friends, family or neighbours. Some individuals noted they had discovered the service through an information leaflet, whilst others had been first informed of community transport by a health care professional.

"I've only been using it since I had a stroke. It was when I was in to physio that they told me about this service", Omagh Focus Group Participant.

"I found out about it from my social worker", Newtownards Focus Group Participant.

Some individuals felt community transport should be advertised more widely to ensure other rural dwellers who could benefit from the service can be made aware of it.

All participants noted they made regular use of community transport with many indicating that community transport represented their main, or in some cases only form of transport. This included use of the Dial-A-Lift service for individual journeys and group travel.

"I live away out in the heart of the country, it's the only way I get out", Omagh Focus Group Participant.

"I live on my own and up a lane and I'm really dependant on community transport so I wouldn't be able to get out at all", Newtownards Focus Group Participant.

"The rural transport, it's been a lifesaver for me", Cookstown Focus Group Participant.

All participants in the Newtownards group availed of a weekly shopping trip which took place each Thursday, with each highlighting the social benefits this service provided for them in addition to the main purpose of the journey.

Participants in the Newtownards and Omagh groups stated the availability of community transport journeys had been reduced which impacted on their ability to undertake social activities. Many individuals noted that two days of travel per week were now permitted on community transport using their concessionary passes whilst previously they would have travelled more regularly. Many of the Newtownards group stated they were unaware of the 'Dial-A-Lift' service. A number of individuals in the Newtownards and Omagh group had undertaken individual travel outside of the Dial-a-Lift operating hours, under the full cost recovery charging model.

The majority of participants across the groups indicated they were content with the types of vehicles used and did not experience any difficulties in terms of accessibility or comfort. Some participants noted that additional space for luggage or shopping onboard the vehicle would be helpful, although there was

recognition this may then impact on the number of people who could travel in the vehicle.

In the Omagh group, one individual noted that volunteer cars were the only viable option for their relative who used community transport.

“My mother has two rods up her spine so there’s no way that she can travel in a minibus, she was using the car service and now for one reason or another it’s the buses and she just cannot use the buses, now she has to use a taxi”, **Omagh Focus Group Participant.**

Accessing information and cost of travel

The main source of information for participants in each of the groups was to contact their local operator directly by telephone. The Newtownards group noted that they previously received a regular newsletter from their community transport provider, along with letters offering transport for specific functions such as Christmas events. These have since ceased, due to the costs incurred by the transport operator in producing and mailing these. Participants in the Cookstown and Dungannon group indicated that they still received occasional newsletters.

Many of the participants in the groups were holders of the concessionary ‘SmartPass’ which allows for free or half fare travel on public transport services. All those in the focus groups felt that the ability to also use the pass on the Dial-A-Lift service improved their ability to travel. Many stated that the use of alternatives such as taxis would be prohibitive due to the cost involved.

Participants in the Omagh and Newtownards group cited use of the transport provided by their local community transport provider under the full cost recovery model and noted that whilst the cost incurred could be prohibitive, it was recognised that this still proved cheaper than travelling by taxi.

“I left home about 8.40am and I got back home again about 1.05pm or 1.10pm from Derry and that’s what it cost me, it cost me £51 or £52”, **Omagh Focus Group Participant.**

The group in Newtownards discussed the Rural Transport Fund Voucher Scheme funded by the Department for Regional Development. The scheme provides up to £100 off the cost of travel for groups who travel using a large coach, which groups can apply for on a quarterly basis. One individual commented that it would be beneficial if the vouchers were available for smaller groups and cited a preference for using community minibuses rather than larger vehicles provided by private bus operators.

“If you have more than 17 people, four times a year you can get £100 towards the trip, but we have only 16..... why we want the smaller bus is because, we went on one of those trips and it was sort of lost because the big bus can't go where the wee bus can go, we'd to walk about a mile to finally get where we wanted to go. The 18-seater would be able to and we want to use the community bus rather than a private one”, Newtownards Focus Group Participant.

In the Cookstown group, there was limited knowledge that community transport could provide transport on a full-cost-recovery basis outside of Dial-A-Lift hours. Once this was discussed, most participants felt this would be beneficial to them and indicated they would be willing to pay for this service.

“If you don't have a way to get out and then at six o'clock in the evening, all throughout the evenings plus weekends you have zero social life, you are just home. I wouldn't mind, pitching in with the cost. That would be alright. I wasn't aware of that”, Cookstown Focus Group Participant.

Booking journeys and customer service from booking staff

Most participants indicated they booked journeys by calling the operator. Those involved in the Omagh and Cookstown groups indicated that they experienced no difficulties booking the journeys they needed to make, particularly if they were able to call in advance. One participant in the Cookstown group also noted a number of examples where the operator was also able to provide transport at short notice to meet their request.

“When I was stuck a couple of times I knew that you should give 24 hours notice but when I rang them up and said ‘is there any way possible that somebody might be lurking about could help me out because I'm in a bind and I've looked at anything else I can do and I'm stuck’ and they have sent someone and extended themselves to accommodate in an emergency which is brilliant”, Cookstown Focus Group Participant.

In the Newtownards group, some individuals noted that unless you were able to call early on a Monday morning to book a journey that week they were unlikely to be able to secure confirmation of travel. One individual also noted that they were aware their neighbour was undertaking a specific journey and when they requested to also travel on the vehicle for the same journey this was denied by the operator.

One individual in the Newtownards group who was a wheelchair user noted that the service was stopped for a number of weeks during spring 2012 which left them unable to leave the house.

An issue which was raised by many participants in the Newtownards group related to the short time provided at their destination before the return journey had to be undertaken. In some instances, this meant the journey was not considered worth undertaking.

“The driver picks me up round about 10.15am and he goes for the rest of the ladies, and that driver drops us off at Ards Shopping Centre, he has got to pick us back up again by 1.30pm and that's not long after, a wee bit more time there would be nice”, Newtownards Focus Group Participant.

“I would have went for about 11am in the morning and I was picked back up again at 3.30pm and I met everybody, some of my family could meet me, it meant I wasn't totally on my own all day. Now, there's no time”, Newtownards Focus Group Participant.

Individuals in the Omagh and Newtownards groups noted that in some instances, their community transport operator had limited the number of days they were able to travel on the Dial-A-Lift service

“I had a slight operation and when I came home I had to go to the health centre to get it dressed every other day and, now they only took me twice that week, they wouldn't take me a third time”, Omagh Focus Group Participant.

“I would have used it at least maybe three, four times a week, it depends. It stopped me from going to visit friends and family because we're only allowed the two days now”, Newtownards Focus Group Participant.

