



Getting There: *Transport and Access to Social Services*

Executive Summary

1 Focus of Report

The purpose of this social policy report is to highlight issues related to travel and transport and access to social services. The report is based primarily on an analysis of feedback from citizens information services and disability advocacy projects. It highlights a number of concerns about transport and access to social services, including, the social isolation of older people in rural areas, the transport accessibility difficulties encountered by people with disabilities on a daily basis, and problems of access arising from the centralisation of hospital services. A number of case examples are included in the report to illustrate difficulties encountered. The final chapter sets out a series of proposals aimed at addressing the issues identified.

2 Key Factors Identified

A key consideration noted in the report is the need for effective use and targeting of resources in the current economic climate. The report concludes that the present situation where state funding is provided for a range of parallel and fragmented transport and mobility support initiatives frequently operating independently of each other is unlikely to be the best use of resources. The report calls for greater synergy between the various transport and mobility support schemes currently available to ensure the most efficient use of available resources and, at the same time, equality of access across all groups of people with transport and mobility issues.

Drawing on other research, the report identifies key factors that need to be acknowledged in order to bring about an adequate socially inclusive response to transport/mobility deprivation:



- » Households without a car are most at risk of mobility deprivation. The incidence of car ownership is lower among people with disabilities and older people.
- » In many instances, already low incomes are stretched for those who have to travel long distances to services and who cannot access public transport.
- » The lack of adequate public transport is one of the major factors contributing to social exclusion in rural areas – it impacts significantly on people’s ability to access services necessary for daily living or health and social services, or to pursue education or attend training courses or work/training opportunities.
- » The availability of transport to service centres such as, hospitals and for shopping and social activities is a critical issue for rural communities as services become more and more centralised.
- » The continuing poor accessibility of some public transport (despite significant improvements in recent years) makes it difficult for people with physical/ sensory disabilities to use such transport independently.
- » Transport and mobility support schemes play an important role in combating social exclusion and enabling access to services. For many people such schemes are the key to accessing social and health services and make a significant contribution to enabling them to participate in society.
- » A key aspect of international best practice in rural transport provision is the coordination of different schemes at local level and the integration of these with mainstream provisions

3 Transport Policy Context

A central concept in Irish transport policy is ‘Transport for All’, now generally accepted within the EU. This includes the mainstreaming of public transport accessibility for the benefit of all users and applies to bus, rail and taxi services.

One of the main underlying principles of Transport 21 (the Government’s current Transport Policy Ten Year Plan) is making the transport system accessible for people with mobility, sensory and cognitive impairments. Public transport accessibility issues go beyond the needs of people with disabilities. They also involve the transport needs of the wider community, who at some stage in their lives may have a form of mobility or visual impairment that makes travelling difficult if the mode of transport or the built and external environment is not accessible. In this regard, the Transport Strategy for the Greater Dublin Area 2010-2030¹ is significant in that it includes objectives relating to strengthening communities, improving access to opportunities, improving accessibility, integrating public transport and better public transport information.

The Free Travel Scheme, available to older people, people with disabilities and carers, is a very significant transport support with some 637,000 users and currently costing the State over €68 million. The Rural Transport Programme (RTP), funded through Pobal and administered by local voluntary/ community organisations and operating in 36 areas around the country, provides some 1.2 million passenger journeys annually. It is geared towards encouraging and supporting innovative community-based initiatives to provide transport services in rural areas. The RTP is an important policy component that has resulted in a wide range of semi-

1. See www.2030vision.ie

scheduled and fully-demand-responsive services and the active involvement of the voluntary/community sector in transport initiatives at local level. The voluntary/community sector has been a leader in innovative transport initiatives.

Accessibility is a complex issue that presents significant challenges in the provision of a comprehensive and inclusive transport system. The Department of Transport Sectoral Plan under the Disability Act 2005 (Department of Transport 2006) sets out a range of proposals of the Department and the agencies under its remit in relation to the rollout of a comprehensive programme of accessible transport. While significant improvements have been made to public transport accessibility in recent years, e.g. Dublin Bus, DART, Luas, wheelchair-accessible taxis and gradual progress by Bus Éireann, there continue to be major gaps, for example, no low-floor accessible public transport in many parts of the country and difficulties in finding accessible taxis.

4 Issues Identified in the Report

A number of specific issues are set out referring to people who have a need for transport or a transport/mobility subsidy that is not being met under current provisions. These are illustrated by relevant case examples. The issues identified include:

- » Lack of public transport in many rural areas and the consequent inability of people to avail of 'free travel'
- » Limitations of current transport and mobility support schemes

- » The continuing poor accessibility of some public transport, particularly outside the main cities
- » Difficulties in getting transport to and from hospital services
- » A heavy reliance on Supplementary Welfare Allowance (SWA) Exceptional Needs Payments to cover the costs of transport to and from hospitals – this scheme was never intended to meet such costs – and difficulties in accessing such payments
- » Poor linkages between the SWA system and the HSE Non-Emergency Patient Transport Services scheme
- » Transport and the cost of disability – people with disabilities regularly have no option but to pay for taxis to access vital health and social services
- » Difficulty experienced by some people in accessing information about public transport and transport options and transport supports
- » Impact of lack of appropriate transport on people with disabilities taking up employment or training opportunities.

Difficulties with transport/mobility support schemes experienced by people on a day-to-day basis refer to the HSE Ambulance Transport Scheme, the Motorised Transport Grant, the Mobility Allowance, the Disabled Drivers and Disabled Passengers (Tax Concessions) Scheme and the Parking Permit Scheme for people with disabilities.

