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A new approach to travel, our streets and our places (working draft and title)

Introduction

The past two years have been challenging for everyone, but Deaf people, disabled people and older people have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and the response to it. In many ways the pandemic has both exposed and exacerbated the discrimination and inequalities experienced by disabled people and older people before COVID 19 including significant issues relating to travel, our streets and our places.

In addition to the pandemic, society is facing the even greater challenge of responding to and adapting to climate change. It is inevitable that a transition to Net Zero will mean changes to the way we travel, reducing our current car dependency in favour of sustainable modes. For some Deaf people, disabled people, and older people this transition offers an opportunity to address some of barriers that currently make travel difficult or impossible. For other disabled people and older people, completely dependant on the car for mobility, the prospect of transition will understandably be a worry. In responding to climate change it is essential we do not repeat past mistakes and that tackling inequalities is a key priority for a just transition to Net Zero.

Because of the recent crisis and the massive challenge of climate change, Imtac believes it essential that Government reconsiders its current approach to making travel, our streets, and our places accessible and inclusive to everyone. We are recommending a new approach focusing on 4 key principles:

1. Putting Deaf people, disabled people, and older people at the centre of every stage of decision making
2. Ensuring a shift in our cultures
3. Ensuring public and private investment contributes to an accessible and inclusive society
4. Ensuring end to end journeys are straightforward and accessible

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Putting Deaf people, disabled people, and older people at the centre of decision making

As Deaf people, disabled people, and older people we are the experts in issues that affect our lives. If we are going to develop effective policies, services and infrastructure that work for everyone it is essential that we are involved from the start.

It is essential that engagement reflects the diversity of Deaf people, disabled people and older people. This must include engagement with people with a diversity of impairments. It must also include diversity in backgrounds including, for example, children and young people, women and girls and people who live in both urban and rural areas. It must also include carers, families and relatives who play a vital role in assisting some disabled people to have a voice in decision making.

The work of Imtac demonstrates the value of lived experience including many examples of effective coproduction such as the successful BRT / Glider project. There have also been examples where we have not been involved or have been brought in too late to effectively influence policy and service development. When the latter happens, we lose valuable opportunities to ensure that investment works for everyone.

The new approach we are recommending must require that policy makers and providers engage with Deaf people, disabled people, older people and carers at the earliest stage of any policy and service development impacting on travel, our streets or our places.

To ensure that change happens Imtac recommends a framework for engagement be developed setting out:

- Accessible channels to be used to obtain the viewpoints of Deaf people, disabled people and older people at both local and regional levels
- Practical mechanisms for policy makers and service providers to develop an understanding of the barriers faced by Deaf people, disabled people and older people such as guided walks and journeys
- A clear commitment to and implementation of standards to ensure communication and consultation is accessible to Deaf people, disabled people and older people

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- The establishment of fora of Deaf people, disabled people, older people and carers by Government Departments and local councils to actively assist in the shaping of policies and services

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Ensuring a shift in our cultures

Central to the success of any new approach is a shift in our cultures, challenging and changing the traditional approaches to accessibility and inclusion as well as the current approaches to how we design travel, our streets and our places.

Shifting culture around accessibility and inclusion

We need a shift in culture around how inclusion and accessibility is weighted and prioritised when decisions are made on policy and allocation of resources, recognising that access and inclusion are fundamental to a fairer and more equal society and provide benefits for everyone.

To achieve this Imtac recommends:

- All people involved in the design and delivery of strategy, policy and services relating to travel, streets and places should undertake Disability Equality Training designed and delivered by Deaf people and disabled people
- Government requires all service providers it funds to publish a Reasonable Adjustment Policy, detailing arrangements in place to ensure Deaf people and disabled people can access services on a equal basis to others

Shifting culture around travel, our streets and our places

We need a shift in culture around how we design travel, our streets and our places, prioritising people over the movement of vehicles.