Participants in each of the groups stated that they were happy to share the vehicle with other passengers to allow more people to travel, with many indicating this added to the social benefits of travelling by community transport.

Participants in the Omagh and Cookstown groups both provided positive experiences of interacting with staff when booking journeys. Some participants in the Newtownards group felt that the customer service they received had been negatively impacted by the amalgamation of their community transport provider with other areas.

The majority of those involved in the focus groups stated they had not experienced any issues with journeys they had booked through the Dial-A-Lift service. One example where transport failed to arrive when booked was provided in the Newtownards group.

"I booked actually to go and I was sitting ready for what, an hour, no bus came and I rang up they said I didn't book it but I did book it because I had it on my phone", Newtownards Focus Group Participant.

Customer service from drivers

There was universal praise for the customer service received from drivers in each of the groups.

"They're very friendly, very good, all the drivers", Omagh Focus Group Participant.

"Excellent, absolutely wonderful", Newtownards Focus Group Participant.

"Wonderful", Cookstown Focus Group

Operational areas and hours and linking to the wider network

Participants in the Cookstown and Omagh groups were satisfied that the current operational areas allowed them to access the services they needed.

In the Newtownards group, some individuals felt the service would provide greater benefit to them if the operational area was increased as local trips only facilitated access to a very small number of shops with a limited choice of products.

"In my opinion, the community bus could be a bit more flexible, for instance, letting you go wherever you want to go", Newtownards Focus Group Participant.

"You've only one street and it's expensive in the wee villages to go shopping", Newtownards Focus Group Participant.

Most participants were content that current operating hours met their travel needs, either through the Dial-A-Lift scheme during its operational hours or through the full cost recovery model outside of this. One individual in the Newtownards group noted that the current operating hours meant it was difficult to access early morning hospital appointments using Dial-a-Lift.

Participants in the Omagh group indicated some use of community transport to link to public transport services provided by Translink, although this was minimal and did not form part of most individuals' regular journeys.

Some examples of this working practice were provided in the Cookstown group.

"The connections I've made mostly is to the express bus that goes to Belfast and of course they are always on time", **Cookstown Focus Group Participant.**

In the focus group held in Newtownards, some individuals felt this was not a viable option for them due to mobility issues, the additional time that would be required to interchange between services, issues with the frequency of public transport services or a worry that the bus or rail service there were connecting to may be delayed or cancelled.

"I was told to take a bus to Portaferry and cross on the ferry as a foot passenger and the bus would be waiting on the other side but could you imagine that, I haven't got my walker with me today, I've a stick with me because I've not much walking to do but to trail a walker with me and probably a few messages, a few bags on buses and then on the ferry; it was just a no-no from the word go", **Newtownards Focus Group Participant.**

"You can use [your Smartpass] on Translink but you can't go for messages because you can't bring your trolley out onto the buses, the wee community bus is the only one you can bring your shopping onto", **Newtownards Focus Group Participant.**

Some comments indicated that previously the entire journey would have been provided by the community transport provider, negating the need to transfer between services. This may have built expectation in terms of the service that community transport could deliver in future.

"They always took us the whole journey but then it all stopped", **Newtownards Focus Group Participant.**

Social inclusion

Participants in each of the groups highlighted that the social interaction with other passengers and staff they experienced when travelling by community transport was an important ancillary benefit for them.

"It gives you your bit of independence", **Cookstown Focus Group Participant.**

"Its good because you get to know everybody. There's a lot of isolation that people do have that is answered by a service like this, there's so much isolation", **Cookstown Focus Group Participant.**

Making a complaint

Participants in each of the groups indicated that they would raise any concerns or complaints directly with their community transport provider. Those involved in the Cookstown and Omagh groups added that they were satisfied with the service they had received to date and as such had not had any reason to complain previously.

Participants in all groups indicated they would raise any issues they experienced with Translink services with their local area manager or the Translink Call Centre.

There was no awareness amongst any of the groups of the option to take a complaint regarding community transport, Translink services or other modes of transport to the Consumer Council for investigation if the response received from the transport operator was not deemed satisfactory.

Suggested improvements to meet passenger needs

Most participants indicated they were satisfied with the current service provision. Some participants in the Newtownards group felt that a regular journey outside of the current operational area would provide an improvement to the current service.

"Maybe another trip wider afield. Even if it was a monthly thing", Newtownards Focus Group Participant.

8.2 Operator Views on Dial-A-Lift and Community Transport

All the community transport operators⁵ interviewed stated that most passengers were regular users of the service, with some other passengers only requiring community transport services occasionally or for a short period of time (for example due to a short-term health condition).

All operators noted that demand for travel from passengers has increased in recent years; this meant it could be difficult to provide journeys for new members who join as there was usually limited availability.

Passengers usually found out about the service through word of mouth, with very limited advertising (if any) undertaken by operators as it was feared this would create further demand which could not be met. Some operators continued to promote services which fell outside the Dial-A-Lift service such as group travel. Some operators produced newsletters for members, although others had stopped this due to rising postage costs and the staff time involved in producing these.

Most operators also noted an increase in the number of members who have been signposted to community transport by a health or social care professional. A result of this was that operators were regularly receiving requests from individuals that have been informed that community transport could deliver free transport for them when this may not be the case.

Most operators felt there were individuals who used the Dial-A-Lift service for whom there are other potentially viable alternative travel options. The ability for passengers to use their Smartpass for free or half price travel on the service was generally welcomed, although some operators felt this meant some passengers chose to use the service instead of other viable alternatives they had such as their own private car as it was the cheaper option. Some passengers also had unrealistic expectations regarding what the service could deliver, with the expectation that the service amounted to a low cost personal taxi service. This was, in part, attributed to how services had previously been delivered when demand was lower although it was recognised that this approach could not be sustained with the current levels of demand. Most operators felt that there was a need to target services for those most in need and for whom there were no viable alternatives available. Due to limited funding availability, some operators had limited the number of journeys which could be undertaken by a passenger

⁵ A list of participating operators is included on Page 8.

each week under the Dial-A-Lift scheme. Transport was still available outside of this under the full cost recovery model.

Some operators recognised that whilst Dial-A-Lift was designed for local journeys, this did not always provide the range of shops and facilities which passengers need to access as the amenities in each local area can vary considerably. A further issue for passengers was that as Dial-A-Lift did not operate in the evening, this meant the service could not be used for further education classes.

Most operators indicated low levels of demand from passengers for journeys which link in with wider public transport services. In some cases this was due to the limited number of routes in some rural areas, or was not viewed as a viable option for some older passengers who would then be required to carry shopping on public transport which may create difficulties for them. A few of the operators felt that some passengers were happy to undertake journeys which linked to public transport routes if the details of the journey and how to change between services was explained to them in advance.

