



**Response to Department for Regional Development (DRD)
Consultation on the Accessible Transport Strategy (ATS)
Action Plan 2009-12**

1 Introduction

Age Sector Platform (ASP) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation by the Department for Regional Development (DRD) on the Accessible Transport Strategy Action Plan 2009-12.

Age Sector Platform was established in December 2007 as a company limited by guarantee to campaign and lobby for older people in Northern Ireland. The organisation has emerged from the Age Sector Reference Group (ASRG) which had been in operation for 7 years supported by Help the Aged and Age Concern NI. Age Sector Platform has a membership base of 26 older people's organisations and networks which represent approximately 200,000 older people across Northern Ireland.

2 Comments on Consultation

Age Sector Platform (ASP) believes that the Accessible Transport Strategy (ATS) remains a very important strategy which, if implemented, can have a major impact on improving the quality of life of older people across Northern Ireland. Therefore, it is important that the strategy receives adequate resources to ensure its actions are implemented sooner rather than later. It is also important that DRD builds strong linkages with the other government departments identified as having a role in the strategy as many of the actions cannot be delivered by DRD alone.

ASP is committed to playing whatever role it can to introduce the actions as a matter of urgency so that older people can experience a better quality of life. The invitation to ASP to facilitate the Belfast public meeting was welcome and we support the commitment of DRD to hold public meetings on their proposals throughout Northern Ireland so everyone has an opportunity to have a say on transport issues. We have provided our comments under the question headings provided in the consultation and have outlined the key priorities for actions as identified by our members.

3 Executive Summary

- Age Sector Platform (ASP) believes that the Accessible Transport Strategy (ATS) remains a very important strategy which, if implemented and provided with adequate resources, can have a major impact on improving the quality of life of older people across Northern Ireland.
- ASP welcomes the improvements there have been to the quality and accessibility of public transport over the past few years but many older people continue to face travel barriers and this action plan must address them.
- ASP recognises that Door-2-Door transport has benefited older people but believes that there needs to be a review of the scheme in order to identify areas for improvement. ASP would welcome the opportunity to take part in this review and believes that the review must be comprehensive and get the views of users, non-users and potential users of the scheme.
- ASP believes that the main beneficiaries of transport changes in the past few years have been those living in towns and cities across Northern Ireland. Much more needs to be done to tackle the social isolation that many older people living in rural areas experience due to the lack of suitable transport to connect them with their local community.
- ASP believes that one of the best ways to increase rural access and tackle social isolation in rural communities would be to extend the concessionary fares scheme to other modes of transport. DRD needs to look at how the scheme could be widened to include community transport services, taxis and more private operators to increase the mobility of older people. Taxi voucher schemes should be developed for deep rural areas where public transport is not available.
- ASP welcomes the commitment (P04, p.16) to work with older people and their representatives at an early stage when developing new transport policies

and projects. ASP has welcomed the opportunity to engage with DRD in the past year and we look forward to continuing to do so in future.

- ASP supports the commitment to link with other administrations in relation to transport matters. The introduction of free travel throughout the island of Ireland for people aged 65 was welcome and DRD should work with their counterparts in England, Scotland and Wales to ensure that older people from Northern Ireland can also avail of free travel throughout the UK and vice versa.
- 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.
- ASP welcomes the action to research the current usage of the concessionary fares scheme but again believes that this should be brought forward as a priority as this review would uncover many of the access barriers faced by older people.
- ASP welcomes the policy objective to further promote and raise awareness of the travel options available to older people (P25, p.33) as anecdotal evidence across ASP members is that many older people are unaware of the range of transport options available.
- ASP wants to see older people to be able to get return tickets when travelling by public transport so therefore welcomes the action to investigate this issue (P30, p.40).

4 Comments on Action Plan

Questions 1 and 2

Since the launch of the Accessible Transport Strategy in 2005 do you think the accessibility of the transport system for disabled people and older people has improved?

Can you say why?

Age Sector Platform recognises and welcomes the improvements there have been to the quality and accessibility of public transport over the course of the ATS to date. The new trains and buses have made travelling by public transport an easier and more pleasant experience for more people but there remain many barriers for older people that need to be addressed in this action plan.

The introduction of free travel for people aged 60-64 in 2008 was a welcome development and one that removed the cost barrier to travel for many people in this age range. Members of Age Sector Platform had actively campaigned for this change for many years with a lead role taken by the North Belfast Senior Citizens' Forum on this matter.

ASP believes that ongoing discussion with older people and their representatives continues to be an important element in ensuring the ATS is kept on-track. We welcome the engagement with DRD over the past year with our transport committee and we hope that this can be built on during the period of the Action Plan so the voice of older people continues to be heard throughout the remainder of this strategy.

However, while some progress has been made there is still much more to be done to break down the access barriers that older people face on a daily basis to enable them to live a full and active life.

