



## **The future of driver licensing in Northern Ireland**

### **Recommendations on meeting future challenges**

**October 2012**

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## **About Imtac**

Imtac is a committee of disabled people and older people as well as others including key transport professionals. Our role is to advise Government and others in Northern Ireland on issues that affect the mobility of older people and disabled people. Our aim is to ensure that older people and disabled people have the same opportunities as everyone else to travel when and where they want.

Imtac receives support from the Department for Regional Development.

## **About this paper**

In today's society we enjoy unprecedented levels of mobility. We can travel more and further than ever before. Much of this improved mobility is due to access to the private car. On the flip side there are significant numbers of people in our society who face difficulties accessing everyday services and activities because they have limited or no access to the car or other suitable means of transport.

For many disabled people and older people driving is essential for day-to-day mobility and independence. Younger disabled people can face barriers to learning to drive and Imtac plans to look at issues for younger disabled people as part of 2012/13 Work Programme. For other older and disabled people impairment and ageing can have effect on their driving. Justifiably many older people and disabled people dread having to give up their car. Imtac recognises that driving is a privilege and not a right. The Committee also recognises that for some disabled people and older people impairment will mean driving becomes more challenging. While some people will not be able to continue to drive many older people and disabled people can continue with appropriate support. The focus of this paper is to examine whether we are doing enough to support older and disabled people to continue driving where this is possible.

This paper assesses current Government policies intended to assist older people and disabled people to continue driving. It also

examines research into the safety of older and disabled drivers and future demographic trends that are likely increase the importance of this issue. Finally the paper makes a number of recommendations to assist Government meet future challenges.

## **The importance of the car**

There has been significant research into the link between access to a car and social exclusion<sup>1</sup>. This research shows that people who do not have access to a car face significant challenges accessing everyday services and undertaking everyday activities despite the improvements made to public transport. The research shows that not only has this a major negative impact on the lives of individuals concerned it also costs Government a significant amount of money through increased pressures on other services.

Disabled people and older people are two groups in our society who are more likely not to have access to a car as ageing and impairment can have an effect on driving<sup>2</sup>. Despite this many disabled people and older people rely on driving or the availability of a car for mobility. Research<sup>3</sup> and work we have done with both groups shows that disabled people and older people who do drive are extremely concerned about losing their driving licence and are unclear about any support available to assist them to continue to drive. There are suggestions that some older people and disabled people, despite being safe to continue driving, are giving up driving prematurely.

## **Future trends**

Recent statistics from the DVLA in Great Britain show that the number of drivers over 80 years old have reached 1 million for the first time. This reflects that our population is getting older. In Northern Ireland it is projected over the next decade that people

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<sup>1</sup>For example "Making the connections: Final Report on Transport and Social Exclusion (Social Inclusion Unit 2003)

<sup>2</sup> This issue was explored in the research undertaken into the Accessible Transport Strategy for Northern Ireland published in 2005

<sup>3</sup> Appendix 1 contains a full list of publications considered in developing this paper

age between 60 and 74 will rise by 18.9% and people aged 75 and over will increase by 35.88%<sup>4</sup>. In terms of population there is likely to be an additional 88,000 older people in Northern Ireland in 2021 as compared to 2011.

The ageing population has significant policy implications for Government in Northern Ireland. Driver licensing and driving is one of these challenges. From a roads safety perspective are increasingly older drivers safe to drive? From a social policy perspective can services and resources cope with increasing numbers of people potentially without access to a car?

### **Research and older drivers**

There has been extensive research into the safety of older drivers since the 1990's. Currently all people must renew their driving licence at the age of 70 and every three years after that. There has been much debate over whether regulation needs to be strengthened in this area including suggestions that older drivers be periodically be retested.

