



The Consumer Council

**Transport Services funded by the Rural Transport Fund
and the Transport Programme for People with
Disabilities – 2014 Review**

August 2014

Introduction

In 2013 the Consumer Council published a report entitled *Transport Services funded by the Rural Transport Fund and the Transport Programme for People with Disabilities*¹. The research gathered views from passengers who used the Dial-A-Lift (DAL) service and other transport options provided by Rural Transport Partnerships in rural areas, and the views of the operators of the services. 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.

The research generated the following findings:

- For some individuals, the services represent the only way in which they can travel
- There is a lack of capacity on services
- Door-2-Door Transport sometimes fails to arrive when booked
- Vehicles are not always appropriate to meet the needs of passengers
- There is a belief amongst some passengers that individuals use the services who could use other means of transport
- Services should be targeted at those for whom there was no other viable means of transport
- Improvements in the accessibility of mainstream public transport are not always known
- There is low demand for journeys which link in with wider public transport services
- Minimal advertising of the schemes is undertaken
- Most passengers are regular users of the services

¹http://www.consumercouncil.org.uk/filestore/documents/Transport_Services_funded_by_the_Rural_Transport_Fund_and_the_Transport_Programme_for_People_with_Disabilities.pdf

- There are increasing numbers of referrals to community transport services by health or social care professionals
- There are limits to the number of journeys which can be undertaken by a passenger each week under the DAL scheme
- While DAL is designed for local journeys, this does not always provide the range of shops and facilities which passengers need to access
- As DAL does not operate in the evening the service cannot be used for further education classes

Since the research was conducted the Disability Action Transport Service (DATS) has replaced the Door-2-Door Transport service. Disability Action (DA) is responsible for operating the service throughout Northern Ireland and the service operates in conjunction with Bridge Accessible Transport in Derry/Londonderry and the Rural Transport Partnerships throughout Northern Ireland².

The aim of this paper is to provide a short update to the Department for Regional Development (DRD) and transport stakeholders on how the issues identified in 2013 have progressed since the changes in service delivery.

Review of findings

In January 2014 the Consumer Council contacted the various community transport providers to gather information concerning whether the provision of community transport services has been impacted by the introduction of DATS and the associated alterations to the administration of the services. This paper compiles and summarises the information submitted by Armagh Community Transport, Down Community Transport, Fermanagh Community Transport, Newry and Mourne Community Transport, and North Coast Community Transport. The paper also includes the opinions of the Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee (Imtac), and the views of DA concerning the operation of DATS.

² Department for Regional Development funding for services provided by DA and the Community Transport Partnerships in 2013/14 was £6.7 million.

The community transport providers, DA, and Imtac were presented with a number of issues identified in the 2013 report. They were asked to explain whether the issues had changed, and if changes had occurred, had they delivered a positive or negative impact for consumers.

The following section details the responses provided by the Community Transport Partnerships, DA, and Imtac, in relation to each issue, along with the Consumer Council's assessment of the progress made and recommendations for further improvement.

- **For some individuals, the services represent the only way in which they can travel**

The community transport operators were in agreement that for some individuals, both people with a disability and people who have no access to Translink services due to the rurality of the area in which they live, the services remain the only viable way in which they can travel. It was noted by one operator that the additional resources provided for the operation of both urban and rural services is improving services for rural dwellers. It was also noted by one operator that the users of their services, especially some older people, develop a friendship / level of trust with their volunteer drivers which encourages them to travel, reducing isolation.

Imtac agreed that for some individuals DATS and community transport (CT) services represent the only viable way in which they can travel, but explained that improvements over the last decade mean that many more disabled people have the option to use mainstream public transport services.

In its response DA explained User Forum meetings have recently started which will give customers the opportunity to express their views on all aspects of the service and to influence service planning in the future.

Since the publication of the 2013 report this issue remains unchanged and therefore it is essential that sufficient funding continues to be provided by the Department to ensure the continued operation of these services at present.

In the longer term, the Consumer Council recommends that the NI Executive undertakes a wide ranging travel needs analysis, the findings of which should inform the development of services which meet the needs of all consumers, including consumers with a disability or reduced mobility.

- **There is a lack of capacity on services**

The various community transport providers reported very few or zero refusals due to capacity restrictions. One operator did, however, report capacity constraints and explained that to operate a sufficient number of vehicles to meet all passenger demands at peak times would result in significant underutilisation of vehicles at less busy times. It was explained by one operator that while it doesn't refuse transport in general, many people are reluctant to accommodate times to suit the vehicle in the area or to spend any time on the vehicle, picking up and dropping off other passengers.