8.3 Stakeholder Views on Dial-A-Lift and Community Transport

There was recognition that operating a service such as Dial-A-Lift can be difficult in many rural areas due to the dispersed nature of some communities. One stakeholder took the view that services should be tailored in different areas in recognition of the differing transport services and levels of population density. An area such as North Down which features a number of larger public transport corridors was noted as having different transport needs than an area such as rural Fermanagh and that services should be varied to take account of this. It was also considered that there may be merit in revisiting the current operational areas for each operator to ensure the service was enabling passengers to access key services and locations.

As Dial-A-Lift is a membership based service, this can result in a limited pool of passengers making the majority of journeys. Targeted marketing, aimed at individuals who could benefit from the service was noted as a way to address this.

One stakeholder took the view that the cost of the service should mirror that for a local public transport journey. Stakeholders also believed that Dial-A-Lift providers should be encouraging passengers to link to public transport services where these were available to make the best use of resources. It was considered that previous provision, with drivers providing the entire journey and making multiple stops per journey may have increased passenger expectations of what the service can deliver which means some passengers prefer the Dial-a-Lift service even when there is a viable public transport option to use or link into.

The provision of advice and 'Travel Training' were proposed as options to encourage and enable those who have alternative means to avail of these. The Department for Transport⁶ describes Travel Training as any kind of scheme which provides tailored and practical help in travelling by public transport which usually involves a practical hands-on element involving accompanied journeys, as well as some classroom based tuition in some cases. The training is predominantly aimed at people who are less able or less inclined to travel independently. This includes (but is not limited to) people with reduced mobility, learning difficulties, young inexperienced travellers and those who are older and have lost confidence or who find themselves without a car for the first time in years.

Stakeholders noted that the distinction between Dial-A-Lift journeys and those offered outside of this using the full cost recovery charging model was not particularly clear to passengers, with many passengers having the perception that all community transport is operated under the Dial-A-Lift model. It was noted that there may also be a perception from other Government Departments, such as the health and social care sector, that community transport is a free transport

⁶ "Travel Training – Good Practice Guidance", Department for Transport, February 2011.

option and this has been promoted to their service users rather than mainstream public transport. Issues have also been raised by passengers wishing to use community transport to access further education colleges for night classes who are currently unable to use the Dial-A-Lift service as this ceases to operate at 6pm each weeknight.

Stakeholders believed that a more joined up approach to the planning and delivery of all transport services in Northern Ireland was needed, with a focus on passenger needs rather than specific transport services. This could improve planning and integration across the various Government Departments and transport operators involved in the funding and delivery of transport, and ensure effective use of public funding to improve the ability of rural dwellers, older people and those with a disability to travel.

8.4 Consumer Views on Door-2-Door Transport

How participants currently travel

In the Bangor group, all participants had travelled using Door-2-Door Transport with many also making some use of Ulsterbus and NI Railways services, mainly for longer journeys outside of the local areas. Some participants were unable to travel on Ulsterbus services as the vehicles could not accommodate their larger powered chairs.

In the Derry group, many relied on Door-2-Door Transport as their main or sole mode of transport. Some passengers had previously been car drivers, with changes in their health meaning they now relied on Door-2-Door Transport. Some participants made use of Door-2-Door to travel within Derry in addition to public transport to travel further afield outside of the city. Others had to rely on Door-2-Door as there was either limited evening and weekend public transport services available, or no bus route which they could access.

“We don't have any service after 5.30pm, 6pm so it's just Door-2-Door”, Derry Focus Group Participant.

Participants in the Lurgan group cited Door-2-Door Transport as their main form of transport. When this was not available, many had to rely on friends or family for lifts. Some individuals had made also use of public transport including Ulsterbus and NI Railways although many participants stated that this was not a viable option for them.

Participants in each of the groups made some use of taxis to travel, although the cost incurred meant this could only be used occasionally. In all areas individuals noted there was a lack of accessible taxis which suited their needs. Others felt that taxis did not provide a satisfactory means of transport due to concerns over a lack of driver training to assist wheelchair users, or lack of taxis with lifts.

“I am solely dependent on Door-2-Door to get around, without them I can't go anywhere. No other sort of means of getting around fits the bill, there's one or two accessible taxis in town but they have wobbly ramps”, Derry Focus Group Participant”, Derry Focus Group Participant.

“There's no local taxis in the area that have lifts, if you cannot transfer from your wheelchair into a seat in the taxi, it's very, very hard to get a taxi that actually fits the head room in”, Lurgan Focus Group Participant.

Awareness and usage of Door-2-Door Transport

Most participants indicated they were first made aware of Door-2-Door Transport through word of mouth from friends and family. Some felt there was a need to advertise the service more.

Participants in each of the groups commented that they either made regular use of Door-2-Door Transport or regularly attempted to book journeys.

Many participants had been using Door-2-Door Transport for a number of years with many relying solely on Door-2-Door Transport to travel. One individual in the Derry group indicated they had used the service for over ten years through Bridge Accessible Transport (pre-dating the current service).

Some individuals in the Lurgan and Bangor groups indicated that larger Door-2-Door Transport buses were the only type of vehicle which could accommodate their powered wheelchair, yet it was particularly difficult to access journeys on these larger vehicles. Participants also felt that increasing the number of larger vehicles available would allow more individuals to travel together, improving the social benefits of travelling on Door-2-Door Transport. Some individuals in the Bangor group also noted issues with the vehicles used in their area such as issues with ramps and doors malfunctioning.

“The thing about Door-2-Door is that you can't take any more than one in it [the vehicle]”, Lurgan Focus Group Participant.

“I was on the ramp for a half an hour. He got me up and in at my house but when we arrived at the destination I was hanging, well the ramp wouldn't go down”, Bangor Focus Group Participant.

“I don't know how some of the buses are running because I thought they were yearly inspected. Bald tyres, ramps don't work, one actually has a crushed door where it was hit by a lorry or he reversed into a lorry, I don't know which”, Bangor Focus Group Participant.

Some participants felt that use of low-floor vehicles would prove beneficial as it would remove issues faced with ramps, speed up the time taken to board and alight from the vehicles and improve overall accessibility.

“If it was a low floor vehicle there's no need for a ramp, the wheelchair gets on and off a lot quicker when the person in the wheelchair uses it as opposed to a ramp coming out and driving up and all this”, Bangor Focus Group Participant.

Accessing information and cost of travel

Passengers generally accessed information by telephoning their Door-2-Door Transport operator directly.

A particular issue raised by the Bangor group related to the failure of their Door-2-Door Transport operator to provide information in accessible formats such as audio CD or Braille format when requested. Participants noted that banks and other service providers offered the option to receive information in accessible format yet this was not offered by their Door-2-Door provider.