Imtac having reviewed this research has drawn the following conclusions:

- There is no statistical evidence to suggest that older drivers are less safe than other drivers
- There is no evidence to suggest there is a definitive age where drivers become less able but evidence does suggest that for people over 80 driving does become more challenging particularly with regard to certain circumstances or conditions such as driving at night, busy roads, complex junctions and driving longer distances
- However evidence also suggests that many older people compensate for this by self-regulating their driving avoiding the circumstances and conditions where they do not feel comfortable

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<sup>4</sup> See "A demographic portrait of Northern Ireland: some implications for public policy" NI Assembly Research & Library Services 2011

- Evidence suggests that some older people give up driving before they need to, indicating that appropriate support and advice is not always available
- Evidence suggests that family and health professionals have a key role in influencing decisions about driving but currently lack information or appropriate training
- Some local authorities in GB have introduced training courses targeted at increasing the confidence of older drivers<sup>5</sup>
- Evidence suggests that many older people see no alternative to the car for mobility

Based on our review of existing research Imtac does not believe there is any evidence to support further regulation of older drivers. The Committee believes that evidence suggests that older people need more support when making decisions over driving. There is also a need to promote use by older people and disabled people of alternatives to the car where this is practical and possible.

### **Current policy in Northern Ireland**

In Northern Ireland DRD and DoE share policy responsibility around driving and older people and disabled people.

The DRD has recognised the importance of the car to disabled people and older people in the Accessible Transport Strategy. Strategic objective 4 of the ATS commits government to:

#### **To enable older people and people with disabilities to travel safely using cars and other means of private transport**

DRD has a number of policies and programmes that support that this objective including:

- Operating the Blue Badge Scheme that provides parking concessions to over 100,000 disabled people and older people

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<sup>5</sup> Courses such Safer Driving with Age (SAGE) offered by amongst others Wiltshire and Gloucestershire County Councils

- Providing on-street and off-street accessible parking and enforcement
- Supporting the Mobility Centre to provide advice and assessment to people to enable them where possible to continue driving

DRD also has responsibility for supporting and encouraging use of alternatives to the car including public transport and specialised services such as door2door.

The DoE has responsibilities in Northern Ireland for driver licensing through the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA). DVA is required to take steps to ensure that drivers issued with a license are safe to drive. It does this in a number of ways:

- By asking people to declare medical conditions that may affect their driving
- By encouraging professionals to alert DVA of conditions that may affect peoples driving
- By requiring drivers to renew their licenses at 70 and ever three years after that
- By providing a free assessment service for people who have declared a medical condition <sup>6</sup>

### **Assessing current policy**

Over the past year Imtac has tried to assess how effective current policy is in supporting older people and disabled people to continue to drive. We have done this by meeting and discussing issues with older people and disabled people and their organisations, with officials within DRD and with DoE and staff from the Mobility Centre. Through this work we have found:

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<sup>6</sup> Assessment may involve a number of processes including a driving assessment at the Mobility Centre – assessment can result in a licence being revoked, restricted or advice being given on adaptations to vehicles to help the person to drive

- Significant apprehension amongst older people and disabled people about losing their license
- A belief amongst older people and disabled people that there is no viable alternative to the car
- A widespread perception amongst disabled people and older people that current policy is aimed at removing a licence rather than providing support to people to continue to drive
- A reluctance to inform DVA of changes to medical conditions as a result of this perception
- The potential that policies that support people to continue to drive may be perceived as contradictory to other policies that encourage people to use alternative modes of transport
- Evidence from DVA that the assessment process is effective in helping those that can to continue to drive
- Evidence from the Mobility Centre that significant numbers of disabled people and older people are supported to continue to drive through its work<sup>7</sup>
- Evidence from the Mobility Centre of positive steps to broaden the reach of their services to more locations across Northern Ireland
- Indications that the majority of people who go through the assessment process have a positive outcome

Based on our findings we believe that the following are issues around current policy:

- Current policies would benefit from a better balance between the need to ensure driver and roads safety and supporting

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<sup>7</sup> 911 people undertook an assessment through the Mobility Centre in 2010-11 (Disability Action Annual Report 2010/11)



older people and disabled people to continue to drive where this is possible

- More could be done to promote alternatives to the car to older people and disabled people
- There is a mismatch between people's negative perceptions of driving assessment and the positive outcomes of the process
- The current approach may be leading to some people giving up driving prematurely or continuing to drive when not safe to do so

## **Recommendations for the future**

In this paper we have looked at issues around driver licensing and older people and disabled people. We have stressed the importance of the car to people's lives and the impact of not having access to a car both to individuals and to Government. We have looked at the projections for an ageing population and concerns about the safety of older drivers. Finally we have looked at the support currently available for older people and disabled people to enable them to continue to drive. The following are recommendations based on our work.