5 Addressing the Issues

A More Integrated Policy Response

A number of proposals are put forward for addressing the issues identified, the main thrust of which is the need for a more integrated policy response, as has been suggested in a number of earlier reports, including the Interdepartmental Review Group on Disabled Drivers and Disabled Passengers (Tax Concessions) Scheme (Department of Finance 2002), the Working Group on the Review of the Supplementary Welfare Allowance Scheme (Department of Social and Family Affairs 2006) and the Review of the Rural Transport Programme (Fitzpatrick and Associates 2006). The present report suggests that in order to arrive at an efficient, cost-effective and equitable system of publicly funded transport that provides access for all, further exploration is required in two distinct areas:

- » Streamlining (or cohesion) to achieve greater co-ordination between services for the benefit of the users, particularly in respect of accessing necessary health and social services
- » Rationalisation of the current multiplicity of schemes to provide the most efficient use of available resources and improved equality of access for all groups of people with transport and mobility issues

Recommendations

- » *Review of Existing Transport/Mobility Support Schemes*
Existing transport/mobility support schemes should be reviewed to achieve both better resource efficiency and greater co-ordination and integration: for example, between the Motorised Transport Grant Scheme (introduced in 1968), the Mobility Allowance (introduced in 1979), the HSE Hospital Transport Scheme and the Disabled Drivers and Passengers (Tax Concessions) Scheme, the Free Travel Scheme, the Rural Transport Programme and assistance under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance scheme.
- » *Integration of Transport Services at Local Level*
There is potential for greater rationalisation and joint working between transport services at regional and local levels and usage of information technology to enhance demand-responsive services – the learning from pilot initiatives currently in place should be used in a proactive and timely manner to develop and enhance rural transport provision.
- » *Integrated Planning at National Level*
In line with the Government's commitment to mainstreaming and service integration, cross-cutting issues relating to different Government departments and agencies involved in the provision of transport and mobility supports should be identified and addressed by the Department of Transport. Such a requirement could be made explicit in the remit of the National Transport Authority established in December 2009. The Authority has, among a number of specific functions, a general role of overseeing the development of national transport services in a planned and integrated manner in the future.

- » *Role and Potential of Voluntary/Community Organisations*
The development of a more integrated approach requires an evaluation of transport provision by voluntary/ community organisations and by the HSE and how these fit with the Rural Transport Programme.
- » *Transport and the Cost of Disability*
It is recognised nationally and internationally that people with disabilities incur many extra living costs as a result of their disability and that these include above-average transport costs. The issue of the additional costs of transport for people with disabilities should be a major component in progressing social inclusiveness and should be kept to the forefront of discussion and debate.
- » *Integrated Transport/Mobility Subsidy*
In terms of ensuring equality of access to public transport, in the longer term options other than a Free Travel Pass should be available. For example, there could be a corresponding cash payment for those people who are unable to use the pass because of the inaccessibility of transport. Alternatively, vouchers could be made available for use in taxis, hackney cars, community bus schemes and private buses.
- » *HSE Ambulance Transport Policies*
Each HSE Area should examine, review its current ambulance transport policies as they affect older people and people with disabilities in rural areas. The outcomes of the review of the non-emergency transport needs of people attending HSE facilities carried out during 2008 should be published and any issues identified addressed.
- » *Respective Roles of Department of Social and Family Affairs and the HSE*
The Department of Social and Family Affairs (DSFA) and the HSE should engage in joint discussions to examine as a matter of priority their respective responsibilities in relation to providing assistance with costs of transport to and from hospitals. This should be done in conjunction with the Review of Non-Emergency Transport Needs of Patients Attending HSE Facilities, which has been completed by the HSE.
- » *Motorised Transport Grant*
The Motorised Transport Grant is currently generally only available to employed people with disabilities. There is a provision for the grant to be paid on occasion to a person living in a very isolated area even though he/she may not be in employment. This provision should be applied more widely to address serious transport deprivation for very isolated people.
- » *Mobility Allowance*
People who fulfil the criteria for Mobility Allowance should be able to apply for it after the age of 66.

There should be more flexibility in the means-test assessment of families where two persons in the household are in receipt of Disability Allowance.
- » *Parking Permits for People with Disabilities*
In relation to parking cards for people with disabilities, a range of issues need to be addressed concerning assessment and allocation. These include the allocation and availability of wheelchair-accessible bays, abuses of the scheme, lack of enforcement and the lack of a coordinated approach. The Department of Transport's Review of the Disabled Parking Permit Scheme should address these issues.

» *Travel Information and People with Disabilities*

All people using public transport should have timely, accurate and reliable information on all travel choices available to them (routes, timetables, stops, interchanges, costs). The introduction of both Smartcard based integrated ticket systems and passenger information systems with accessibility features should be expedited by all transport providers.

» *Needs Assessment*

As part of a more integrated system of transport and mobility supports, the transport needs of older persons and persons with disabilities living in isolated areas should be kept under active review taking into account current social policy principles of social inclusion, equality of access, choice, person-centred planning, independent living, responding to changes over the life cycle and supporting the most vulnerable in society.

About the CIB

The Citizens Information Board provides independent information, advice and advocacy on public and social services through citizensinformation.ie, the Citizens Information Phone Service and the network of Citizens Information Services. It is responsible for the Money Advice and Budgeting Service and provides advocacy services for people with disabilities.

The CIB has a mandate to support, promote and develop the provision of information on the effectiveness of current social policy and services and to highlight the concerns of users to those who provide services and in turn encourage improvements and developments in service provision and service delivery.



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