



**Comments from Imtac on footbridge access at
Lambeg railway halt**

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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 has been asked by Translink to comment on proposals to make changes to current footbridge provision at Lambeg railway halt. Whilst comments are made on the specific proposals for Lambeg, this document will also address the wider issues of improving accessibility at unstaffed facilities across the rail network in Northern Ireland.

Context

Both the Department and Translink have made significant policy commitments to ensure that the public transport system is accessible to all. Both have legal commitments and duties relating to disabled people. More broadly the State has obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD). Article 9 (Accessibility) states:

“To enable persons with disabilities to live independently and to participate fully in all aspects of life, State Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure to persons with disabilities access, on an equal basis with others, to the physical environment, to transportation, to information and communications, including information and communication technologies and systems, and to other facilities open or provided to the public, both in urban and

rural areas. These measures, which shall include the identification and elimination of obstacles and barriers to accessibility”

Steps are the most basic physical barrier that prevent, or make, travel difficult for disabled people, older people and others. Imtac’s published position is that any future investment in new transport infrastructure must ensure step-free access.

There are significant challenges in achieving step-free access across the current rail network in Northern Ireland given it was largely designed and built over a century ago. Recent investment means that mainline stations here are now step-free. Improvements made in the 2000’s have also upgraded access at many unstaffed halts. Most, but not all, halts have step-free access to platforms. However transfer between platforms remains problematic in a number of locations with stepped footbridges or underpasses presenting significant barriers for some older people and disabled people. In some locations the length and accessibility of pedestrian routes between platforms is an additional barrier to their use. Making provision for easy, accessible transfer between platforms in such locations would help to address and remove these barriers.

Developing a step-free rail network

Achieving step-free access at all rail halts is not straightforward. Significant financial resources are required to make the necessary infrastructure improvements, sometimes at locations where passenger numbers are relatively low. The design and nature of some of the sites involved can constrain what solutions are practical and achievable. In addition there can be on-going management and maintenance issues with some solutions. Finally some step-free options, such as transfer between platforms via the track, are deemed to be unsafe. Improvements to accessibility at each halt will have to be considered on a site by site basis. However, based on the above Imtac believes there are three options to ensure that disabled people and older people have the same opportunities to travel as everyone else.

The first, and preferred, option for the Committee for step-free access between platforms is lift provision. Lifts provide all users with

straightforward easy to use access between platforms. However Imtac recognises that there are significant issues around providing lift access in unstaffed locations connected with ongoing maintenance and the potential for vandalism and other anti-social behaviour. There are examples from Great Britain where lift access has been provided successfully at unstaffed stations. Taking account of experiences in GB Imtac recommends that lift access be explored as the first option at each location when improvements to halt accessibility are considered in the future.

The second option, preferred by the Committee where lift access is deemed not feasible, is the inclusion of a ramped footbridge. The major drawback to this option is the length of ramping required to achieve an acceptable gradient. Translink has informed Imtac that new footbridges on the network must be higher to take account of potential future electrification of railways, adding substantially to the length of ramp required. Whilst this type of provision will provide step-free and easy access for some older people and disabled people, others who have mobility impairment will find the walking distances involved will make it difficult or impossible to use the ramp. Despite these reservations Imtac recommends that if Translink proposes to install any new footbridge on the rail network, the bridge should, as a minimum, include ramped access. Not only does this meet Imtac's advice in relation to new infrastructure and step free access, it also meets Translink's own policy and legal commitments.

The Committee recognises that at some locations it is either impossible or impractical to provide step-free access via lifts or ramps. Only in such locations and circumstances does Imtac accept the use of a third option which is to retain and refurbish the existing footbridge. Where this option is taken Translink must provide evidence as to why a step-free solution is not possible or practical. Furthermore to ensure that disabled people and older people retain equal access to the services Imtac would insist that Translink make provision for people who have difficulties accessing halts to undertake the journey using alternative means. This is common practice amongst train operating companies in GB and usually entails a taxi to and from the nearest step-free station. Translink must take urgent

steps to ensure a written policy offering alternative transport is in place and that this policy is widely publicised and available to passengers.

Specific comments on Lambeg station

Through discussions with Translink, Imtac has been informed that the preferred option for Lambeg halt is a refurbishment of the existing footbridge. In line with the advice contained in this paper Translink must provide justification as to why a step-free solution is not considered appropriate at the halt.

The Committee would like to make clear that a decision by Translink to refurbish the footbridge at Lambeg should in no way set a precedent for future plans to improve accessibility at other stations and halts. Future improvements must be considered on a case-by-case basis with the provision of step-free access the preferred option.

If the option of refurbishment is progressed at Lambeg it is essential that Translink have a written policy in place guaranteeing passengers who cannot access this facility an alternative means of transport to enable them to undertake or complete their journey. Imtac recommends that Translink work with the Committee to develop this policy as a matter of urgency.

Finally Imtac recommends that Translink take the opportunity to review access at Lambeg more generally and make any necessary improvements at the same time as making improvements to the footbridge provision.