"[Information] needs to be in a format which meets the needs of the passengers and that should be something that should be asked in a form, what is your preferred means of communication and then that should be that from the start",
Bangor Focus Group Participant.

Most participants felt the current charge for journeys on Door-2-Door Transport was reasonable. Many individuals compared the cost of travelling on Door-2-Door Transport to that incurred when using accessible taxi services or Translink services.

"It is an awful lot cheaper than a taxi", **Lurgan Focus Group Participant.**

"Before Door-2-Door came on the scene, it would have cost us £12 over to Kiltonga and £12 back in a taxi, so at least Door-2-Door is getting you there for £1.50 so that's the good side of things", **Bangor Focus Group Participant.**

In the Derry group, one participant felt that multi-journey tickets would be advantageous as it would remove the need for the driver to deal with small amounts of cash for each journey which could speed up boarding times. In the Bangor group, a number of individuals noted that they previously purchased journeys in bulk at a lower cost per journey. This option had since been removed, with many participants indicating they had issues with this. The result of this was that passengers now had to pay a higher cost per journey.

"I was paying by [pre-paid] credits and because they kept making so many mistakes I had to stop, now I'm losing out because I'm paying £1.50 per fare instead of £1.15 [per fare]", **Bangor Focus Group Participant.**

Other participants in the Bangor and Derry groups felt that concessionary passes should be available on Door-2-Door Transport.

“Door-2-Door is meant to be an alternative to public transport for people who find it difficult to use, on that basis I think its unfair that as I can’t use a bus I’m having to pay £3 return when on a bus it would be free”, **Bangor Focus Group Participant.**

“How come that your SmartPass will work on Ulsterbus but it won’t work on Bridge Transport? Both of them are funded by the government, why is the SmartPass not available on the Door-2-Door service?”, **Derry Focus Group Participant.**

Booking journeys and customer service from booking staff

Participants in the Derry group indicated that they experienced no problems in booking journeys on Door-2-Door Transport and offered praise for booking staff who they felt got to know passengers and their needs.

“I think their service is absolutely excellent, the staff are so caring. The staff you ring up, they are so nice”, **Derry Focus Group Participant.**

Many in the Lurgan and Bangor groups indicated that they experienced regular difficulties in booking journeys.

“They say we’ll take it in 4 week slots but then when you phone to do a 4 week slot they’ll say to you, now I’m not sure whether we can book you in but if there’s any problems, we’ll phone you back but they never phone you back”, **Lurgan Focus Group Participant.**

Participants in the Lurgan groups also felt that the timing of their journeys was dictated by their Door-2-Door Transport operator, with alternatives or flexibility in times rarely offered.

Some participants in the Bangor group indicated a view that better coordination of journeys would allow more people to travel. It was felt that booking staff were not always knowledgeable about the local area when booking journeys, and did not always check availability when they rang to book journeys. There were also comments from the Bangor and Lurgan groups that the customer service provided could vary considerably depending on which member of staff they spoke to.

"I can tell right away if I'm booking and I get through to a certain person and ask, they just say 'no' but I mean it's my eyesight that's the problem, it's not my hearing and you don't hear the keys going [on the computer] so I know they are not checking but if I ring back later and get somebody else and try to book the same journey they say 'oh yes'", Bangor Focus Group Participant.

"Last Friday for instance there was me and another lady on this huge big bus and yet they told people there was no buses going to Ards and we were going to Ards on this big bus, just me and this other lady. What I think you need is someone in each area that knows the area that's going to coordinate so more people are on it", Bangor Focus Group Participant.

Participants in the Bangor group also noted that they had previously booked journeys using text and email and as a result of bookings not being recorded they had subsequently stopped using these options and instead contacted the operator by telephone.

A number of participants in both the Lurgan and Bangor groups provided examples where services which had been booked failed to arrive, in particular for the return leg of a journey.

"One time they left us stranded....we had booked it to come back and they turned round and told me to my face we didn't", Lurgan Focus Group Participant.

"There was a friend of mine, I had blowed about Door-2-Door to him, he got his membership and he finally got a night out to go to the pictures, they took him to the pictures but they didn't come back for him", Bangor Focus Group Participant.

As a result of the service failing to arrive when booked and other difficulties in booking journeys, some noted that this has discouraged them from using the service again.

Some passengers felt booking staff did not allow sufficient time for drivers to complete journeys, or take into account time to allow passengers with differing needs to board the vehicles. This included those with larger powered chairs who require additional time compared to an individual with a visual impairment who is mobile.

“They are not really working it out properly and scheduling it and then that of course then is making drivers late for their next passenger. I mean I was with a driver the other night and he told me he was five minutes off an hour late for a lady in Newtownards Shopping Centre. She was sitting waiting in a wheelchair out in the cold because she thought obviously ‘oh the bus is coming at seven’. At five to eight he pulled up outside because of the way the office had organised his jobs”, Bangor Focus Group Participant.

Some also noted examples where Door-2-Door Transport arrived early for the return leg of their journey.

“I find when they do come for you, if you book it for 11am, they come at 10.40am or 10.45am and they’ll ask you to leave early”, Lurgan Focus Group Participant.

When questioned, participants in the Lurgan group noted they had no knowledge that there is an out-of-hours telephone number to contact when services fail to arrive, nor had they been provided with this. Some participants in the Bangor group indicated that this was a mobile number which meant it could be hard to remember. A suggestion was made that enabling calls to the main booking number to forward on to this number out of office hours would be a benefit.

“I never had that [the out of hours number]”, Lurgan Focus Group Participant.

“Their after hours number is a mobile but could that not be set up so the number you ring during the day, that it could swap over to that number at night because it’s not easy to remember a mobile number unless you have it programmed in your phone”, Bangor Focus Group Participant.

Customer service from drivers

There was universal praise for customer service received from drivers from all participants across the three focus groups held.

“The drivers are friendly and very helpful”, Lurgan Focus Group Participant.

“The drivers are absolutely fantastic”, Bangor Focus Group Participant.

“They’re extremely courteous, they always go one step further than anybody else”, Derry Focus Group Participant.

Operational areas and hours and linking to the wider network

Most comments made regarding the operational areas stated that Door-2-Door Transport provided a valuable service for local journeys, with most issues relating to journeys which required travel further afield or linking in with either the Door-2-Door Transport service in another areas or community transport in rural areas.

“Door-2-Door is brilliant for local areas but when you want to go out of the local area, really it takes months to plan something, so anybody with a disability is limited in where we can go”, Lurgan Focus Group Participant.

