



**Northern Ireland  
Assembly**

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**COMMITTEE FOR  
REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

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**OFFICIAL REPORT  
(Hansard)**

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**Impact of the Accessible Transport  
Strategy**

24 November 2010

**NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY**

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**COMMITTEE FOR  
REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

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**Impact of the Accessible Transport Strategy**

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Fred Cobain (Chairperson)

Miss Michelle McIlveen (Deputy Chairperson)

Mr Billy Armstrong

Mr Cathal Boylan

Mr Allan Bresland

Mr Billy Leonard

Ms Anna Lo

Mr Fra McCann

Mr Ian McCrea

Mr Conall McDevitt

Mr George Robinson

**Witnesses:**

Mr Frank Caddy            )        Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee

Mr Michael Lorimer       )        

**The Chairperson (Mr Cobain):**

Frank, we are pushed for time. Please give a 10-minute introduction, and we will then ask some questions.

**Mr Frank Caddy (Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee):**

If you can indulge me in setting the Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee (IMTAC) in context briefly, we can then give you an outline of our report into the impact of the accessible transport strategy (ATS) in improving access to transport for people with a learning disability.

IMTAC consists of 21 voluntary members, each of whom serves a three-year term. The structure is such that a third of the membership steps down each year, so we recruit a third annually. In recruiting, we try to ensure that we cover the main areas of disability and have older people's representatives, and that we do so geographically where possible.

IMTAC's work is informed by three working groups: the public transport working group; the personal mobility working group; and the information and training working group. The chairpersons of those groups, the deputy chairperson and I sit on the IMTAC management group. The chairperson of the information and training working group, David McDonald, was due to be here today, but, somewhat ironically, transport is an issue for David. He got into an accessible taxi to come up here, but unfortunately it broke down. That serves as an illustration. It is a pity, because one of the less-recognised issues for people with a learning disability is the information and communication issues that are involved in accessing transport.

IMTAC meets about four times a year, and the working groups meet as required to feed into that. I would like to set that in context. We believe that the Department receives objective advice, which is debated and agreed by consensus among all areas of disability. It is advice that the Department can rely on; it is authoritative advice on transport for disabled and older people. Michael put together the report from the information that was compiled by IMTAC and from desktop research, and I will ask him to make a brief presentation and take you through the report.

**Mr Michael Lorimer (Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee):**

The Department asked us to produce the report to inform its contribution to the cross-departmental learning disability action plan. The purpose of the report was to look at the impact of the accessible transport strategy 2005, specifically on people with a learning disability. We first wanted to establish what the barriers were that made using transport difficult for people with a learning disability. We did that by looking at existing research and readily available information, and by talking to people and organisations of and for people with a learning disability.

We then looked at the ATS and the strategic objectives, policies and actions contained in it, and we then made an assessment of whether the barriers and the ATS matched up. Finally, we had to make an assessment of whether the policies and actions contained in the ATS had been successful in improving access to transport services. Again, we did that by talking to people with

a learning disability and their organisations, to Department for Regional Development (DRD) officials and to the transport providers that DRD funds.

I will quickly touch on what we mean by “accessibility”. It does not mean being able to get on and off a bus easily but is a much wider definition. Paragraph 1.8 of our report defines it by stating:

“For transport to be accessible it must go where people want to go, at a reasonable cost and in reasonable time. For transport to be accessible people need to know about it, feel safe and comfortable when using it, be able to afford it and be able to get on and off it with ease.”

I have given you the context of what we did to establish the issues. Our key findings are detailed in page 11 of the report. People with a learning disability are a lot less likely to own a car or have access to a car than others, and they are more reliant on public and statutory transport and on friends and relatives for transport. Finding suitable transport is a major issue for people with a learning disability. It has a major contribution to the life chances and opportunities — and the limiting of those — of people with a learning disability.

The barriers that stop people using transport are not just to do with physical access. Although that is important, we have detailed some of the other barriers, including the attitudes of transport staff and others to people with a disability; the lack of information about transport services and the lack of information in a format accessible to people with a learning disability; the confidence and fears of people with a learning disability about using transport and the confidence and fears of the parents and carers of people with a learning disability; and the cost of travel.