To make best use of available capacity one operator reported instances in which passengers have been asked to change the time of their booking to accommodate vehicle availability. In such cases, the reason for this is communicated to the passenger.

It was noted that the provision of many-to-one services using minibuses have been adopted by some operators to make optimum use of available capacity. Imtac, however, questioned whether this approach adequately meets passenger needs in terms of providing flexibility regarding the time and destination of journeys made. Imtac also noted that where many-to-many services are operated constraints can occur as it is difficult to schedule services to accommodate more than two passengers at a time.

It was explained by one operator that some passengers believe there is a shortage of capacity as these passengers expect a taxi type service and do not want to travel on a many-to-one basis. Another operator explained that the introduction of DATS has increased its efficiency and flexibility as both DATS and their own DAL service now use the same vehicles thus reducing costs.

DA explained refusal rates by the operator are relatively low for DATS. DA explained currently five per cent of requests are refused overall and

this represents an improvement when compared to the previous year. DA explained that the improvement is the result of a reduced booking window, as passengers can now only book services up to 7 days in advance.

The Consumer Council welcomes the finding that rates of refusals on services are low. However, it is important that passengers' transport needs are being adequately met and therefore operators should give consideration of the extent to which many-to-one services meet these needs.

- **Door-2-Door Transport sometimes fails to arrive when booked**

The various operators explained either that there were no instances where a DATS service had failed to arrive when booked or that they had received no complaints in relation to this issue. One operator explained that it has a 10 minute window either side of the actual booking time within which the service may arrive. The operator explained, however, that some passengers would complain if the service arrived within the window but not exactly at the arranged pickup time. Imtac stated that the problem of services failing to arrive when booked still exists, however, it suggested it is a reflection of the model of delivery rather than the quality of the service providers.

The Consumer Council recommends Community Transport providers and DA engage with passengers to ascertain their views concerning an acceptable 'window' for arranged pick up times. Each operator should then agree a punctuality standard based on these discussions and communicate the standard to all of their members.

- **Vehicles are not always appropriate to meet the needs of passengers**

Only one of the operators that responded to the request for information explained that it uses a low floor vehicle. One operator explained that while low floor vehicles are suitable in towns and cities, it contended that on rural roads they are unsuitable. This assertion was, however, disputed by another operator that explained it has experienced no difficulty in using its low floor vehicle on rural roads. It was noted by a number of operators that the cost of low floor vehicles is a key factor in determining why they are not used in greater numbers. One operator

explained low floor buses cost approximately 1.5 to 2 times more than a wheelchair converted minibus and given the demand for their services their preference would be to have 3 or 4 converted minibuses in place of 2 low floor buses.

DA explained the vehicle mix it uses to operate DATS includes larger 16 seater vehicles, smaller 12 seater vehicles and taxi vehicles in order to best match vehicle capacity to demand and also achieve best value for money. DA explained that while low floor vehicles offer the best standards of accessibility, they are not used for DATS due to their prohibitive cost.

Imtac agreed with the statement that the vehicles currently used are not always appropriate to meet the needs of passengers due to a lack of low floor vehicles. The organisation expressed the view that vehicles with steps and tail lifts often do not meet the requirements of older and disabled people and that low floor vehicles are the best option for passengers.

It is clear that there is a wide range of views regarding the suitability of vehicles and the costs involved in procuring low floor vehicles. While it is important that services are delivered in a cost efficient manner, it is essential that all eligible passengers are able to access these services given that for many they are the only viable transport option. Therefore, providers must be able to demonstrate that services are operated with a range of vehicles that best accommodate the access requirements of all passengers.

- **There is a belief amongst some passengers that individuals use the services who could use other means of transport**

The operators explained the criteria for use of their services. One operator explained that they believed that their service is open to abuse by some who see it as a cheap transport option especially now that the Smart Pass can be used on the DAL service. Another operator explained that they rely on the honesty of their members when making application for membership and another noted that its booking office staff members have the responsibility to try and accommodate the diverse needs of its users, which may not always be physical and therefore may not be apparent to other users.

