Policy paper about the future role for the car for the mobility of disabled people and older people

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About Imtac

The Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee (Imtac) is a committee of disabled people and older people as well as others including carers and key transport professionals. Its role is to advise Government and others in Northern Ireland on issues that affect the mobility of Deaf people, disabled people and older people.

The aim of Imtac is to ensure that Deaf people, disabled people and older people have the same opportunities as everyone else to travel when and where they want.

Imtac receives support from the Department for Infrastructure (herein after referred to as the Department).

Introduction

This paper sets out Imtac's position about the future role of the car[1] for the mobility of disabled people and older people. The paper reviews how access to a car and the design of existing infrastructure currently influences mobility for disabled people and older people and the historical reasons for this. It describes the challenges created for disabled people, older people and wider society by policies aimed at reducing car dependency and the ambitious targets set towards decarbonisation and the transition to Net Zero. Finally, the paper outlines Imtac's priorities to ensure that disabled people and older people who currently rely on the car for mobility are not disadvantaged as we introduce changes to the way we travel.

Disabled people, travel and cars

A review of data and evidence from England[2] and Northern Ireland[3] about how disabled people travel shows disabled people make significantly fewer trips than non-disabled people. Figures from GB in 2022 indicate that 33% of disabled people live in households with no access to a car, compared to 13% of non-disabled people. Only 60% of disabled people hold a driving licence, significantly lower than the

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[1] For ease of use the term car is being used to cover all types of private vehicles used by disabled people and older people including wheelchair accessible vehicles (WAVs) and by their care and support services.

[2] See https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/disability-accessibility-and-blue-badge-statistics-2022-to-2023/disability-accessibility-and-blue-badge-statistics-england-2022-to-2023#national-travel-survey-findings

[3] See https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/transport-accessibility-statistics

percentage for non-disabled people. Statistically, disabled people take more trips using public transport than non-disabled people.

In relation to car use by disabled people, statistics from England show that disabled people who drive make many more journeys than disabled people with no access to a car. Disabled people who travel by car as a passenger also make more trips than disabled people with no access to a car, but less than disabled people who drive.

There are no comparable figures specific to Northern Ireland. However, the Department for Infrastructure does issue figures[4] for the numbers of Blue Badges issued. In 2021 statistics showed that over 125,000 individuals in Northern Ireland were issued a Blue Badge. Research reported in the Northern Ireland Travel Survey[5] indicates that disabled people rely more on the car for travel than non-disabled people, although the same statistics show that, similar to England, disabled people make significantly fewer journeys than non-disabled people.

All the available evidence indicates that access to car enables some disabled people to travel more than if totally reliant on other modes of travel including public transport.

Wider context of society and cars

For a significant period in recent history, society has been designed around the assumption of everyone having easy access to cars. Where we live, work, learn, how we access health and other services as well as retail opportunities and how we spend time on leisure and other activities have been designed around easy access for cars. This has been accompanied by a reduction in the availability and affordability of alternatives to car travel including public transport.

Whilst a society based on car dependency worked for many, for significant numbers of people without access to a car it created major difficulties accessing basic everyday essentials and activities. The dominance of the car has increasingly been seen as a major contributor to the social exclusion of certain groups in society with little or no access to private transport. The link between social exclusion and transport is

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[4] See https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-transport-statistics-2020-2021

[5] See https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/articles/travel-survey-northern-ireland

best summarised in the UK Government's 2003 Making the Connections Report[6].

Transport and land use planning policy for the past 20 years has recognised the need for change and rebalance society, encouraging a move away from car dependency towards use of more sustainable modes of transport. Whilst policy has promoted a change in approach, practice continues to largely mirror previous design around prioritising car access.

Two recent and interlinked developments have begun to drive change in relation to addressing car dependency. Firstly, climate breakdown and the transition to Net Zero is forcing us to reassess our approach to travel and places. This is exemplified by the Department for Infrastructure policy document Time for Change[7]. It sets out the need to move away from car dependency by reducing the need to travel, replacing car journeys with sustainable mode journeys and transitioning from fossil fuel to zero emission vehicles. The second development relates to projects, such as the Bolder Vision for Belfast[8], which seek to reprioritise our towns and cities away from provision for the movement and space for vehicles towards making the central areas a more inclusive place for people.

From the perspective of disabled people and older people, wider societal car dependency has created two distinct problems. For some the lack of accessible alternatives means they are in practice completely dependent on cars for their mobility either as a driver or passenger. Disabled people who do have access to a car face specific barriers to travel including the lack of adequate accessible parking opportunities. Other disabled people and older people with limited or no access to a car face multiple additional barriers to undertaking everyday activities.

Imtac policy position about the future role for the car for the mobility of disabled people and older people

In 2022 Imtac published A New Approach to Travel, Our Streets and Our Places. The introduction to New Approach sets out the following challenge:

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[6] See https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/---emp_policy/---invest/documents/publication/wcms_asist_8210.pdf

[7] https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/planning-future-transport-time-change

[8] https://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/Documents/A-Bolder-Vision-for-Belfast

"..society is facing the even greater challenge of responding to and adapting to climate change. It is inevitable that a transition to Net Zero will mean changes to the way we travel, reducing our current car dependency in favour of sustainable modes. For some Deaf people, disabled people, and older people this transition offers an opportunity to address some of barriers that currently make travel difficult or impossible. For other disabled people and older people, completely dependent on the car for mobility, the prospect of transition will understandably be a worry. In responding to climate change it is essential we do not repeat past mistakes and that tackling inequalities is a key priority for a just transition to Net Zero."