To achieve this Imtac recommends:

- Land use planning policies and related guidance are strengthened to ensure that inclusive and sustainable travel is prioritised over private vehicles in future public and private sector development
- A road users hierarchy prioritising walking, wheeling and other sustainable travel is mainstreamed into the delivery of programmes and policies relating to travel, our streets and our places

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- We introduce a zero-tolerance approach to pavement clutter in our towns and cities
- We legislate to make pavement parking illegal as the default position

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Ensuring public and private sector investment contributes to an accessible and inclusive society

Imtac recognises that both public and private sector investment over the past two decades has made a significant difference to the accessibility of travel, our streets, and places. Despite this positive change Deaf people, disabled people and older people still experience persistent discrimination and inequalities compared to others in society. If we are going to effectively address these issues, as well as ensuring a just transition to Net Zero, it is essential that we look at a new approach to maximise the impact and benefit of future public and private sector investment.

We believe this change in approach can be achieved by adopting the highest inclusive design standards when investing in travel, our streets and our places rather than adopting the current minimum standards or a legal compliance approach.

Taking into account the need for a shift in cultures highlighted in this paper Imtac recommends the following be prioritised:

Walking and wheeling

All journeys we undertake involve some walking or wheeling including for linking journeys using other sustainable modes. It is essential that we make walking and wheeling accessible and easier for everyone and give both greater priority in the design of our streets and places through:

- Increased priority for walking and wheeling in our existing streets and places by ensuring when upgrading existing pedestrian infrastructure that it meets the highest accessibility standards
- Ensuring, when investing in new pedestrian infrastructure including new development and active travel projects such as Greenways, that these are required to meet the highest accessibility standards
- Ensuring that maintenance of walking and wheeling infrastructure is prioritised under a new approach
- Ensuring that high standards are in place for utility companies when work takes place on footways, ensuring accessible routes are in place during works and that reinstated footways meet accessibility standards.

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Cycling

Cycling must be normalised as a mode of travel in Northern Ireland, accessible to all regardless of age, gender, ethnicity or impairment. In line with a sustainable road users hierarchy, making cycling easier should never involve making pedestrians feel vulnerable. Under a new approach we must ensure that the opportunity to cycle is open to everyone through:

- Ensuring, when investing in cycling infrastructure (including cycle parking), that is designed to standards that are safe, accessible and usable for all (including disabled and non-disabled people).
- Ensuring investment recognises cycles as vehicles not pedestrians, by providing infrastructure in urban areas that is segregated from both pedestrians and other vehicles (no shared footways).
- Ensuring that as a condition of any investment in schemes to promote cycling (including public cycle hire schemes) they are required to be inclusive and accessible to everyone including people who require non-standard and accessible cycles

Public transport

Easy access to regular, reliable and affordable public transport is essential to addressing current discrimination and inequalities as well as meeting ambitious targets for a just transition to Net Zero. We must ensure that under a new approach Deaf people, disabled people and older people have the same opportunities to travel by public transport as others through measures including:

- Ensuring all buses and coaches purchased in the future to deliver public transport services are low-floor and are designed to agreed accessibility standards (including the provision of audio-visual announcements and space for 2 wheelchair users)
- Ensuring that our bus stop infrastructure is designed to agreed accessibility standards which enable easy access to and between services
- Ensure that investment in our mainline stations meets agreed accessibility standards which include provision of key facilities such as Changing Places Toilets

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- Ensure that we invest to upgrade our rail infrastructure to provide universal step free access with halts designed to agreed accessibility standards
- Undertake a feasibility study into introducing a level boarding rail network
- Ensure that travel by public transport is affordable and ticketing systems are designed to be accessible to everyone
- Requiring that information about public transport is provided to agreed design standards to ensure accessibility for Deaf people, disabled people and older people