Question 3 and 4

Has the improvement in the accessibility of public transport (i.e. accessible buses, trains, Door-2-Door services etc) increased the travel opportunities for disabled people and older people?

Can you say why?

As mentioned in the previous answer, ASP believes that the improvements to the public transport network in the form of newer buses and trains and improvements to the physical infrastructure of many bus and train stations has helped increase the travel opportunities for some older people by making the travel experience more accessible and pleasant.

The introduction of Door-2-Door transport in urban areas of Northern Ireland was another significant development which has improved the transport options for many older people. Many of our members have reported that they find the service very useful and that it has increased their travel options and helped with the cost of travel when taxi was the only previous alternative. However, other ASP members have expressed frustration at the limitations of the scheme, particularly in relation to some of the operational areas, which can limit its usage for often the most important journeys, such as doctor or hospital appointments. For example, ASP members in Newtownabbey have expressed their disappointment that they can't normally use Door-2-Door to get to hospital appointments in Belfast.

ASP believes that there needs to be a review of the Door-2-Door transport scheme in order to identify areas for improvement within the scheme and its areas of operation. ASP would welcome the opportunity to take part in this review and believes that the review must be comprehensive and get the views of users, non-users and potential users of the scheme. ASP believes this review can result in the improved delivery of an accessible, flexible and reasonably priced alternative transport option for older people across Northern Ireland.

While welcoming the improvements there have been, ASP believes that the main beneficiaries of the transport changes have been those living in towns and cities and not those located in rural areas across Northern Ireland. Much more needs to be done to tackle the social isolation that many older people experience due to the lack of suitable transport to connect them with their local community.

Questions 5 and 6

What are the remaining barriers to making public transport accessible for disabled people and older people?

How can these barriers be overcome?

ASP believes that one of the best ways to increase rural access and tackle social isolation in rural communities would be to extend the concessionary fares scheme to other modes of transport. DRD needs to look at how the scheme could be widened to include community transport services, taxis and more private operators to increase the mobility of older people. Taxi voucher schemes should be developed for deep rural areas where public transport is not available.

The fact that 45% of those who own a Senior SmartPass have never used it¹ highlights that many barriers to public transport remain. It is our view through listening to our members that many of the older people who have never used the SmartPass are rural dwellers who can't access public transport. It is therefore important that DRD takes action to increase the travel options for rural dwellers.

It is also important that a holistic approach to accessibility is taken to ensure that each leg on a passenger's journey is accessible. This includes the physical infrastructure of vehicles and facilities, information provision and linkages between different transport centres such as ports and airports to ensure journeys are accessible from start to finish.

An important consideration in the planning of new major structural facilities for use by the public, such as sports stadia and leisure and shopping complexes should be their accessibility by public transport systems to allow for ease of access to these facilities by older and/or disabled people. Improved rail provision to ports and airports in Northern Ireland is also needed to increase accessibility to these key transport hubs.

Door-2-Door Transport in urban areas - performance review

As mentioned in an earlier answer, ASP calls for a review of the Door-2-Door transport scheme in order to identify areas for improvement within the scheme and its areas of operation. ASP should be part of this review which should result in the improved delivery of an accessible, flexible and reasonably priced alternative transport option for older people across Northern Ireland.

In particular, we believe that Door-2-Door services need to review the main reasons for journeys to ensure that the operational arrangements reflect as much as possible where people need to travel to. For example, we believe that there needs to be increased flexibility around providing transport for people travelling to hospital or doctor's appointments as these are essential journeys.

Question 7

The new ATS draft Action Plan includes new actions to improve the accessibility of transport, do you agree with them?

Age Sector Platform welcomes the vast majority of actions included in the Action Plan. What is important now is that these actions are put into practice so that older people and others can start benefiting from these changes and enjoy a better quality of life. The ATS is now into its fifth year and it is important that there is progress on addressing some of the main areas of concern as outlined by older people and disabled people throughout the lifetime of this strategy. ASP makes a number of points in section 5 of this response in relation to some specific actions included in the Action Plan.

5 Specific Comments on Action Plan

5.1 Engagement with Older People

ASP welcomes the commitment to work with older people and their representatives at an early stage when developing new transport policies and projects (P04 – Consult with old people (p.16)). ASP has welcomed the opportunity to engage with DRD in the past year and was pleased to be involved in the Belfast public meeting as part of the review. We look forward to continuing to meet with DRD to highlight issues faced by older people on transport. ASP also has members represented on the IMTAC committee and welcomes the continued support for this committee as an advisor on transport issues.

5.2 Other Administrations

ASP supports the commitment to link with other administrations in relation to transport matters (PO 5, p.18). The introduction of free travel throughout the island of Ireland for people aged 65 and over was a welcome one. DRD should also work with their counterparts in England, Scotland and Wales to ensure that older people from Northern Ireland can also avail of free travel throughout the UK and vice versa.

