



Report into issues arising from Imtac public meetings held during March 2019

(May 2019)

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About Imtac

The Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee (Imtac) is a committee of disabled people and older people as well as others including key transport professionals. Its role is to advise Government and others in Northern Ireland on issues that affect the mobility of older people and disabled people.

The aim of the Committee 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 Infrastructure (hereafter referred to as the Department).

Background

Imtac held five public meetings across Northern Ireland in March 2019 – Newtownards (14th), Newry (19th), Enniskillen (22nd), Belfast (25th) and Derry/Londonderry (29th). The meetings were attended by around 100 people including disabled people, older people, some of their representative organisations, transport providers, policy makers, Councillors and MLAs. Whilst short presentations were made by the Vice-Chairperson and the Secretary of Imtac, the bulk of the meetings involved discussion by attendees on what they saw to be the key issues in transport and travel. This report summarises the issues raised during the meetings.

Structure of the discussions

Each meeting involved a series of round table discussions. Everyone attending was given the same topic guide and asked to select a person to take notes and provide feedback. The topic guide contained three general questions on travel and transport:

- (1) What currently works well?
- (2) What currently doesn't work well?

(3) What improvements are needed?

Participants were asked to relate each question to the different modes of transport, the pedestrian environment, how easy it is to access information and how involved people felt in the design and delivery of services.

Feedback on what currently works well

Public transport

There was some recognition that the accessibility of public transport has improved in the last decade. There was more positive feedback in Belfast about public transport than at the other venues. Glider services received particular praise at this meeting. Train services were praised at nearly every meeting, contrasting sharply with attitudes to bus services. The levels of assistance provided on the railways received particular praise. On board audio and visual information systems on trains and buses (Belfast only) were welcomed but qualified as the systems did not always work on both modes. There was some feedback at a number of meetings that customer service provided by bus drivers has improved in recent years. Positive feedback was also received about the improved facilities at mainline bus and rail stations.

Concessionary fares

The Concessionary Fares Scheme was highlighted at a number of meetings as very beneficial for older people in particular. Free travel was seen as making an important contribution to combating loneliness and isolation amongst older people.

Community transport

Some attendees at each of the meetings used local community transport services and many attendees saw these services as an essential lifeline for older people and disabled people. Several people highlighted the excellent assistance provided on community transport services. The

facility to use a Smartpass on community transport was also considered by some as a good thing.

Taxis

Some people attending meetings stressed how important taxis are in helping them to get out and about. A number of people praised the service and assistance they received from some drivers

Feedback on what currently doesn't work well

Public Transport

There was significant comment at all the meetings on various issues relating to public transport services. These can be summarised as: (1) issues with service levels, (2) issues with infrastructure and vehicles, (3) issues with staff and assistance and (4) issues with connectivity.

- (1) Many people felt that bus service levels in their area are inadequate. This was particularly acute in Enniskillen where services were deemed to be poor except for the Enniskillen to Belfast services. Evening and weekend services were seen as inadequate at every meeting. Frequency was seen as an issue everywhere apart from Belfast. However here there was particular criticism of the reliability of feeder bus services to the Glider.
- (2) Most attendees have issues with the accessibility of public transport infrastructure and vehicles. At the meetings outside Belfast buses and coaches with a number of steps were seen as a major concern for many older people and disabled people. The lack of priority seating and flexible space on board these vehicles creates additional problems for wheelchair users, people with rollators and people travelling with assistance dogs. For many people in rural areas getting to the nearest bus stop is difficult or impossible and the lack of bus shelters or an accessible place to board in many places deters people from using bus services.

The lack of audio and visual next stop information systems on buses outside Belfast was highlighted at every meeting as a factor that makes travel more difficult for some disabled people.

Reliability issues with the existing audio and visual systems on buses and trains was also commented on. The positioning of the display screen on buses was also questioned, as wheelchair users could not see it.