“They can only cover their catchment area and if you don't fit within the catchment area there's a gap within the services where they are not linked up, it would be a good idea if there was a way the Door-2-Door services could possibly link up so there wouldn't be a gap between the different areas”, Derry Focus Group Participants.

Participants in the Bangor group also felt that the boundaries should overlap between areas to ensure there are no gaps. Examples were given where individuals lived a very short distance outside of the catchment boundary of Door-2-Door and as a result of this were denied membership. Ensuring the boundaries overlapped would remove this issue and ensure no one who requires the service is unable to join.

Generally, focus group participants were happy that the current operational hours met their travel needs. In the Bangor group, some individuals noted that availability seemed more limited later at night and at weekends.

“They have cut back at weekends and some nights you can only get them maybe till nine....I asked the driver for later and he said ‘well I can't get you at half ten 'cause of me finishing at nine”, Bangor Focus Group Participant.

An issue raised by those in the Lurgan and Bangor groups was the short time available at their destination before the vehicle would arrive for their return journey. This sometimes meant the journey was not viewed as worth undertaking:

“We had to come home earlier than we had expected to come home, which meant that you couldn't go to some of the places you wanted to go. I'd like to go in and get a meal and all but you can't get that in 10 minutes”, Lurgan Focus Group Participant.

Where participants had made use of Door-2-Door Transport to link in with the wider public transport network this was generally found to have worked well. This

was particularly noted for linking in with NI Railways and Translink Goldline services to travel outside of participants' local area.

Making a complaint

A number of individuals cited examples where they had previously complained to their Door-2-Door Transport operators, yet most felt this was either dismissed or no response or apology was received.

"I've made a complaint and it's just kind of dismissed", Lurgan Focus Group Participant.

"Because you don't get any satisfaction when you do complain, whether it's writing, emailing or whatever I think people just give and don't pursue it you know", Bangor Focus Group Participant.

There was no knowledge amongst the Derry or Lurgan groups of the option to take a complaint regarding Door-2-Door Transport, Translink services or other modes of transport to the Consumer Council for investigation if the response received from the transport operator was not deemed satisfactory. Some individuals in the Bangor group were aware of this and felt this should be made clearer to passengers.

"I think it needs to be made clear that you can make a complaint to the Consumer Council about Door-2-Door", Bangor Focus Group Participant.

Social Inclusion

In addition to enabling passengers to travel to meet others and take part in social activities, each of the groups highlighted that the social interaction with other passengers and staff they experienced when travelling by Door-2-Door Transport was an important ancillary benefit for them.

"If we didn't have Door-2-Door, a lot of us would be left very, very vulnerable with little option to get out", Lurgan Focus Group Participant.

"You've got the banter, you've got the craic, you've got everything that goes with it", Derry Focus Group Participant.

"It makes a big difference if I can't get it [Door-2-Door Transport] as otherwise I've to get a taxi and lands down to cost, thinking I'm not going to be able to go here tonight because it's too expensive for me in a taxi. So that's had an impact on my social life", Derry Focus Group Participant.

"I would be absolutely lost, I was never independent my whole life until I came across Bridge and that's the God's honest truth. I just depend so much on Bridge and if they took that I would be bankrupt with the cost of taxis", **Derry Focus Group Participant.**

Suggested improvements to meet passenger needs

Participants in each of the groups stated that they were content to share vehicles with other passengers and felt that improving the utilisation of vehicles to allow more people on board would improve the availability of transport for those who most needed it.

"Door-2-Door is not meant to be a taxi service...it should be about sharing journeys, picking up people who needed it, prioritising people's needs", **Bangor Focus Group Participant.**

In all of the focus groups, many felt there was a need to increase the number of Door-2-Door Transport vehicles which were available.

It was suggested that the application form to join the Door-2-Door Transport service should include a question for an applicant to state their assistance needs and the most appropriate format in which they wish to receive information so that the operator can be made aware of these and keep them on file for each journey. This would negate the need to provide this information during each booking request.

Implementing a system where the operator can provide a text message to the passenger once the vehicle has arrived, as employed by many taxi operators, was suggested as a benefit for passengers.

"Taxi companies when they get to your door so many of them text you now to let you know they've arrived, that would be helpful", **Bangor Focus Group Participant.**

Many participants across the groups felt there was a need for greater passenger involvement in how the Door-2-Door Transport service is planned and delivered, with more mechanisms for passengers to provide feedback directly to the Department for Regional Development on how the service operates.

A number of individuals in the Lurgan group felt that introducing smaller, 'flexi-bus' services could negate the reliance on Door-2-Door Transport for many older and disabled people and mean the service could be targeted at those most in the need of it.

8.5 Operator Views on Door-2-Door Transport

Both Door-2-Door Transport operators⁷ interviewed have been providing the service for a number of years prior to the roll out of the current scheme (previously called 'Dial a Ride' in Belfast and 'Door To Door' in Derry).

Each operator indicated that any advertising of the service was minimal as they were operating at full capacity and it was feared that more advertisement of the service would result in journey requests which were unlikely to be fulfilled. Journeys can become fully booked in advance which means those wishing to book travel a day or two in advance can face difficulty. It was felt that the television advertising campaign undertaken when the Door-2-Door Transport service was rolled out to more areas across Northern Ireland meant that some passengers believed the service was a cheaper alternative to taxis and could provide all older and disabled people's travel needs. This built expectation amongst passengers which was hard to deliver.

Whilst some passengers expected to be able to travel alone, the majority of passengers were happy to share the vehicle and some passengers were flexible in their travel arrangements to enable other people to travel at the same time. Operators tried to maximise vehicle utilisation, particularly at peak times to enable more people to travel. Both operators indicated they were receiving a steady increase in demand for journeys, with the result that refusal rates for journeys which could not be delivered were also increasing. This also meant that providing journeys for new members who join was increasingly difficult.

There was a recognition that some passengers using Door-2-Door Transport did have viable alternatives which they could use such as public transport services provided by Translink. Some examples were provided where members had been referred by a General Practitioner, for whom membership of the Door-2-Door Transport scheme may not have been appropriate, such as an individual referred due to a short-term temporary mobility impairment who then continued to use the service after this issue had passed. It was felt that there was a need to prioritise the service for those who needed it, although it was recognised that there was no easy way to achieve this. One option proposed was greater advertising of the improvements which have been made in mainstream public transport as some older or disabled people may not be aware of improved accessibility of vehicles and stations.

Both operators noted that as part of the previous application process (where passengers applied directly to the operator) they asked passengers about their

⁷ A list of participating operators is included on Page 8.

condition and travel needs. One operator felt that this level of information could be provided on the initial application which is submitted to the Department for Regional Development to provide more information to the operator in advance of booking journeys. The first journey for each new member always involves a learning curve in terms of the needs of the passenger.