### **Recommendation one – Government needs to maintain policies that support older people and disabled people to drive where possible**

There is potential for policies aimed at supporting people to continue to drive being viewed as incompatible with other policies aimed at encouraging people to use alternative modes of transport. Departments such as DRD and DoE should maintain a policy that recognises the benefits to individuals and society of supporting older people and disabled people to continue to drive wherever possible and particularly where suitable sustainable alternatives are not available

## **Recommendation two – Government should do more to encourage use of alternatives to the car by older people and disabled people**

Even allowing for an acceptance that keeping older people and disabled people driving is the right thing to do Government should also accept for increasing numbers of older people driving either will not be possible or only possible for specific journeys.

Transport policy must anticipate these changes by attempting to encourage a culture of people using alternatives to the car in advance of people having to make difficult choices around driving. Policies such as free travel for people aged 60 and over are helpful in achieving this. Clearly this needs to be on the understanding that for some disabled people the car is often the only suitable form of transport available. In developing such culture and policy, recognition must be given to the difficulties some older people and disabled people may have in getting to and from suitable accessible and sustainable alternatives.

## **Recommendation three – Government should recognise the crucial role of the Mobility Centre and provide continued and extended support**

Evidence suggests that the Mobility Centre assists large numbers of disabled people and older people each year in Northern Ireland to continue drive through assessment and advice on adaptations. In recent years significant progress has been made in reducing the distances people have to travel for assessments. In meeting future demands it essential that Government here continues to and looks at extending support to the Mobility Centre.

## **Recommendation four – DVA should gather more evidence about older people and disabled peoples attitudes to driving**

Much of the evidence used to compile this report was from research undertaken in Great Britain. Imtac undertook some limited qualitative work with organisations in Northern Ireland that indicates that many older people and disabled people fear losing their licence and have negative perceptions of the procedures and the support available. However policy in Northern Ireland could be better informed by more in-depth research into older people and disabled people's attitudes to driving here. This should include

qualitative and quantitative evidence of people's experiences of the medical assessment process.

**Recommendation five – DVA work with Imtac and others to change perceptions of the assessment process**

Many older people and disabled people have positive experiences of the medical assessment process. However we have found widespread scepticism and fear about the process amongst other older people and disabled people. In the short term Imtac believes there is merit in DVA working with Imtac and other organisations of and for older people and disabled people to identify measures to challenge public perceptions of the process.

**Recommendation six – Government should introduce measures to improve information and support available to older drivers to assist in making decisions about driving**

Imtac has found no evidence to support increased regulation for older drivers. Instead in the longer term Imtac believes greater focus should be given to developing measures that provide older people and disabled people with better support and information to make decisions about their driving. Such measures could be targeted at individuals themselves, their families and key health professionals.

## **Appendix 1 Useful Publications**

**Accessible Transport Strategy for Northern Ireland – DRD 2005**

**Regional Development Strategy 2035 – DRD 2010**

**Making the Connections: Final Report about Transport and Social Exclusion - Social Inclusion Unit 2003**

**A demographic portrait of Northern Ireland: some implications for public policy - NI Assembly Research & Library Services 2011**

**Keeping on the Move: Old Age not the end of the Road – Help the Aged 2008**

**Can Older Drivers be nudged? How the public and private sectors can influence older drivers' self-regulation – RAC Foundation 2011**

**Rospa Older Drivers Policy Paper – Rospa 2010**

**Older Drivers – safe or unsafe? – Institute of Advanced Motoring 2010**

**Safety issues for older drivers – Transport for London 2010**

**A literature review of older driver interventions: Implications for the delivery programmes by Devon County Council and Devon Road Casualty Reduction Partnership – Devon County Council 2010**