Accessibility at some railway stations was discussed. In particular footbridge and step provision at Sydenham, Moira, Derriaghy and Adelaide made these stations inaccessible. Toilet provision at stations was praised but toilets are locked or not available when the station building is closed. Low-level counters, where provided, were praised at a number of meetings but feedback indicated that these are rarely open or available.

People at a number of the meetings raised poor signage on vehicles and at stations. The lack of audio announcements at bus stations was highlighted as problematic for some passengers. At several meetings participants mentioned that buses often leave from the wrong stands at stations, to the detriment of people with a visual impairment in particular.

There was criticism at a number of meetings of the accessibility of vehicles operated by commercial operators other than Translink who provide public transport services. In particular operators were criticised for using vehicles with no access for wheelchair users.

- (3) Issues were raised at every meeting about staff and the assistance they provide, in particular bus drivers not always being helpful and/or moving off before people are seated. The notice requirement for some disabled people to travel by bus outside Belfast was raised at a number of meetings and is seen as unacceptable. The lack of assistance at bus stations including Laganside was highlighted by some, as was the general lack of available assistance at night.

Many people at the meetings questioned the training provided to bus drivers in particular and contrasted their experiences travelling on buses to the service and assistance provided when using trains. There was general agreement that awareness of issues for people with hidden impairments was low on all modes, despite the welcome adoption by Translink of initiatives such as the JAM Card.

A lack of respect for priority seats on board buses and trains was a concern expressed at most meetings. Feedback from attendees suggested more should be done by Translink to encourage people who don't need these seats to move for disabled people, including people with hidden impairments.

For some disabled people and older people attending the meetings a lack of confidence in staff attitudes and assistance was the major reason why they did not use public transport. A small number of people also raised the attitudes of other passengers as well as instances of anti-social behaviour as issues which made them uncomfortable when travelling on, or less likely to use public transport.

- (4) Connectivity between bus and rail services and between public transport and other services was raised at every meeting. The lack of connectivity between services was the major reason why people found using public transport difficult or impossible in the meetings outside Belfast.

Concessionary fares

Many disabled people attending the meetings raised their concerns about the Half-Fare Smartpass. Most felt it was discriminatory that some disabled people did not have free travel. Some commented on changes that have been introduced in Belfast to allow free travel on Glider services. Others were frustrated that return tickets could not be purchased using the Half-Fare Smartpass. Some attendees at the meetings were unaware of the Concessionary Fares Scheme.

Community transport

Community transport services divided opinions at the meetings. For many the service is essential and provides one of the few ways of getting out. Others found the services impossible to get unless they were willing to fit in with what the operator could provide.

There were common frustrations that united both users and potential users of community transport at meetings. These included lengthy notice requirements to book the services, the lack of flexibility in how and where the services operate and the restricted operating hours of the services. With regard to DATS the rise in fares was highlighted as a negative. In Enniskillen people felt that it was unfair that people living in the town using DATS had to pay a fare, whilst people using rural Dial-a-Lift travelled for free.

A number of community transport providers attended the public meetings. There was widespread agreement between both users and operators that recent funding reductions by Government had impacted negatively on services and made addressing issues with services impossible. Community transport providers at several meetings expressed frustration about the increased demand placed on their services by reduction in the provision of transport previously provided by the Health Service.

Taxis

Taxi issues were raised at every meeting. The availability of taxis was a problem particularly in rural areas with small or no operators. The limited availability of wheelchair accessible taxis was raised at every meeting with problems seen as getting worse since the introduction of the new fare structure.

The attitudes of some drivers were raised at every meeting. Some people reported drivers making offensive comments. A number of people had been refused access because they were a wheelchair user or travelling with their assistance dog.

The cost of taxis was also raised by participants at all the meetings as a major barrier to using services more often. Some people reported drivers charging more for travelling because they were a wheelchair user or travelling with an assistance dog.