Previous to the introduction of the current scheme, one operator charged fares which were equivalent to the fare for local bus services. This included the use of concessionary passes. As the fare for Door-2-Door Transport is lower than those charged on public transport, this may encourage some people who could use other forms of transport to view Door-2-Door Transport as a cheaper option. Having comparable fares on Door-2-Door Transport, including the use of concessionary passes was suggested as one way to address this.

One operator also noted that they were aware of Travel Training being undertaken, although this was on a very small scale and there was a need for this to be provided on a larger scale to enable some people who currently use Door-2-Door Transport to make use of mainstream public transport.

8.6 Stakeholder Views on Door-2-Door Transport

Stakeholders noted that Door-2-Door Transport is aimed at individuals who cannot access mainstream public transport or face difficulty doing so, with stricter membership criteria than the Dial-a-Lift service which is available to anyone in a rural area who faces difficulty accessing transport.

With improvements in the accessibility of public transport through the use of low floor buses, stakeholders believed there were some passengers using Door-2-Door Transport who could feasibly travel using mainstream public transport. Encouraging and facilitating these people to use public transport, by offering advice and travel training, would allow resources to be targeted more at those who are most in need of Door-2-Door Transport. This could help to address some issues where passengers face difficulty accessing journeys due to a lack of capacity. Further improvements in mainstream public transport to make them more accessible, such as allowing local bus services to be hailed from the street where safe, were considered a more cost effective way to improve people's ability to travel for those who could make use of public transport.

Some stakeholders believed the cost of Door-2-Door Transport should be comparable to local bus fares, including the use of concessionary passes. This would incentivise those who have alternative means of transport to avail of them rather than chose Door-2-Door Transport which may be viewed as a cheaper option.

Improving the utilisation of vehicles was noted as a way to improve the ability of passengers to travel, although it was recognised that this will always prove difficult in a service which offers individual journeys.

With the majority of mainstream public transport being delivered using low floor buses, some stakeholders stated it was an anomaly that a service specifically designed for older and disabled people was provided using vehicles which mainly featured stepped access (along with ramps). Examples were provided of similar services in other regions such as MyBus operated by Strathclyde Partnership for Transport where these services are successfully provided using low floor minibuses.

Some stakeholders also stated that there should be an option for passengers who do not fall within the current criteria to apply for membership of the Door-2-Door Transport service by detailing how they are unable to access mainstream public transport.

8.7 Consumer Views on the Removal of Easibus in Bangor

Participants in both the Newtownards and Bangor group were directly asked to discuss their usage of the Easibus service in the Bangor and Groomsport areas which ceased operation in 2010 . This was to determine the local public transport travel needs of older people and those with disabilities in this area and to assess whether these are being met adequately by the current provision of conventional town bus services and flexible public transport, including taxis. This sought to ascertain if the removal of the Easibus service had impacted on their ability to travel and any aspects of the Easibus service which proved beneficial which are not available on other Translink public transport services.

Participants in the group held in Newtownards (covering the North Down area) indicated they had made no use of the Easibus service previously, stating that they would have travelled to and from Bangor by bus but would not have used Easibus or the Translink town service to travel around the area.

Participants in the Bangor group all lived within the local area, seven of whom had travelled on the Easibus service when it was in operation in Bangor. There was a general consensus that regular town bus services did not provide a comparable service to that which was provided by the Easibus service. Three of the participants noted that whilst the distance to their nearest bus stop may have been relatively short, this may involve crossing a busy main road which meant they or others they knew couldn't access the current bus service. There was also a recognition that even short distances to the bus stop may mean that some older or disabled people are unable to access the bus stop.

"I have a friend who is visually impaired and they have no bus service on the route since they lost the Easibus. They can't get the bus because it means they need to cross the carriageway and it's too dangerous", Bangor Focus Group Participant.

"The [Easibus] bus could stop practically outside your door you see. There's folks that can't get the 200 yards to the bus stop", Bangor Focus Group Participant.

"There are accessible buses but they are not necessarily accessible services", Bangor Focus Group Participant.

"I'm totally blind but the Easibus used to actually come into my street and they would have picked me up. It meant then I could go out on my own but now because there's no Easibus if I can't get door to door I'm snookered. It impacts on your independence", Bangor Focus Group Participant.

The social interaction provided when travelling on Easibus was noted as a significant benefit which the service provided. Participants in the Bangor group noted that the service meant a variety of passengers could travel together rather than the segregated nature of the Door-2-Door Service for older and disabled people. The use of dedicated drivers on the Easibus service, who were trained to provide assistance to passengers and got to know regular passengers, was a further benefit which was raised.

“It’s a segregated service [Door-2-Door Transport]. Easibus, everybody got it. Mothers with their children, school children, people getting on and off to work, disabled people going to work. It was like a family very much so you got on the Easibus and if they hadn’t seen you for a day or two they wanted to know why. I can give you a very good example. A neighbour, I couldn’t see into his letterbox because of my chair, we hadn’t seen him for two days and the bus driver actually went and looked in and found him lying on the floor and saved that man’s life because he’d had a stroke”, Bangor Focus Group Participant.

“The other thing was the drivers were consistent. They got to know people which made a lot of difference to up people’s confidence and things like that”, Bangor Focus Group Participant.

Many participants indicated that incorporating some of the features of the Easibus into the current town bus service could mitigate the issues caused for them by the removal of Easibus

“It’s not about Easibus per say, I’d like a sensible town service that includes everything [that was featured on the Easibus service]”, Bangor Focus Group Participant.

“The elderly didn’t have to run for the bus because they knew if he [the driver] seen them at all and they were heading for the bus stop, if it was safe enough to stop he would have stopped. It’s what a town service should really be”, Bangor Focus Group Participant.

The Easibus route allowed individuals to access key services without the need to interchange between routes which was highlighted as a further benefit.

“See the Easibus route if you were on that route you could actually go to your doctor, the cinema, the leisure complex, the hospital, the library, it was all covered on the route whereas now you have to try and get on a bus, get into Bangor, then maybe get another bus out to find your way out that way and then you maybe have to cross another road to get the bus back, to get the bus out so instead of two buses you are doubling up to four”, Bangor Focus Group Participant.

The views expressed in the Bangor group would indicate that for some older people and passengers with a disability in the Bangor and Groomsport area, current conventional town bus services and the Door-2-Door service do not

adequately meet their transport needs. The removal of Easibus has negatively impacted upon some passengers who used the service, and implementing some the features of the Easibus service on conventional town bus services was proposed as one way to mitigate this impact.

