



A2B Access to Benefits for Older People

Response to Draft Accessible Transport Strategy Action Plan 2009-2012

Version: Final
Date: 07/07/2009
Author: Zoë Anderson
Contact: 028 9075 4070 / 07875 092 915 / zoe@a2b.org.uk

unit 40, north city business centre, 2 duncairn gardens, belfast bt15 2gg
t: 028 9075 4070 e: a2b@a2b.org.uk www.a2b.org.uk

A2B: Access to Benefits for Older People is a not for profit company limited by guarantee, number NI61324, registered in Northern Ireland.

1.0 Introduction

1.1 A2B is a not-for-profit organisation with a four year, fixed term life-span. Its vision is to empower and enable the older people of Northern Ireland to maximise their take-up of benefit entitlements.

1.2 A2B is developing online resources, available to older people, their carers, and Voluntary Sector and Governmental advisers to screen older people for benefit eligibility, prepare their claims applications, and submit their data for claims processing.

1.3 A2B welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation. As in our response to the 2007-09 action plan, submitted in January 2008, we are broadly in favour of the actions proposed and therefore this response lists only some areas of concern.

1.4 It is worth noting that this consultation has been held over a very generous timescale and that several public events have been held – this is to be commended and should be used as a model of good practice within the Department.

2.0 General issues

2.1 A2B fully welcomed the introduction of the 60+ SmartPass and the improvements made to coverage of Door To Door schemes during the course of the last Action Plan. However, we remain disappointed that concessionary passes still cannot be used on services other than those provided by Translink. We hope to see some progress on this issue during the course of this Action Plan as it leaves many older and disabled people just as isolated as they were before these changes were implemented.

2.2 The development of a Code of Practice to assist transport providers to meet their DDA Duties would be very useful and should be done in collaboration with both the Equality Commission and transport users.

2.3 The plan to share knowledge across administrations is a good idea and we look forward to the results of this, bearing in mind that transport policy here is well positioned to be a leader, not just a follower of what is happening in other places, as evidenced by the cross-border coverage of the SmartPass. We would welcome any moves towards increasing coverage so that NI SmartPass holders could avail of free travel in GB and vice versa.

2.4 At a recent lobbying event that we helped to facilitate, bringing older people from Engage With Age to Stormont to meet their local politicians, one key discussion theme was access to transport. Some of the older people spoke about bus drivers making it difficult for them to access the bus by not using the 'kneeling' facility or parking too far away from the kerb, while others noted that drivers would pull away before they were seated. Many problems like this can be resolved by simple training and increasing the understanding of transport staff so we welcome the commitment to provide disability awareness and equality training.

2.5 Reviewing the level of funding to Shopmobility should not lead to cuts in that funding. The review should also look for new areas in which the schemes could be extended. We also look forward to the results of the review of the Door to Door schemes. While we recognise that improvements have been made since the last Action Plan, more needs to be done to secure consistency of service and better promotion to those who could avail of it. This should include the views of both current and potential users of the scheme.

2.6 With the introduction of the 60+ SmartPass there were many problems with the application process and the types of supplementary information that people were asked to produce. A review of application processes should look at how this can be improved in future and, again, should take the views of users and potential users of the various passes. In our experience, the complexity of application forms and processes is one of the three main factors which puts older people off applying for benefits so anything that can be done to make the application easier would be very beneficial. We echo the response of the Age Sector Platform on this point:

'ASP welcomes the action to review the application process for SmartPasses but believes that this review should be brought forward from March 2010. ASP believes that one way the process could be made easier would be to enable people to post their application instead of having to present it in person.'

2.7 As we stated in our response to the 2007-09 Action Plan last year, there continue to be problems with the Blue Badge scheme. The Department should look at ways of ensuring that those who are genuine users are able to avail of the badge to the full while also taking action against those who abuse it and against the substantial proportion of the general public who have no disability yet continue to abuse accessible bays. The Department should promote and take part in the annual Baywatch survey.

2.8 The consultation document states that the Blue Badge Scheme was to be reviewed in April 2009. We are not aware of any outcomes from this and would appreciate being kept informed of any consultation or publication as a result of this review.

2.9 Under Strategic Objective 5, we are again fully supportive of work being done to increase awareness of the needs of older and disabled people. This should be done under a wide-ranging partnership model and should produce some tangible outcomes – we would welcome some targets or definitive actions in the Plan for this. Raising awareness among older and disabled people and the organisations that work with them should continue to be a priority – as mentioned, complexity is one key barrier to benefit take-up; awareness is another.

2.10 Our response to the 2007-09 Action Plan stated,
‘The new Translink trains and the announcement system on them are welcome but it must be remembered that not all train passengers in Northern Ireland can benefit from them and that many more improvements are needed to the service on the Larne and Derry/ Londonderry lines.’

We do not believe that any progress has been made in the eighteen months since this response was submitted.

2.11 We advocate strongly that the Department considers ‘the options for further expansion of the Northern Ireland Concessionary Fare Scheme.’ The scheme is of great use to pass holders who live within a reasonable distance of public transport routes and for whom those routes are useful and regular. The scheme, however, does little for older and disabled people who live in more isolated rural (and indeed some urban) areas and cannot make use of it. The lack of access to even a simple journey starting point is often cited by older people as a main reason why they have never applied for a SmartPass. Meanwhile, a large proportion of those who do have one use it rarely or never, as their transport needs are not met by the current public transport system. While we appreciate that it is not feasible to extend public transport provision in many cases, the fact that passes cannot be used on alternative transport types such as community transport schemes, Door to Door schemes and private taxis, requires urgent review.

2.12 In a recent IOD Webchat with Minister Conor Murphy, A2B put the following question:

‘I work for Access to Benefits and time and time again, when we are out meeting older people across NI, we are asked why they can't use their SmartPasses on community and rural transport schemes. The Pass is of little use to them when there is no standard public transport available. Has the Department any plans to address these issues?’

The Minister responded:

‘The reform of public transport... is intended to better integrate public transport provision. We want to ensure that as wide a section as possible have access to the benefits of free travel and so we will look at the issue of the use of Smart passes on community transport in that exercise.’

We urge that this commitment is taken forward as a serious priority.

2.13 Finally, the provision of return tickets to those using concessionary passes should be implemented as soon as possible. The issuing of single journey tickets is time consuming both for the pass holder and the ticketing staff. It is also wasteful as it generates twice as many tickets as is necessary.