5.3 Research

Ongoing research (PO 8, p.19) is very important to ensure the ATS continues to be up to date and responsive to the needs of older people and people with disabilities. We believe that DRD should seek comment from organisations such as ASP when developing its research priorities. There may also be opportunities for DRD to work with ASP's members on specific issues to assist officials in the development of departmental policy and the establishment of transport projects.

ASP particularly welcomes the action to research the potential role of taxis in providing more public transport services as we believe taxis are an under-utilised source for meeting the needs of rural older people in particular. As

stated previously, we believe the introduction of taxi voucher schemes in more areas could be hugely beneficial for older people unable to travel on the 'traditional' public transport services.

5.4 Review of Door-2-Door services

ASP welcomes the action to review the provision of rural Door-2-Door services (PO14, p.25) in October 2009 and would seek to be consulted in relation to this review given the concerns of our rural members on transport availability. We also welcome the action to review the existing Door-2-Door contracts but believe that this should be a wide-ranging review and involve existing users of the services, non-users and potential users.

5.5 Application for SmartPasses

ASP welcomes the action to review the application process for SmartPasses but believes that this review should be brought forward from March 2010. ASP would be happy to work with DRD and IMTAC on problems faced by older people in this process to seek solutions. 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. ASP remains unconvinced of the necessity of this given that other equally important applications to government can be made by post.

5.6 Review of Concessionary Fares Usage

ASP welcomes the action to research the current usage of the concessionary fares scheme but again believes that this should be brought forward as a priority as this review would uncover many of the access barriers faced by older people. Again, consultation with older people, disabled people and their representatives will be central to this and ASP is happy to provide this information to DRD. However, many of the barriers to usage are well known and outlined in this paper so the process for this should not take long.

5.7 Information on transport options

ASP welcomes the policy objective to further promote and raise awareness of the travel options available to older people (P25, p.33) as anecdotal evidence from many ASP members is that many older people are unaware of the range of transport options available. Much of the responsibility for this appears to be with Translink but ASP believes that there is a need to provide a service highlighting all the possible transport options available across a range of transport providers. This campaign should look at the wider dissemination of information in the community as well as looking at the normal marketing channels such as leaflets, TV, billboards.

5.8 Taxi Role

As mentioned earlier, ASP supports plans to consider how taxis can play a larger role in the public transport network and therefore we welcome the action (P30, p.40) to explore the potential for increased taxi usage, particularly in rural areas.

5.9 Return Tickets

ASP wants to see older people to be able to get return tickets when travelling by public transport so therefore welcomes the action to investigate this issue (P30, p.40). We believe that making older people, many of whom have mobility problems, queue twice on a return journey to get their ticket is unnecessary and creates a barrier to travel in itself. Therefore, we believe that DRD should work with Translink to see how this can be facilitated as a matter of urgency.

6 Conclusion

Age Sector Platform (ASP) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the proposals by the Department for Regional Development (DRD) for the Accessible Transport Strategy Action Plan 2009-12. While there have been many improvements to the quality of public transport vehicles and facilities since the beginning of the ATS, many barriers to travel remain for the tens of thousands of older people in Northern Ireland who rely on public transport to get out and about and have a good quality of life.

Many older people, particular those in rural areas, continue to experience social exclusion due to the limited availability of public transport services in their area. Older people who need to rely on financial support to travel should be able to use it on the transport option that best meets their needs. The Senior SmartPass can become a much more valuable tool in overcoming social exclusion if it is made more flexible and can be used on a wider range of public transport services.

Age Sector Platform welcomes the engagement it has had with DRD over the past year and we look forward to continuing to provide the views and ideas of our members so that transport solutions can be found to enable more older people to participate more fully in society and experience a better quality of life.

Age Sector Platform Members

- Age Concern Help the Aged, Northern Ireland
- Amicus Retired Members
- AT&GWU Retired Members Association
- Carers NI
- Castlereagh Lifestyle Forum
- Chinese Welfare Association
- Civil Service Pensioners' Alliance (CSPA)
- Communications Workers Union (NI Regional Retired Members)
- East Belfast Seniors Forum
- Engage with Age
- Friendship Federation
- GMB Retired Members
- Indian Community Centre 50+ Club
- National Federation of Post Offices & BT Pensioners
- Newry and Mourne Senior Citizens' Consortium
- Newtownabbey Senior Citizens' Forum
- NIC ICTU Retired Workers Committee
- North Belfast Senior Citizens Forum
- Northern Ireland Pensioners Convention
- Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA) Retired Members Association
- Older Women's Network
- Pensioners Actively Lobbying Services (PALS)
- Public Commercial Services Union (Associate and Retired Members)
- Sperrin Lakeland Senior Citizens' Consortium
- University of the Third Age
- West Belfast 50+ Forum

Transport Committee

- Francis Hughes, Chair
- Ivan Baxter
- Anne Gamble
- Indira Laugee
- Brian McCloskey
- Mary Morrison
- Gretta Reid
- Anne Watson
- James Watson

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