Pedestrian issues

Pedestrian issues featured prominently at every meeting. Pavement parking was a major problem commented on in every area. Other clutter including A Boards, pavement cafes, shop display and street furniture was highlighted as hazards in every location. At one of the meetings dog fouling (and a lack of enforcement) was raised as an additional hazard for disabled and older pedestrians.

The provision and condition of footways was an issue in every location. Uneven and damaged surfaces were a problem. In some locations where public realm improvements had been carried out participants reported surfaces were slippery when wet. People also highlighted problems with narrow footways, particularly in rural areas.

The lack of dropped kerbs and suitable crossings was mentioned at every meeting. More controlled pedestrian crossings are required with longer crossing times. Some people criticised the design of new Puffin crossings. Others highlighted the lack of rotating cones and audible signals at existing pedestrian crossings. Finally some people highlighted a lack of tactile paving and the lack of maintenance of existing tactile paving as hazards that made pedestrian journeys difficult or impossible.

Blue Badge and parking issues

Comments on the Blue Badge Scheme and parking were made at all the meetings. The consensus was that there are not enough accessible parking bays and that abuse of these bays is a consistent problem, particularly in private car parks. There was criticism of the provision and design of accessible parking bays. Consideration needs to be given, in particular, to bays accessible to larger wheelchair accessible vehicles.

Accessible bays are sometimes located too far away from key locations. A number of people commented on the misuse of the Blue Badge by family members and other non-disabled people and the need to better educate people about how the badge should be used. Finally some people with hidden impairments reported being challenged by members of the public when using their Blue Badge.

Access to information

In relation to access to information a number of issues were raised at the meetings. Some people reported not being confident about using online information including using a smartphone. Many older people reported relying on printed timetables but found the text size too small. Other disabled people reported finding using timetables difficult. Some people reported problems with the consistency and accuracy provided by the Translink Contact Centre, timetable and App. Some people with a visual impairment reported difficulties using the Translink website and App. Generally people did not feel information about the accessibility of services was well communicated and providers needed to be more proactive. Finally, some people at meetings outside Belfast reported that groups and organisations have closed to due to funding cuts and that as a result they are less likely to hear about services and developments.

Involvement and engagement

When asked if people feel involved in the development and delivery of services participants universally responded negatively. Most felt they were never involved in decisions about transport and travel policy and services. Those that had some experience felt that engagement only took place after important decisions had already been taken, feeling the process was more of a tick box exercise. Some people had not heard of Imtac before the meetings and the consensus at each meeting was that more should be done to involve disabled people and older people.

Other issues

A number of issues were raised at the meeting in Newry around assistance services provided at ferry terminals and airports in Northern Ireland. These issues have subsequently been referred to the Consumer Council and staff from the Council have been in touch with the individuals concerned.

Attendees at the meetings close to the Border raised issues with cross border travel and raised particular concerns about the potential impact of Brexit on travel in the island of Ireland.

Feedback on the improvements that are required

Public transport

The suggestions for improvement of public transport covered:

- More frequent services, particularly at weekends and evenings
- Better integration between bus and rail services
- More accessible bus design with low-floor access, space for a wheelchair user, generous priority seats and separate space for others such as people with rollators, assistance dogs and buggies and prams
- Buses with 2 spaces for wheelchair users
- Next stop audio visual information on all buses in Northern Ireland
- Better signage on buses, trains and at stations
- Enforcement of priority seating on buses and trains
- Better provision of Park & Ride services
- Better shelter provision and timetable information in rural areas
- Accessibility prioritised during ongoing testing and maintenance of vehicles and infrastructure
- Better training for bus drivers including issues for people with dementia and other hidden impairments
- More public transport staff to be taught basic sign language
- Training at all levels in Translink delivered by people with lived experience
- Free travel for disabled people on public transport

Community transport

The suggestions for the improvement of community transport covered:

- Increased funding for services
- Flexibility of booking including being able to book on the day
- Extended operating hours to include weekend and evening services
- Fares to be set at a more reasonable level
- Concessions available to use on all community transport services
- Better linkages with Translink services
- Improved access for groups (including groups of wheelchair users)