DA stated that many disabilities are 'hidden' and it is a prejudiced misperception to equate disability with something which can be seen. It also explained that the membership criteria for DATS are rigorously applied in respect of every applicant and that one of the membership qualifying criteria is age; people aged 80 and over are permitted membership and this age group represents a significant proportion of overall members.

Imtac stated it believes that it was undoubtedly the case that there are individuals that use the services who could use other means of transport. Imtac explained it is in favour of encouraging all passengers that can use mainstream public transport services to do so. It also believes that alternative, more efficient modes of demand responsive transport (DRT) should also be explored and recommends the NI Executive establish a multi-agency DRT Forum tasked with identifying opportunities to develop these services³.

In recognition that many disabilities are hidden the Consumer Council considers it important that service providers address misconceptions, where they exist, that some passengers are using services when they are not entitled to. It is important that all passengers who require access to services funded by the Rural Transport Fund and the Transport Programme for People with Disabilities are able to do so and do not feel disenfranchised as a result of the attitudes of others.

- **Services should be targeted at those for whom there was no other viable means of transport**

Two operators explained the DAL service is targeted towards rural dwellers who do not have access to a car or public transport. One operator explained it doesn't limit its services and attempts to ensure that people in similar areas travel together to enable better use of resources so the operator can accommodate more passengers.

One operator explained that its monthly statistics indicate a marked increase in people with disabilities and older people using the service. It stressed, however, that DAL is targeted at the most vulnerable and isolated in rural communities and this can include young people, women

³ Further information is available in *Flexible future – lessons from the development of demand responsive transport services* (Imtac 2012).

in the home, and people in need of transport to access training and employment.

Another operator explained that it aims to balance requests from members who rely entirely on its services for transport but who travel very infrequently and only for essential journeys, with requests from members who have a more apparent mobility impairment but who travel very frequently.

Imtac agreed that services should be targeted at those for whom there is no other viable means of transport. It explained, however, that more needs to be done to support people who can use mainstream public transport services. Recommended changes include: improved design of services, improved disability equality training for policy makers and service operators, improved information about services, and improved travel training / mentoring for disabled people and older people⁴.

The Consumer Council maintains the position that services should be targeted at those for whom there are no other viable means of transport. To ensure sufficient capacity exists in order that services can meet the needs of those who are most dependent on them, the Consumer Council agrees with Imtac's assertion that more needs to be done to support people who can use mainstream public transport services.

- **Improvements in the accessibility of mainstream public transport are not always known**

The various operators explained that they worked closely with Translink and can advise passengers about linking in with Translink services. One operator explained that if passengers require a low floor vehicle they can notify Translink in advance through the operator's office.

It was explained that although operators encourage members to link where possible to mainline services and there has been an increase in this activity, with the growing number of members who are elderly or have limited mobility, mainline services are not always suitable.

⁴ Further information concerning areas for improvement as recommended by Imtac is detailed in *Lessons from the current approach of Passenger Transport Executives (PTEs) to access and inclusion* (Imtac 2014).

One operator explained that to enable members to link in with Translink services the operator would transport the member to a suitable cross over point where they can be left under cover and in safety so that they could connect with public transport. It was noted that the ability of passengers to link in with Translink services is restricted by the shortage of suitable cross over points as the operator would never leave a member at a bus stop on the road side where there was no cover and uncertainty over whether the bus was on time or had been cancelled. The operator continued by explaining that it would be impracticable for a driver to remain with the member to ensure they caught the bus. It was also explained that if the operator was required to pick a member up from a bus stop it may entail waiting and this may cause an obstruction on many of the country roads, along with inconvenience to other members travelling on the community transport service.

Despite improved accessibility for older people and disabled people on mainstream public transport, the 2012 DRD consultation *Review of the Door-2-Door Scheme*, highlights that recent investment in mainstream public transport has not led to a reduction in demand for specialist services, or an increase in the use of mainstream public transport services by disabled people. In its response to the 2012 consultation the Consumer Council recommended that the DRD should investigate why despite increased investment into public transport to make it more accessible, journeys by passengers with limited mobility have not increased.

Imtac explained it had been highlighting for some time that improvements in the accessibility of mainstream public transport were not always known. Imtac explained it will shortly produce a report recommending improved information and promotion of accessible public transport opportunities.

DA explained it has recently started a pilot volunteer led transport buddy service in partnership with Volunteer Now. The service seeks to provide individuals with the skills, knowledge and confidence needed to access public transport in a safe and confident manner. DATS active users in Belfast will be one of the client groups approached in relation to this service as an alternative transport option.