To further support these findings, the Lurgan group who have never experienced the Easibus service described how a 'flexi-bus' service, similar to that provided by Easibus would prove beneficial for them and reduce their need to use Door-2-Door Transport or incur the significant costs involved in using a wheelchair accessible taxi. The fact that any such service would be scheduled was perceived as a benefit as it wouldn't require advance booking.

"See if the likes of Ulsterbus and stuff went down there it would be perfect, if there was a wee flexi bus, is there such a thing?", **Lurgan Focus Group Participant.**

"It'd mean more flexibility and at least if you miss it, you can get the next one. I think you're very tied to time when they take you [on Door-2-Door Transport], that's what I think, it's a rush", **Lurgan Focus Group Participant.**

"If there was a flexi bus to go to the shopping centre, it would be great", **Lurgan Focus Group Participant.**

"When you have to book 48 hours or whatever to go to anywhere, you could be dead and buried in that time. But if you had a flexi bus every half hour, then away you go, it would be brilliant, no need to book, you could just go", **Lurgan Focus Group Participant.**

8.8 Consumer Views on Public Transport Services delivered by Translink

Through the focus groups, participants also provided a range of feedback on current public transport services provided by Translink. Participants included individuals who made some use of public transport in addition to either community transport or the Door-2-Door Transport service and individuals who provided feedback on why using public transport was not a viable option for them. One example of this was due to the distance to the nearest bus stop.

Another individual noted that issues with services not integrating to allow for connecting journeys meant that public transport was not considered a viable option for them to use.

“My nearest bus would be a five mile walk”, Omagh Focus Group Participant.

“I live 10 miles outside of Cookstown, to go from there to Armagh which is 26 miles by road to drive it would take me between three and four hours to get down there by bus. I’d have to wait for perhaps an hour and a half for the next bus or else it left two minutes before you get there. It’s impossible really the way that Ulsterbus has their schedules, they are not really effective”, Cookstown Focus Group Participant.

Option to book an ‘accessible journey’ through the Translink Call Centre

The Translink Access Guide (April 2012) details how passengers can contact Translink in advance to book an accessible journey as not all Translink buses, coaches and stations meet accessible standards. Passengers are advised to call the Translink Contact Centre 24 hours before the time of travel to request a wheelchair accessible vehicle on their route or staff assistance at any bus or rail station. The policy also recognises that in some cases passengers will not be able to provide 24 hours’ notice and pledges to do everything possible to assist passengers in these circumstances although this cannot always be guaranteed.

There was some knowledge of this amongst the Bangor and Derry groups, although this was not universal. Examples were provided where this has worked effectively in the past, along with a minority of instances where this has not been provided for the passenger when requested.

“Myself, I ask for assistance regarding trains and nine times out of ten they are there and it's organised. Nine times out of ten I have no faults but I have had issues where I have said look, I've asked for assistance and none's been here and it's not good enough. They've apologised for it but apologies are ok after you've freaked out at being left there”, **Derry Focus Group Participant.**

There was no knowledge of this amongst the Lurgan focus group, who indicated that awareness of this would improve some participants' ability to travel using public transport. Some individuals in the Lurgan group felt there should not be a need to book assistance in advance.

“Why, in this day and age, do you have to ring up 24 hours in advance to get onto a train, they should have a ramp there”, **Lurgan Focus Group Participant.**

Customer service from bus drivers

Participants in the Derry and Cookstown group detailed a number of positive experiences of customer service from Translink bus drivers.

“I think some of the rural Ulsterbus drivers are really understanding of the difficulties that we have and so they are very personable and very helpful once they get to know you and they see you are a regular rider”, **Cookstown Focus Group Participant.**

“I think most public transport is excellent, you know. Anything I have issue with is minor, the bus drivers and the way they wait, I always think they wait until I get off and don't start up until I get a seat. I would be very complimentary but just a wee few changes would go a long way”, **Derry Focus Group Participant.**

Less positive examples were provided by participants in the Newtownards group.

“If you get on an ordinary Ulsterbus and you get on with groceries, the driver never waits until you sit down and he takes off with a vengeance - he knows that you're struggling but they've always been like that for years, those drivers and they've took great delight in doing it”, **Newtownards Focus Group Participant.**

The Newtownards group felt that ensuring drivers allowed sufficient time for passengers to take their seat before driving off from stops would encourage greater use of public transport from older people and those with a disability or mobility impairment.

Customer service from staff at stations

One participant in the Derry group provided praise for the customer service received at Foyle Street Bus Station.

"I have to say the bus station at Foyle Street is absolutely brilliant. I would usually go by taxi now down to the bus station and I'll get the driver to bring me into the inspector's office, they will bring me to the shop, bring me out to the seat and they will come and get me, put me on the bus, get a seat for me and the guide dog and there's never an issue, absolutely brilliant", **Derry Focus Group Participant.**

Vehicles

A number of participants in the Lurgan group felt that it would be beneficial if all public transport services were delivered using low floor vehicles. This would negate the need to call in advance to request an accessible vehicle for their journey and mean that older and disabled people would have more flexibility in when they could travel.

The lack of audio or visual announcements on buses indicating which stop the vehicle was at (similar to those featured on NI Railways) was noted as a key barrier to use of public transport bus services for many disabled people. This was particularly an issue for local bus services, which meant that participants instead had to rely on Door-2-Door Transport.

"The only problem I have with Ulsterbus in the evening, it's not like the trains where you have audio, there's nothing like that on the bus if you don't know the route", **Bangor Focus Group Participant.**

"If you're totally blind there is nothing worse getting off at the wrong stop. To get off at a stop where you haven't a clue where you are and ok, you have your dog but your dog only knows where to go if you know where to go.....I would love to just jump on a bus and go round the city and get off here and there but because it doesn't tell you the stop, that's why I have to use Bridge Transport", **Derry Focus Group Participant.**

"For myself and I could nearly say for any visually impaired person, it [audio announcements on buses] would be a God send", **Derry Focus Group Participant.**

“There is an awful lot of visually impaired and blind people who will not use public transport for that only reason [the lack of audio announcements], that they don't know where they're getting off and I could list you 20 or 30 visually impaired or blind people who won't use the public transport system. And if that offer was there, they would go out and use it because they wouldn't have that worry”,
Derry Focus Group Participant.

9. Conclusion

The views expressed in the focus groups demonstrate that community transport (including the Dial-A-Lift scheme) and Door-2-Door Transport are a lifeline for some passengers and provide real and tangible benefits for rural dwellers, older people and those with a disability who face difficulties accessing other forms of transport. Transport is an enabler service, providing access to essential services and social inclusion for passengers who may otherwise face isolation. The social benefits that Dial-A-Lift and Door-2-Door Transport (now the Disability Action Transport Service) provided were an important factor for everyone involved in the research.