Taxis

The suggestions for improvement of taxi services covered:

- Strong support for incentives/subsidies to encourage more drivers to purchase wheelchair accessible taxis
- Better training for drivers including issues for people with a hidden impairment
- JAM card to be adopted by taxi companies
- Stronger legal requirements requiring drivers to carry wheelchair users
- Enforcement of existing legal requirements requiring drivers to carry passengers with assistance dogs

Blue Badge and parking issues

The suggestions for improvement for Blue Badge and parking issues covered:

- Better education and information for Blue Badge Holders on how to use the Badge
- Education and awareness for the general public about people with hidden impairments

- Better enforcement of accessible parking, particularly in private car parks
- Increased numbers of accessible parking bays
- Better designed accessible parking closer to destination points
- Provision of accessible parking bays for larger vehicles

Access to information

The suggestions for improvement of information covered:

- Apps and websites designed to be more accessible to disabled people
- Larger print on documents and timetables
- Access policies and guides to be made more widely available
- More disabled people to be used in advertising services
- A dedicated telephone service to get information

Involvement and engagement

The suggestions for improvement involvement and engagement covered:

- Involvement at an early stage before decisions are taken
- Regular regional Imtac engagement meetings

Conclusions

Imtac would like to thank everyone who took part in these public meetings during March. The meetings were very productive with discussions raising a broad range of issues. Most of the key issues were the same at every meeting but with some local variations. The level and frequency of services are major concern for everybody as is the lack of connectivity between services. However these issues tend to be more important for many older people and disabled people because often their travel choice is so limited. In addition to these generic issues there are a number of broad themes which have emerged from the five meetings

which the Committee will use to inform the advice that it gives to Government.

Firstly, there was recognition at every meeting that some aspects of travel and transport have improved in recent years. However it is clear from the feedback that these benefits are most pronounced in the Greater Belfast area compared to other locations. This is unsurprising from one perspective given that service levels for public transport are higher there than in all other locations around Northern Ireland. However the meetings also confirmed that Belfast benefits from enhanced accessibility of services in comparison to other areas. Buses are all low-floor, with dedicated wheelchair user spaces and audio and visual next stop announcements. The rail network, praised for its service levels at all meetings, is most extensive in and around the city. Finally Belfast has benefited from prestige investment projects including Glider, praised at meetings for the inclusive approach used in developing the service.

A key challenge that must be addressed in the future is to ensure that investment in public transport outside of Belfast delivers greater benefits for disabled people and older people living in these areas. Central to achieving this is requiring vehicles and infrastructure used to deliver public transport services (by both Translink and commercial operators) across Northern Ireland to meet higher accessibility standards.

Secondly, the service provided on the railways here received significantly more praise than bus services. This is not a great surprise given staff are generally available both on trains and at mainline stations and the infrastructure, with notable exceptions, is accessible.

The contrast in experiences between modes should present a clear challenge to examine ways to raise the standards of service provide on buses here. This will involve looking at the training provided to drivers and others and the assistance available to passengers on board buses and at stations.

Finally it was clear from every meeting that alternative services to public transport which many disabled people and older people rely on have not improved in recent years and have often, based on the experiences of people attending the meetings, worsened. These services include taxis, rural community transport services and DATS. It has been clear for some time that following changes to regulation in 2016 access to taxis for some disabled people (notably wheelchair users) has reduced. Each public meeting simply confirmed this to be the case. There is an urgent need to look at ways this trend can be reversed. Community transport services funded by Government in both rural and urban areas have always been a vital service for older people and disabled people, although people often express a frustration about the inflexibility of the services. It is clear from feedback at the meetings that funding reductions are impacting on service levels and increasing frustrations for users and potential users.

Imtac does not believe the current situation is sustainable for either operators or users and believes a fresh approach to demand responsive transport in urban and rural areas is essential.

To further highlight the issues raised at the meetings Imtac will publish this report on its website and circulate it to the key policy makers and service providers.