In our summary of findings, we also make the point that, traditionally, policymakers have given priority to making transport physically accessible; for example, by buying low-floored buses and by improving stations. However, the barriers that we have identified are not addressed by that sort of investment but are different barriers. We make the point about people with learning disabilities in rural areas, who, because they do not have access to cars, are particularly affected by the lack of services in those areas.

We then had a look at the contents of the ATS. When we sat down and worked through the strategic objectives, the policies that are contained in the ATS and the actions that are contained in its 2005 version, we felt that analysis indicates that, at a policy level, DRD clearly understands that there are barriers to using transport other than physical access. Many of the barriers that

DRD identified in the ATS are issues that make it difficult for people with learning disabilities to access transport. A number of the specific actions that are contained in the ATS would, if implemented, go some way to improving access to transport for people with learning disabilities. Again, we have given the Department credit for its unique approach to developing strategic objectives to improve access to transport for disabled people.

To assess whether the ATS has had an impact, again, we talked to many people and looked at all the literature that exists on the issue. It is difficult to be 100% certain. However, the clear message that we got was that investment has made a difference. New buses, new services, such as the door-to-door service, and rural services have made a difference to people with learning disabilities because they offer them broader choice. However, the fact that certain other issues that relate to tackling specific barriers that make travelling difficult, particularly barriers to do with information, training and giving people confidence, have limited the value of that investment. We found that specific issues in the ATS that relate to those other barriers have not been progressed as well as they should have been.

We came up with a number of recommendations to the Department, the details of which are on pages 26 to 28 of our report. A clear message from organisations and people with learning disabilities is that travel training is an extremely useful tool to help people to use transport independently. Its availability is limited. The purposes for which someone can access travel training are also limited. For instance, it might help him or her to get to a job. However, if the person wants to travel, say, in the evening in order to have a social life, travel training does not cover that. Therefore, the clear message is that greater and wider travel training opportunities are needed for people with learning disabilities. We consider our first recommendation to be a priority. We believe that the Department, which has responsibility for transport, should take the lead on that and bring in other Departments that have an interest, such as the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS).

Certain policies in the ATS require best practice in design of information. They also require that transport providers ensure that information is available in other formats. Our second recommendation is that the Department require those transport providers to provide evidence of how they have made information accessible to people with learning disabilities. The Department itself can do that through programmes such as the concessionary fares scheme.

The third recommendation deals with training. Again, policies in the ATS require transport providers to provide appropriate disability training for their staff. When we looked at that, we found that, although it was being given, training did not particularly take account of issues for people with learning disabilities. It focused on assisting, say, a wheelchair user to access a vehicle or on assisting someone with a visual impairment. It did not particularly focus on people with learning disabilities. Again, we have suggested to the Department that it require anyone whom it funds to provide evidence of how training takes into account issues for people with learning disabilities.

The fourth recommendation is on the promotion of public transport to disabled people. One of the clear messages that we got was that people were simply not aware of what was available to them. The specific example of that is the half-fare concession. People were simply not aware that that concession was available to them. A lot of the organisations were promoting that concession. The ATS has a campaign to promote public transport opportunities to disabled people. We felt that that is something that the Department should be progressing.

The issue of the heavy reliance of people with learning disabilities on the use of taxis is dealt with in recommendation 5. Taxis are seen as being safe and convenient, but costs restrict the amount of travel. The original 2005 ATS included an action to explore the possibility of establishing a taxi card scheme. That seems to have disappeared from the ATS in subsequent editions. The clear message back from the people whom we have talked to is that we need to revisit the idea of a taxi card and helping people with the cost of taxis.

The sixth recommendation came about as a result of consultation with the organisations. It revealed that many people with a learning disability are not eligible for the concessionary fares scheme. A person has to be known to his or her local trust. The statistics that we got from the Bamford review showed that less than half of the people with a learning disability in Northern Ireland are known to their local trust. We asked the Department to look again at the eligibility criteria. In GB, there is not that narrow definition of eligibility for concessionary fares for people with a learning disability. A GB doctor can vouch for a person with a learning disability.