A lack of capacity is impacting on the ability of some passengers who rely on the service to access all the journeys they need to undertake. There is also a recognition that some individuals using these services could viably use alternatives such as mainstream public transport. Educating consumers of the improvements in the accessibility of public transport can help address this, along with specific training for some individuals to provide them with the knowledge and confidence to use public transport. Ensuring public transport services delivered by Translink meet the needs of older and disabled people could lessen some passengers' need to use Door-2-Door Transport in some urban areas. Improving the frequency of some rural routes, in particular in the evening and at weekends could also reduce the demand for the Dial-A-Lift service and improve rural dwellers' ability to travel. There was also a recognition that only minimal promotion of the Dial-A-Lift and Door-2-Door Transport services was being undertaken. This may mean that some people who may require the services are not aware that they could help with their travel needs.

Many passengers felt that more flexibility in how transport services are delivered would provide a positive benefit. Strict membership criteria and operational areas were viewed as negatively impacting on some people who require these services yet fall outside of the current criteria and areas.

There is an opportunity to assess how the travel needs of passengers can be better addressed overall rather than looking at individual transport options in isolation. An overarching review of all publicly funded transport can show how limited public finances can be more effectively utilised to deliver better travel options for consumers, including rural dwellers, older people and those with a disability.

There are also a number of other measures which can be taken to improve services for passengers which are detailed in the key findings section of this report. Some will require funding and a longer-term approach to implement whilst others can be implemented with minimal impact on current funding.

It is recognised that services funded through the Rural Transport Fund and the Transport Programme for People with Disabilities are going through a period of change. The key findings from this report should be considered by the Department for Regional Development, Disability Action and community transport providers during this period to inform how services can be delivered in future.

The Consumer Council welcomes the opportunity to work with these organisations to take forward the findings of this report.

Appendix A: Details of the transport services covered by this research

Dial-A-Lift and Community Transport

Dial-A-Lift is a door to door service for individuals living in rural areas who are unable or find it difficult to use public transport. Dial-A-Lift can be used for a variety of purposes including shopping, visiting local amenities, visiting family and friends or accessing training and employment. Dial-A-Lift cannot be used for hospital inpatient appointments or home to school transport. The Dial-A-Lift service is currently available Monday to Friday from 8am – 6pm.

To qualify for Dial-A-Lift you must become a member of your local community transport organisation, live in a rural area (i.e. an area not covered by the urban Door-2-Door Scheme) and have difficulty accessing everyday services due to lack of transport. Dial-A-Lift fares are charged based on the distance travelled, with a number of set fare bands. The Assisted Rural Travel Scheme (ARTS), funded by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development allows any passenger with a current SmartPass to travel free or half fare on the Dial-A-Lift services operated by their local community transport organisation.

Outside of the operating hours for the Dial-A-Lift service, some community transport providers can also provide journeys using volunteer car drivers. This is charged under the 'full cost recovery' model where the passenger pays the mileage rate which is paid to the volunteer car driver to cover their cost for fuel and car maintenance (currently around 45-50 pence per mile).

For the financial year 2011/12, a total of 227,476 trips were provided under the Dial-A-Lift scheme across Northern Ireland, with the Department for Regional Development contributing a total of £2 million in operational support for these journeys. Further funding of £1.4 million was provided to community transport operators to cover administration costs associated with the provision of Dial-A-Lift journeys and other community transport services⁸.

⁸ Source: Northern Ireland Assembly AQW 11643/11-15,
<http://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/terms/printquestionsummary.aspx?docid=135238>

Door-2-Door Transport (now the Disability Action Transport Service)

On 12 February 2013 the Minister for Regional Development advised that the current Door-to-Door scheme would end on 31 March 2013. From 1 April 2013, Disability Action Transport has put in place an interim accessible transport service for members of the Door-2-Door Transport scheme in conjunction with Bridge Accessible Transport in Derry/Londonderry and the Rural Transport Partnerships throughout Northern Ireland. The service being delivered by Disability Action is referred to as the Disability Action Transport Service. This research was conducted whilst the Door-2-Door Transport service was still in operation.

Door-2-Door Transport provided local travel in urban areas for people with disabilities, or for those who find it difficult using mainstream public transport. The service was available in 29 urban areas across Northern Ireland and trips could be undertaken to access education and employment, shopping locations, local healthcare facilities and for social activities amongst others. Membership was free along with the passenger's first journey. After this initial journey, a flat fare of £1.50 per single journey was charged to travel anywhere within the local operational area. Travel beyond this was possible where there was availability and incurred an additional charge based on the distance travelled. The Disability Action Transport Service largely follows the same operating model as Door-2-Door Transport.

For the financial year 2011/12, just over 155,000 trips were provided through Door-2-Door Transport across Northern Ireland, at a cost to the Department for Regional Development of approximately £3million⁹.

Current membership eligibility criteria (as of May 2013) for the Disability Action Transport Service is as follows:

- If you are in receipt of the higher rate mobility component of Disability Living Allowance;
- If you are in receipt of the higher rate care component of Disability Living Allowance;
- If you are in receipt of the higher rate care component of Attendance Allowance;
- If you are registered blind ;
- If you are 80 years of age or older; or
- An individual may also apply for membership through their GP if none of these apply and their GP confirms that the individual finds it difficult or impossible to use mainstream public transport.

⁹ Source: "Review of the Door-2-Door Scheme – Public Consultation Document", Department for Regional Development, October 2012.

<http://applications.drdni.gov.uk/publications/document.asp?docid=25429>

This is the same as the membership criteria for the previously operated Door-2-Door Transport service.

A public consultation regarding options to change the membership eligibility criteria was held by DRD from October 2012 to January 2013. At the time of writing, no decision has been announced regarding any changes to the current criteria.

Findings from this research will help to inform how Disability Action provides the interim service and how DRD seeks to provide the service in the longer term.

Easibus

Easibus is a service which provides localised routes to services such as health centres and clinics, local shops, housing for elderly people and shopping centres in Belfast. The service remains operational in Belfast although it has been removed from both Derry and Bangor.

Easibus services are fitted with ramps to make boarding easy and have drivers who received training to help passengers get on and off the bus. The smaller vehicles used could also access housing areas and smaller routes which could not accommodate a larger vehicle and buses have space for two wheelchair users. Initially, the service could be hailed from any safe place along the route, however this function has now stopped. Easibus services provide accessible local bus services mainly, but not exclusively, for mobility impaired people who could not use existing conventional services. When Easibus services were initially introduced, a significant proportion of the Translink fleet did not meet modern standards of accessibility.



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