In relation to the future role for the car for the mobility of disabled people and older people, there are two specific and in some ways conflicting challenges. Firstly, providing more accessible and inclusive options to car travel should be a priority. Secondly, any associated initiatives / policies must not disproportionately impact on disabled people who have no other choice but to rely on the car for mobility. To ensure these challenges can be achieved Imtac has identified six priorities.

Priority one - Deaf people, disabled people, and older people should be involved at the centre of every stage of decision making

In line with one of the four key principles of New Approach it is essential that Deaf people, disabled people and older people[9] are involved at every stage of the development of the strategies, policies and projects (including during implementation) influencing the way we travel in future. Effective involvement is more than just engagement and polite

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[9] New Approach sets out what good engagement with Deaf people, disabled people and older people involves and is centred on the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPD) General Comment Number 7. It means working directly with Deaf and disabled people rather than through organisations for disabled people. It must include engagement with people with a diversity of impairments. It must also include diversity in backgrounds including, for example, children and young people, women and girls and people who live in both urban and rural areas. It must also include carers, families and relatives who play a vital role in assisting some disabled people to have a voice in decision making.

conversation, it should mean that participants have a significant input into and influence decision making.

Priority two – Prioritise investment in providing more accessible and inclusive travel services and infrastructure

The overriding priority must be to increase current travel opportunities and choice through investment in better services and infrastructure. In line with New Approach any new investment must adhere to the best possible standards of inclusive and accessible design. In particular resources should be focused on:

- As envisaged by Time for Change, investing in making everyday walking, wheeling and cycling journeys easy and accessible for everyone, connecting people to local services and facilities and prioritising linkages with the public transport network. This includes increased investment in new walking and wheeling infrastructure, increased investment in new cycling infrastructure (meeting the requirements of LTN 1/20[10] and increased investment and priority given to the maintenance of existing infrastructure.
- Investing in an enhanced public transport network as envisaged by Time for Change that is designed to be accessible and inclusive for everyone.
- Investing in a wider range of flexible transport solutions for rural and urban communities (including dynamic demand responsive transport (DRT) mentioned in Time for Change) which connect people to local services and facilities and to wider travel on the public transport network.
- As envisaged by Time for Change, investing in new ways of travel including concepts such as Mobility as a Service (MaaS), car sharing and autonomous vehicles.
- Investing in accessible and inclusive digital infrastructure as well as support for digital inclusion and skills to ensure opportunities are maximised to reduce the need for travel and to enable people to use technology to make journeys more straightforward.

Priority three – Explicitly recognise disabled people who depend on the car for mobility as essential users

The changes envisaged by Priority Two will take time to implement, and for some disabled people those travel improvements may still not be

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[10] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/cycle-infrastructure-design-ltn-120

accessible or practical. For this reason, it essential in planning and implementing changes to places and the way we travel, that it is recognised some older people and disabled people are essential car users. This should be explicitly incorporated into all relevant strategies and plans, and projects must be required to demonstrate how schemes address access for disabled people who depend on the car for mobility.

Additionally, there will be older people and disabled people who rely on services, such as domiciliary care, which enable them to live independently in the community. People providing services that are essential for independent living must also to be considered essential car users.

Priority four – Support for disabled people to transition to zero emission vehicles

Disabled people who rely on the car for mobility are likely to face additional costs and barriers compared to non-disabled people in transitioning to zero emission vehicles which currently are more expensive than fossil fuelled vehicles. Support needed with the transition to zero emission vehicles includes:

- assistance with the cost of zero emission vehicles including through established schemes such as Motability.
- the provision of accessible charging and other infrastructure
- appropriate design of adapted and accessible vehicles including zero emission wheelchair accessible vehicles (WAVs)

Priority five – Improve parking infrastructure and support

Alongside recognising some disabled people as essential car users, investment should also prioritise improving accessible parking infrastructure. Improvements include:

- Increasing the availability of accessible parking in key locations such as our town and city centres, hospitals and Park & Ride infrastructure
- Improving the design of accessible parking bays to include additional width and easy level access from parking to footways
- Ensuring there is provision of larger bays that accommodate WAVs in key locations

- Ensuring charging and other infrastructure is included in the design of accessible parking as standard in future
- Making changes to the Blue Badge Scheme to make using bays and concessions easier

Priority six – Significantly enhance the enforcement of the Blue Badge Scheme

Changes that challenge the existing priority given to cars whilst at the same time recognising disabled people as essential users are likely to increase the misuse and abuse of the Blue Badge Scheme by non-disabled people. If the Scheme is to remain credible into the future it is essential that enforcement is significantly expanded including looking at technological solutions to make this easier and effective.

Conclusion

The challenges presented by climate breakdown represent an opportunity to reset how we design travel, our streets and places, addressing the barriers society has created in the past that have excluded groups such as disabled people. In meeting those challenges it is vital that we tackle current issues of car dependency and dominance. However, it is equally essential that changes recognise and provide mitigation for the many disabled people for whom the car is and will be the only form of accessible travel.