The Consumer Council welcomes the progress undertaken by operators in terms of working with Translink to facilitate passengers linking in with

Translink services, and welcomes the work currently being undertaken by DA in partnership with Volunteer Now. The Consumer Council, awaits the publication of Imtac's report on the promotion of accessible transport opportunities and encourages operators and the DRD to consider the recommendations when the report is published.

- **There is low demand for journeys which link in with wider public transport services**

Operators continue to report low levels of demand from passengers who want to link in with Translink services. It was noted that passengers often do not wish to change vehicles during a journey and some, especially older passengers, would find the experience daunting.

One operator explained it has been trying to recruit volunteers for travel training to enable passengers who can make use of alternative means of transport including mainstream public transport services to avail of these, but to date it has been unsuccessful.

Another explained that given many of its members are older people it is easy to understand the difficulties that may arise when trying to plan journeys, and one of the reasons why the community transport service is so popular is that members only have to make one phone call and their journey is planned.

One operator explained its members had adapted to its many-to-one system which is more cost effective and also brings the benefits of enabling members to interact socially with each other. The operator also stressed the difficulty of transferring disabled and older members from one vehicle to another.

It was noted that in some rural areas mainline public transport provision is very poor, in some cases routes are served as seldom as twice per day, which is considered unsuitable for CT users.

- **Minimal advertising of the schemes is undertaken**

All operators explained they continue to advertise their services but were divided over the usefulness of press advertising with some employing this method and others considering it as having little impact. Operators stressed the importance of word of mouth advertising and

many favoured engagement with potential members via workshops, community events and health fairs. Two operators also explained they have distributed leaflets to improve awareness of their services with one noting this resulted in an increased membership.

The Consumer Council welcomes the advertising initiatives undertaken by the Community Transport Partnerships since publication of the 2013 report. The Consumer Council encourages all operators to review their promotional strategies to ensure all hard to reach groups are provided with information concerning the services provided.

- **Most passengers are regular users of the services**

While the operators explained that the majority of their passengers are frequent users of their services, there is a mix of users ranging from those who use services on a daily basis to those that use the services approximately once a month. One operator explained that the frequent users do not travel on a one-to-one basis but on a many-to-one basis to make the service more cost effective to operate.

Imtac expressed the view that services that continue to operate under the many-to-many model have a tendency to settle into fixed patterns of usage making it difficult for new users to access the service. The Consumer Council believes it is important that operators consider the manner in which their services operate to ensure that barriers do not exist which would prevent access to new users.

- **There are increasing numbers of referrals to community transport services by health or social care professionals**

The various operators agreed that health or social care professionals are directing patients to community transport services, placing a significant burden on the services. In relation to provision of services there are however various different approaches from the operators. One stated that its remit is not to deliver health related journeys and it advises individuals requesting journeys to contact Patient Care or Ambulance Services while another explained that its funders repeatedly inform it that local health appointments are acceptable but appointments outside the provider's operational area are not permitted.

The operator suggested dialogue between the relevant Departments would help resolve the issue while another explained that accessing hospital appointments outside of DAL operating hours is a problem that could be easily resolved if the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) provided a small amount of funding to enhance the service. The operator suggested DHSSPS would recoup the cost of the funding through a reduction in the number of appointments missed.

The current situation in which some community transport operators permit passengers to access health and social care services while other operators do not is unclear for consumers and has the potential to cause confusion. The Consumer Council believes that the travel needs of passengers who need to access health services must be considered as part of a wider analysis of travel needs together with a review of current public transport services.

- **There are limits to the number of journeys which can be undertaken by a passenger each week under the DAL scheme**

One of the operators explained it has a policy of limiting the number of journeys each member is allowed to make to enable more members to make use of the service. The other operators do not have limits on the number of journeys allowed, however, one operator explained that if its membership and journey numbers continue to grow at the current rate the introduction of a cap on journeys per member may have to be introduced.

Imtac's response explained that it considers the many-to-many model to be outdated and that the model creates a situation in which demand needs to be managed. It recognises that limiting trips, restricting eligibility, limiting operational areas, and charging are all means by which demand can be managed however Imtac recognised that all these options will lead to dissatisfaction amongst users. Imtac explained that attempts should not be made to meet passenger demand by providing additional resources to an outdated delivery model and that new thinking and different approaches are required and could include flexible public transport services.