The final recommendation was that there needs to be greater engagement with people with a learning disability and their organisations when making any changes and other improvements that

affect the accessibility of the transport system. For example, although the Department reviewed the concessionary fares scheme, it undertook a policy review of the scheme and looked at usage statistics but did not talk to users. If it had talked to users, including people with a learning disability, a lot of issues would have come up about eligibility and companion travel. It is in the Department's interest to consult as widely as possible with disabled people when it is looking at new policies and changes to policy.

That concludes my brief overview of our report.

**Mr Leonard:**

You are very welcome, gentlemen. Thank you for your paper and your briefing.

There is an awful lot of common sense in what you have said, but I worry that there is a lack of communication on basic issues. When I use the word "basic", I do not mean that those issues are unimportant; rather, they are very important, but they are basic to people's needs. How does IMTAC promote the issues and get the information out to people? Where are the shortcomings in communication? Are there interdepartmental shortcomings?

**Mr Caddy:**

IMTAC's staff take a lot of time, trouble and effort to maintain contact with the relevant organisations and disseminate information to them. However, I stress that it is not IMTAC's responsibility to communicate that information to a mass audience.

**Mr Leonard:**

I appreciate that.

**Mr Caddy:**

We also maintain a website that provides the necessary information. We believe that the responsibility lies with the transport provider, be that the Department, in the case of door-to-door transport, since it manages the door-to-door function, or Translink for public transport. The onus is on the transport providers, although IMTAC does what it can to disseminate information.

**Mr Lorimer:**

Over the past few weeks, as part of our outreach work, we have held six meetings across

Northern Ireland, working with Guide Dogs, the Consumer Council and the Equality Commission. Those meetings were attended by probably well over 100 people with visual impairment and other disabilities, who gave us their views. The issue of eligibility for concessionary fares for people with learning disabilities was raised at the Armagh meeting, so we are reflecting views. There is nothing in our report that is not DRD policy as written in the ATS. We are simply pointing out the fact there is a gap between what is included in policy and what happens in practice, and we have done that elsewhere; for instance, in our responses to the accessible transport strategy action plans. As Frank said, there is an onus on transport providers as well as the Department, but there does not seem to be any pressure coming from the Department on transport providers.

**Mr Caddy:**

Michael has prompted from me another comment, which is that we offer continually to the Department, as well as to Translink, if it wants to avail itself of it, our facility of using our contacts to arrange regional meetings. We have done that on a number of occasions to facilitate that sort of communication.

**Mr Leonard:**

If such a common-sense approach were taken by departmental providers in conjunction with IMTAC, many of the communication shortages would be minimised.

**Mr Caddy:**

Yes, to put it simply. There is not enough recognition of how difficult it may well be in practice to get to an individual's actual needs, and that issue needs attending to through the way in which timetables, concessions, and so on, are communicated. A lot of detailed communication is needed.

**Ms Lo:**

I agree with many of the points in here, particularly the point that accessibility is not only about the physical aspect of getting on and off buses. I am aware of a number of organisations in the voluntary sector that provide travel training, and those organisations are really good. I am not aware of Departments that provide that sort of training to people with learning disabilities. Are you recommending that funding to the voluntary sector be increased, or are you recommending that Departments set up such provision?



**Mr Lorimer:**

We are recommending that a co-ordinated approach be taken among Departments on how we encourage more travel training. You are right, in that one of the organisations that we talked to was the NOW Project, which, as Committee members may be aware, operates in north and west Belfast.

**Ms Lo:**

The Orchardville Society supports travel training.

**Mr Lorimer:**

Yes, the Orchardville Society is connected to it as well. Such organisations do really good work with people, but they are restricted in what they can focus on. Their funding comes, eventually, through DEL.

