



**Comments from Imtac on the consultation on the
Accessible Transport Strategy Draft Action Plan
2012-2015**

April 2012

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Making our information accessible

As an organisation of and for disabled people and older people Imtac recognises that the way information is provided can be a barrier to accessing services and participation in public life. We are committed to providing information about our work in formats that best suit the needs of individuals.

All our documents are available in hard copy in 14pt type size as standard. We also provide word and pdf versions of our documents on our website – www.imtac.org.uk. In addition we will provide information in a range of other formats. These formats include:

- Large print
- Audio cassette or CD
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- Braille
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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.

Comments on the consultation

Imtac welcomes the opportunity to comment on the consultation on the latest action plan of the Accessible Transport Strategy (ATS). The Committee commends the Department for the proactive steps taken to make the consultation process accessible including public meetings, producing an easy read version of the document and providing an online audio version of the document. The Department should use the ATS consultations as a template for making all future consultations inclusive and accessible.

Progress to date

Imtac recognises and endorses the significant positive changes that have taken place since the publication of the ATS in 2005. We have been pleased to provide advice on many of the initiatives that have been implemented

Investment by Government has radically improved the physical accessibility of public transport. Investment has also improved access to additional services such as door2door and rural dial-a-lift. Extension to the Concessionary Fares Scheme has reduced the cost of travel for many older people and disabled people. The DRD has also sponsored a number of important pilot projects since 2005 including a travel training/buddy scheme and more recently the pilot of audio visual information on buses. Investment and programmes have undoubtedly enhanced life opportunities for many disabled people and older people and contributed to reducing social exclusion.

Coupled with this there has been an increased understanding of other barriers that make travel difficult for older people and disabled people. Information is one such example. Since 2005 Imtac has undertaken two studies into the accessibility and availability of information. These reports have shown that both DRD and transport providers do understand the need to make information accessible and are routinely providing this. Publications such as Travel Safe and Translinks Access Guide show the priority given to improving information about transport services.

The ATS also recognises the importance of consultation and engagement with disabled people and older people in developing policy and services. Imtac believes that since 2005 this has improved as a direct result of the ATS. The Committee is routinely involved in discussions with DRD, other Departments and Translink. This has resulted in significant opportunities to improve current policies and services and maximise investment. There are numerous practical examples of good engagement including both the Travel Safe Guide and Translink Access Guide highlighted above. Other examples of good engagement include the DoE around the Taxis Act, Roads Service around parking enforcement and Blue Badge misuse and with Translink around new train procurement.

Remaining barriers

Despite the obvious progress Imtac believes there is significant evidence to suggest that disabled people and older people still find getting around difficult. Research suggests that disabled people in particular use public transport less than others in our society despite the radical improvements in physical accessibility. Figures around lower income levels and employment rates for disabled people suggest that transport remains a barrier to fully participation in society.

Recently Imtac has been undertaking qualitative work with disabled people and older people around attitudes to using public transport as well as other issues that make getting around difficult. Although not yet complete we believe this research can assist Government to make an assessment about how far we have come since 2005. To date the feedback we have had suggests that, while people appreciate improvements have been made; many do not yet feel confident enough to use public transport on a regular basis. The reasons for this are complex and varied but usually involve some part of the “transport chain” not working. This may be due to a lack of information, poor service

levels at some point, inaccessible infrastructure or the lack of awareness amongst staff and others.

The Committee has also been asking older people and disabled people about how they travel. While more people appear to be making journeys using public transport the use of taxis and the private car remains extremely high. People have also given feedback on alternative transport services such as door2door and dial-a-lift. Here views are polarised between those who think services are excellent and those that find services difficult or impossible to access further highlighting the variation in availability and delivery of such services.

One area that requires specific mention is the barriers encountered by disabled people and older people in the pedestrian environment. Imtac is currently developing a report into these difficulties. From the feedback we have received it would appear that many journeys are made difficult or impossible by problems encountered in the pedestrian environment. These include poor design, poor installation, poor maintenance, illegal clutter on pavements and illegal parking on pavements and at crossing points.

This and other work we have undertaken (including the report on transport and people with a learning disability) suggest that despite some notable improvements there is significant progress still to be made in addressing the barriers to travel identified in the ATS in 2005.

Comments on the current action plan

Imtac acknowledges that the DRD is limited like all Government Departments by current spending restrictions. In better times the Committee would have liked to see proposals to extend the Concessionary Fares Scheme to offer free travel to more disabled people or proposals to roll out the provision of audio visual information on bus services across Northern Ireland.

Given the restrictions on the Departmental budgets is understandable that many of the actions in the draft plan are broad and general in nature. However Imtac believes if properly progressed and monitored there is scope to make improvements. Imtac and other organisations of and for disabled and older people have a key role to play in this. We welcome the clear commitments in the Action Plan to continue to support Imtac and encourage wider engagement with older people and disabled people.

The Committee particularly welcomes the task that specifically relates to examining issues arising from work undertaken by Imtac in areas of concern such as attitudes to public transport, flexible transport, the pedestrian environment and travel training programmes. We are currently revising our Guidelines for Good Practice around Disability Equality and Awareness Training and recommend that this could be considered under task 5.7 in the draft Action Plan.

Imtac notes there is no reference to Shopmobility services in the draft Action Plan. Given the importance of these services Imtac recommends that an additional task be added to provide ongoing support for services similar to the welcome commitment contained in task 4.2 for support to the NI Mobility Centre.

One issue that is particularly relevant at present is free and half-fare travel offered under the Concessionary Fares Scheme. The feedback we have received is that older people value free travel greatly and we welcome that it is not proposed to review these concessions in the action plan. In the main Imtac would not support proposals to do so in the future. The Committee looks forward to be involved in discussions around potential changes to the half-fare concessions connected to changes to Disability Living Allowance.

Given the limitations on resources it is essential that we make best use of what is available. Through the work we have done looking at good practice elsewhere and through discussions with disabled people and older people it is clear more could be done to look at initiatives that support people to using the improved public transport system. Our work also suggests that the mix of alternative transport services currently provided may not offer the best outcomes either for passengers or for Government in terms of value for money.

Imtac welcomes tasks in the Action Plan to look at the impact of the Transport Programme for People with Disabilities (TPPD). However as this is the last planned Action Plan for the ATS it is our recommendation that it should also include tasks to review the future strategic direction of DRD around issues of accessibility and inclusion. Recently both the Regional Transportation Strategy and Regional Development Strategy have undergone similar review processes. A similar review of the ATS would allow the Department to assess how far we have come, future priorities and the continued relevance of existing programmes and services. This would also assist in planning how to maximise the impact

of limited resources. A review would allow the Department to set a new strategic approach to issues around accessibility and inclusion within the context of a renewed RTS and significantly changed times.

Conclusion

Intac would like to thank the Department for the opportunity to respond to the current consultation. The Committee would welcome the opportunity to discuss our response with officials from the Department, in particular our recommendation that the DRD review its current strategic approach to accessibility and inclusion before the end of the current Accessible Transport Strategy in 2015.