

Department for Regional Development Accessible Transport Strategy Draft Action Plan 2009-2012

Comments by RNIB Northern Ireland

1. Introduction

1.1 RNIB (the Royal National Institute of Blind People), Northern Ireland, welcomes this opportunity to comment on the Department for Regional Development Accessible Transport Strategy Draft Action Plan 2009-2012

1.2 The Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) is the UK's leading agency working to improve opportunities and quality of life for people with sight loss. The vision of RNIB Northern Ireland is to make Northern Ireland the best place in the World for blind and partially sighted people to live, learn, work and socialise. We employ some 60 staff across the Province, offering a range of direct and indirect services. We are in close contact with the people we serve, as clients and customers, and also through our growing membership network. More information about our services can be found at www.rnib.org.uk/northernireland.

2. Comments

2.1 Has accessibility of transport improved?

There have been significant improvements in the accessibility of transport which RNIB welcomes. In particular the use of audio announcements on trains means that blind and partially sighted people are able to identify where they are and when they need to get off. However there is still room for improvement, for example audio announcements should be extended to all buses and bus stops.

Timetable and other travel information should be made available in alternative formats in hard copies and online (the Translink website and journey planner are badly designed and inaccessible using screen reader or magnification software)

2.2 Draft Action Plan 2009-2012

PO4

The Action Plan claims that older and disabled people and their representatives will be consulted at an early stage in the development of new transport policies and projects, and yet currently there are major works taking place in Belfast City Centre including transport projects to link East and West of the city and transport in and out of the city, about which consultations are not taking place which clearly runs against what is being claimed as policy and action in this document.

Disabled and older people must be consulted as to the implications of any plans relating to access of the city centre and transport to and from it in order to ensure that disabled and older people are not excluded from our city centre.

PO6

Disability awareness and diversity training should be replaced by disability equality training which places an emphasis on the rights of disabled and older people as equal citizens as opposed to particular impairments which can medicalise conditions and create further psychological or attitudinal boundaries to accessibility.

Accreditation is not as important as training being delivered by organisations who are able to provide trainers who have direct experience of disability i.e. disabled people themselves. No able bodied person, no matter how well trained or accredited, is able to fully relay the impact of disability on a person. They are also unable to actually provide front line transport staff with direct experience of engaging with a disabled person which is key to reducing psychological and attitudinal boundaries and giving staff confidence in their ability to interact with disabled people without causing offence.

PO10

The plan claims that it will ensure best practice in accessible design is followed. There is no clear indication if this is a policy which will be voluntary for transport companies or whether this will be enforced. Who identifies best practice and will this process involve disabled people? The best experts on accessibility of transport for disabled people are disabled people themselves.

Best practice in accessible design should not be utilised at the expense of consulting with disabled and older people themselves. They use the network and are the best judge of its accessibility. Best practice should be utilised alongside the contribution of disabled and older people to ensure that best practice is meeting the needs of those it aspires to serve.

In relation to the Rapid Transit network there is no mention of consultation for this project.

P12

While it is necessary to balance the needs of many interested groups in the design of pedestrian and traffic environments, measures such as shared paths for pedestrians and cyclists become serious risks to the safety of blind and partially sighted people. Similarly street furniture such as tables and chairs in front of cafes, bollards, benches etc create unseen obstacles which can also cause accidents. The mobility of blind and partially sighted people must be taken into account when such features are developed.

Where street furniture is necessary it should be clearly marked with colour contrasted designs and tactile indications of where obstacles occur. There continue to be incidents of blind or partially sighted people falling because of such obstacles.

P13

In order to reduce the need for alternative transport systems for disabled and older people it is essential to ensure that public transport systems reach the areas that people are going to want to access. For example in rural areas some people may not have access to transport that is available in urban areas and therefore depend upon expensive taxis for getting to hospital appointments etc.

In urban areas city centres must be accessible via public transport. If no public transport is allowed to enter city centres this greatly limits the possibility of disabled or older people being able to access those spaces. A disabled or older person may have a very limited walking distance and therefore needs to be able to get as close as possible to the city centre.