I will give the example of what happened when Transport for London reviewed its door-to-door service, Dial-a-Ride. Transport for London has spent millions on buses so that all buses in London are low-floor, meet accessibility requirements and have audio-visual information. In that review, it asked itself why it was pumping so much money into a segregated door-to-door service when it had spent so much money on an accessible bus network in London. Instead of diverting all its money into door-to-door services, it decided to divert some money into what it called a travel mentoring service to give disabled people who had used Dial-a-Ride the confidence to use the fully accessible bus network in London.

That is the sort of example that we want to see here. It puts a greater focus on how we expand those very useful travel training schemes, not only for people with learning disabilities but for people with disabilities generally so that they can make use of the investment in transport that has been made. The investment will more than pay for itself through the savings that can potentially be made from people travelling independently, not only from the DRD budget but from other departmental budgets.

**Mr McDevitt:**

I want to pick up on the other side of that coin. Paragraph 4.10 refers to continuing concerns about staff attitudes towards people with learning disabilities. You say that you were given some

examples of poor staff attitude and that those incidences led to people with disabilities stopping using public transport services. Can you give a rough example of the sort of attitudes that are still present and pervasive?

**Mr Lorimer:**

One of the most stark examples that we received was the case of a mother with a child with a learning disability who used an orthopaedic pram. The bus driver would not let her on board the vehicle and told her that, because it was a wheelchair, her pram was not allowed on. He gave preference to other parents with prams to get on the vehicle. That is probably the starkest example, but there are hundreds of other examples of simple things, such as a bus driver being impatient and tutting at someone who has communication difficulties. That situation made the journey so unpleasant that that person was deterred from using the service again.

**Mr McDevitt:**

Are those incidents reported?

**Mr Lorimer:**

Some incidents are reported, but there is a reluctance to do so. Part of the work that we did over the past two weeks involved going out with the Consumer Council and trying to get disabled people to complain more and to get them to register a complaint when things go wrong. The difficulty is that we hear about cases, but if the information is not passed to Translink or the Consumer Council, they will not be reported. Therefore, we do not have the evidence base to say that such incidents occur regularly.

**Mr McDevitt:**

You note in your report that Translink has made some progress in staff training. Are you satisfied with the type of training that has been provided?

**Mr Lorimer:**

The difficulty is that we were involved in Translink's drawing up a tender for providing training to its bus drivers, and that training has been delivered over the past six months. However, we are not aware of the content of that training, so it is hard to be specific about whether the trainers addressed issues around people with learning disabilities.

**Mr Caddy:**

It is probably too early to pass a judgement on that.

**Mr Lorimer:**

Some other operators use the minibus driving awareness scheme (MiDAS), but we are very clear that MiDAS is not a disability awareness training course. The scheme is used in the community transport sector, but the issue needs to be addressed. We cannot simply have MiDAS as a standard, because it is not a disability awareness course.

**Mr I McCrea:**

You referred to learning disability awareness training. In your report, you referred to people with autism and its associated difficulties. It is a grey area because it is neither a mental disability nor a learning disability. You talked about training needs, but, in reality, each person has different circumstances, and it is difficult to deal with those specific circumstances. That is more a comment than a question, I suppose.

**Mr Caddy:**

It is not the training of the service provider that is the issue in that instance but the training of the person. It is a question of taking each individual's problem and addressing it. It may be a confidence problem in that people are quite capable of accessing the transport but do not have the confidence to do so, or perhaps they are unable to access a particular mode of transport.

**Mr Lorimer:**

We have also produced great guidelines for transport providers to provide effective training. One of the points in the guidelines is that the training should specifically highlight people whose disability is not automatically obvious. We specifically cited people with learning disabilities as a group that it may not be obvious has a disability. We would like transport providers and DRD to adopt most of the guidance that we have issued on effective training on disability issues.

**Mr I McCrea:**

This is slightly wide of the mark, but have you been asked to comment on the Autism Bill?

**Mr Caddy:**

Not to my knowledge.

**Mr Lorimer:**

We included people with autism in our report because one of our members was formerly on the Mental Health Commission and pointed out the potential conflict between people with autism and people with learning disabilities. Therefore, we wanted to make clear the distinction between autism and learning disability.

**The Chairperson:**

Thank you very much.