Private car / vehicles

Imtac recognises reducing discrimination and inequality and making a just transition to Net Zero will involve a radical change in our current approach to travel by car. Part of this change in approach will be a transition to zero emission vehicles but the more radical change must involve a significant reduction in car dependency and usage. It is essential that this change in approach is inclusive, addressing potential negative impacts on Deaf people, disabled people and older people through:

- Ensuring that any measures to address car dependency recognise the continued need for accessible parking and access for pick up and drop off facilities for example for taxi services
- Ensuring that the transition to electric vehicles is affordable
- Ensuring that vehicle charging infrastructure is accessible for everyone and does not inhibit people walking, wheeling or cycling
- Ensuring that design and usage of zero emission vehicles (including E Scooters) compliments and does not deter people from using sustainable modes

Our places

Whilst it is vital that the new approach makes travel and our streets more accessible and inclusive, it is equally vital that our places (including buildings, facilities and services) meet the highest standards too. Failure to do this means that existing discrimination and inequality will persist. Imtac believes this can be achieved through:

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- An Executive wide adoption of inclusive design standards when investing in public realm and buildings
- Strengthening planning policy and related guidance to require higher accessibility standards for buildings and public realm

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Ensuring end to end journeys are straightforward and accessible

Most journeys involve using more than one mode of travel. This can be complex and expensive and often, without the guarantee that every part of the journey is accessible, Deaf people, disabled people and older people won't attempt to travel. The rural nature of Northern Ireland makes accessible end to end journeys particularly challenging with issues over the lack of pedestrian infrastructure and the unavailability of alternative transport for people without access to a car both creating barriers to travel.

In the future it is essential that we change our approach to end to end journeys, recognising that new innovations can reduce inequalities and contribute to a just transition to Net Zero. There are many examples from elsewhere where new approaches have been adopted, taking advantage of advances in technology and changes to land use planning policies.

Whilst technology may provide future solutions, its use can also create barriers for some Deaf people, disabled people and older people. Careful consideration needs to be given to the design of digital platforms as well as non-digital alternatives.

Imtac recommends that the following merit early consideration as approaches to be adopted in Northern Ireland:

Demand responsive transport (DRT)

DRT is a flexible, affordable mode of transport that adapts to the demands of user groups and has significant potential benefits in connecting people in rural areas to key facilities in local towns and onward public transport. DRT can also be used to provide last mile solutions in urban areas reducing car dependency and making journeys easier for people with no or limited access to a car.

Mobility as a Service (MaaS)

MaaS is a concept that uses technology to integrate various forms of transport into a single on demand mobility service. It enables the user to select the best option for a journey using multiple modes and to combine different parts of a journey under a single, affordable payment. The concept has significant potential to provide alternatives to car

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dependency as well as making journeys easier for people with no access to a car in both rural and urban areas.

Shared cars / vehicles

Car clubs, car share and shared rides all represent an opportunity to reimagine models of mobility, providing a potential alternative to car ownership. Clarification is required about how these services can be made accessible to Deaf people, disabled people and older people as well as how existing schemes such as Motability can evolve to take account of changing travel patterns.

20-minute neighbourhoods

The 20-minute neighbourhood concept seeks to create places in our towns and cities where people can sustainably access the facilities they require for daily life (including green space) in a defined area. Good onward transport connections are vital to ensure other vital services outside of neighbourhoods remain accessible.

Autonomous vehicles

Although still in its infancy the development of autonomous vehicles may be a gamechanger in terms of the future of mobility, particularly in relation to providing inclusive and accessible alternatives to car dependency.

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Conclusion

As a society we face the unprecedented challenges of a recovery from COVID and responding to Climate Change, all within the context of restricted budgets. In this paper Imtac has set out the principles around adjustments to current approaches we see as essential for ensuring that the necessary changes involved in travel, our streets, and our places are inclusive and equitable. We plan to work with Government, Councils and others to ensure that these principles are translated into inclusive and accessible policies, services and places and look forward to further productive engagement.