P16

For blind and partially sighted people taxis can be a common means of transport because they feel the public transport system is not accessible enough. Therefore taxi drivers must be made aware of their requirements under DDA.

There have been particular problems with taxi drivers refusing to allow guide dogs in their cars giving a range of excuses. This is unacceptable. It is common practice for guide dogs to be allowed into public premises and transport where other animals are not as guide dogs serve a purpose in guiding a blind person allowing them to be independent and to get out and about. Guide dogs must be allowed in all taxis and action taken against those drivers who continue to refuse to take them.

P17

Pedestrians, cyclists and public transport users can be seen as competing groups vying for public space to travel in their chosen manner. For blind and partially sighted people shared spaces have caused much concern. For blind and partially sighted people to be able to travel safely it is essential that pedestrians, cyclists and traffic remain separated. This separation needs to be clearly marked by colour contrasted signage and tactile guides.

Cyclists can also tend to use public footpaths which again creates a danger to blind and partially sighted people. However cyclists tend to argue they do not feel safe on the roads. A solution would be to create more and better cycle paths. This would encourage more people to cycle potentially reducing traffic; retain the separation between pedestrians, cyclists and traffic thus creating safe places for blind and partially sighted people to walk.

This is an opportunity for Northern Ireland to develop a progressive policy and move from a carbon fuel reliant society to a sustainable one, as well as one in which blind and partially sighted people can feel safe to walk and travel.

P27

The document states there will be a costing exercise as to the viability of audio/visual announcements on all buses. RNIB would welcome such a policy and would encourage the process to be completed as soon as possible. There is evidence in Great Britain in both urban and suburban areas including London, that

audio/visual systems on bus networks are not only feasible but of great benefit not just to blind and partially sighted people but the wider public also.

We would also like to see this system extended to bus stations and bus stops with real time displays so that a spoken announcement is produced which indicates when a bus will arrive and when it does arrive, what number it is, the destination, and stops along the route.

This system would enable blind and partially sighted people to access the bus network without having to rely upon bus staff or other people who may or may not be around.

If older or disabled people are able to access the bus network through the use of such systems this would greatly reduce the need for alternative means of transport such as taxis, which incur a personal expense, and door-to-door services which are greatly over-subscribed and limited in scope.

Currently audio announcements in stations exist on the rail network and so there is no valid reason why this could not be extended to the bus network. There may be some announcements currently, particularly at Glengall St bus station, however these are inconsistent.

Stops with visual displays can utilise technology similar to the React system to make audio announcements of the display. RNIB can offer information about developing technology in this area.

P28

Accessible information is essential in providing an accessible transport system. There is no point having accessible modes of transport if timetable and other information is not made accessible.

Transport information needs to be made available in alternative formats for blind and partially sighted people, such as Braille, large print or audio. Furthermore this must be done within the same time scale as standard information. Currently there is a significant problem with the time it takes for blind and partially sighted customers to receive information from transport providers in their preferred format. This amounts to discrimination as blind and

partially sighted customers are made to wait longer for the same information.

It may be unreasonable to expect a transport provider to provide timetables for all buses and trains in Braille as has been argued. However it is more than reasonable for the provider to produce specific route timetables in Braille. While blind or partially sighted customers are encouraged to use the call centre for travel info, if they are also not provided with a hard copy of timetable information they are not receiving the same level of service. The point of a hard copy of a timetable is that you can carry it around and have access to it at all times, whereas a phone line is only staffed for a certain number of hours. Blind and partially sighted customers should have access to timetable information when they want it as is the case for other customers.

3. Further Information

We would be delighted to discuss with you any aspect of your work, including the comments we have made above. In the first instance, please contact David Mann, Team Leader, Campaigns, RNIB Northern Ireland, 40 Linenhall Street, Belfast BT2 8BA, tel. 028 9032 9373, email David.Mann@rnib.org.uk.

Lee Delaney RNIB 7/7/09