The Consumer Council recognises that it will, in some circumstances, be necessary for operators to limit the number of journeys made by passengers. Where restrictions are currently being placed on the

number of journeys that can be made, the Consumer Council encourages operators to review their operating models to ensure services are delivered as efficiently as possible while meeting the travel needs of users.

- **While DAL is designed for local journeys, this does not always provide the range of shops and facilities which passengers need to access**

The various operators explained the following practices are in place as a means by which to enable passengers to access shops and facilities beyond their local area:

- Link up services with neighbouring partnerships to access locations in the other operators' areas;
- Link ups with Translink services;
- Many-to-one services to transport members to larger towns outside their local town or village;
- Enabling members to travel to the main market town in the provider's operational area although the service is primarily designed to enable users to travel to local amenities such as GP surgeries, chemists and local shops; and
- Provision of shopping trips and outings outside of a provider's operational area, but not free of charge.

Imtac explained it recognised that providing a broader service may be ideal but it is not realistic and therefore limiting services to providing local journeys seems a fair way to ensure as many people can access the limited resource.

The Consumer Council recognises that since the publication of the 2013 report community transport services still do not in all cases enable access to the range of shops and facilities that passengers would like. The Consumer Council welcomes, however, the steps undertaken by operators to enable passengers to access locations further afield via partnering with other community transport providers and Translink.

- **As DAL does not operate in the evening the service can not be used for further education classes**

Operators confirmed that there have been no changes to the operating hours of services, highlighting current operating hours are determined by budget constraints. One operator explained that although it had not received many requests for transport in the evening, a service that operated until 9pm would allow greater flexibility which would be of a particular benefit to young people. Another operator suggested funding should be provided by the Department for Education to facilitate these services⁵. Imtac suggested that in many areas there is no public transport provision in evenings and that CT and DATS services mirror this. It was also suggested that consideration should be given to providing services such as further education classes at times when transport is available.

The Consumer Council encourages transport operators to examine the extent to which there is demand for evening services. If demand is present, operators should consider whether services could be amended to meet the need within existing budgets.

⁵ The Department with responsibility for Further Education is the Department for Employment and Learning.

Further Actions

Based on the review outlined in this report the Consumer Council believes the following actions could further improve services funded by the Rural Transport Fund and the Transport Programme for Passengers with Disabilities:

- The NI Executive should undertake a wide ranging travel needs analysis, the findings of which should inform the development of services which meet the needs of all consumers, including consumers with a disability or reduced mobility.
- Transport providers must be able to demonstrate that services are operated with a range of vehicles that best accommodate the access requirements of all passengers.
- A collaborative approach between the Department, transport providers and relevant stakeholders should be developed to further promote awareness of improvements in the accessibility of mainstream public transport with the aim of increasing the number of journeys undertaken by passengers with a disability.
- Transport providers should examine the extent to which there is demand for evening services. If demand is present, operators should consider whether services could be amended to meet the need within existing budgets.

Conclusion

Many of the issues identified by the research in 2013 continue to be prevalent. However, improvements in terms of capacity, refusal rates and the introduction of user involvement have been reported by the service operators.

A particular issue for operators continues to be the challenge of referrals from health and social care professionals. The Department for Regional Development has recognised this together with the need to extend the hours of operation for services in rural areas.

The Department has advised that ***“DRD will continue to work with other government Departments and apply for funding from other Departments and agencies when applicable to do so”***.

The Consumer Council supports interdepartmental cooperation in the provision of transport services to passengers in rural and isolated communities and those with a disability or reduced mobility. However, to ensure services best meet the transport needs of these passengers the Consumer Council believes that their needs must be considered as part of a wider analysis of travel needs together with a review of current public transport services.

The development of sustainable transport solutions will be essential for the Department to meet its goal of delivering a public transport system that is an attractive, viable alternative to the private car. These solutions have to be based on a thorough understanding of how consumers want to travel.

There will always be consumers for whom mainstream public transport services will not be suitable. However, the Department must have as one of its central goals the aim of developing a public transport system that is inclusive, totally accessible and completely focused on the needs of its passengers and potential passengers.

The Consumer Council is supportive of the positive actions the Department is taking in this direction and will continue to work with the Department and transport providers with the shared aim of developing transport solutions that meet the needs of consumers.



The Consumer Council

Making the consumer voice heard and making it count

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