
An examination of websites currently providing information
about travel opportunities for disabled people and older
people in Northern Ireland

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1 About Imtac

Imtac is a committee of disabled people and older people as well as others including key transport professionals. Our role is to advise Government and others in Northern Ireland on issues that affect the mobility of older people and disabled people.

Our aim is to ensure that older people and disabled people have the same opportunities as everyone else to travel when and where they want.

Imtac receives support from the Department for Regional Development.

Imtac can be contacted at:

Enterprise House
55-59 Adelaide Street
Belfast
BT2 8FE

Telephone: 028 9072 6020
Textphone: 028 9072 6016
Fax: 028 9024 5500
Email: info@imtac.org.uk
Website: www.imtac.org.uk

2 Background to this report

Disabled people and older people experience barriers to accessing everyday services such as transport. These barriers are not just physical, for many people the absence of appropriate information about services means that service is not accessible. The barrier may be that the information simply does not exist, information is not accurate or it is not provided in a way that is accessible to the individual concerned.

The Department for Regional Development have clearly recognised the importance of information to making travel accessible to disabled people and older people. Improving the provision of information is a key objective of the Accessible Transport Strategy (ATS) published in 2005. Policy 29 of the ATS is to “ensure that information systems are in place to support the development of accessible transport chains.” The ATS also includes the following action “Examine the feasibility of establishing a one stop shop providing a range of specific travel advice on public transport, community transport, door to door, taxis, private operators, leisure travel, shopmobility and concessionary fares.”

Websites are an increasingly important way for people to access information about a range of services including transport. Websites can be a way of providing people with information in a way that is much easier to update than written publications. The main drawback of web based information is for people who have no internet access. Statistics show that disabled people and older people are amongst the groups in our society who have the lowest levels of access to the internet.

The purpose of this report is to look at the range of websites, which provide information on transport services of interest to disabled people and older people in Northern Ireland, to assess how useful the overall provision of information on websites is to disabled people and older people and to make recommendations on improving current provision. The report also examines how well current provision meets the policies and actions contained in the ATS.

3 Websites examined by this report

Imtac has identified seven separate websites that currently provide information around transport of particular interest to disabled people and older people. Whilst there are many other transport related websites the following are the most relevant to disabled people and older people:

1. The Getting Out and About website – an online guide to accessible transport in Northern Ireland provided by the DRD (www.ni-transportguide.info)
2. The Door2door website – an online guide to the door2door service provided by DRD (www.door2door-ni.info)
3. The DRD website – Providing information about the Concessionary Fares Scheme here (www.drdni.gov.uk)
4. The Imtac website – Providing information and advice on new services and other travel issues as well as information on the work of the Committee (www.imtac.org.uk)
5. Community Transport NI website – Providing information on rural and urban community transport and the work of the Community Transport Association in Northern Ireland (www.communitytransport-ni.com)
6. Translink website – Providing information on bus and rail services in Northern Ireland (www.translink.co.uk)
7. Dptac Door to Door website – Providing information and advice for disabled people from throughout the United Kingdom on a range of transport and mobility issues (www.dptac.gov.uk)

4 Assessment of websites

In making an assessment of current provision of web-based information Imtac examined two aspects of the websites – accessibility and content.

Accessibility

There are clear guidelines available which can help service providers design websites that are accessible to disabled people and older people. Under the current guidelines websites are graded according to their accessibility with AAA being the most accessible. Of all the websites examined by this report only Imtac's meets this highest standard. Appendix A contains more information about accessible websites.

Imtac believes that websites specifically designed to be used by disabled people should meet the highest standards of accessibility. It is worrying that websites such as the Getting Out & About Guide and Dptac's Door to Door do not reach these standards. The design of these sites must restrict who can access the information provided and therefore their usefulness to disabled people and older people.

Content

(1) Getting Out & About website

The overall content of the Getting Out & About Guide is mixed. Some sections provide good detailed advice and information about a service. A good example of this is the section on the Blue Badge Scheme. Other sections only provide links to other websites. This is particularly true of information on public transport in Northern Ireland with a reliance on links to the Translink website and pages which probably do not provide disabled people and older people with the information they are looking for. For example there is no advice for a wheelchair user interested in using a bus for the first time. This means that the site falls short of being the comprehensive guide to accessible transport services it aspires to be.

The website also provides visitors with links to both the Imtac factsheets and the Dptac Door to Door website for further advice on a range of issues. Whilst on paper this may appear useful some of the information provided by these sources can be contradictory. This is because the Dptac website deals largely with transport provision in Great Britain and there are clear differences in regulation and provision. An example of this would be the difference in concessionary fares provision between here and GB. Another would be the absence of regulation here around the use of transport by disabled people. This may result in visitors to the site obtaining confusing information on a number of topics.

Finally there are many examples on the site where information is inaccurate and not up to date. For example the section on air travel has not been updated to take account of European Regulation 1107/2006. The site also has a latest news section, which has not been updated for over a year. For the site to be credible as an online guide it must be updated more regularly than at present.

(2) Door2door website

The DRD door2door website does contain comprehensive information about the scheme with information about how to join the scheme and how to use the service. The site also contains a section on other services, which has links to various websites.

The attempt to provide a link to other transport services is to be commended. However the way the information has been provided restricts its usefulness. For example some of the links are not appropriate to the topic. For example the Scottish advisory committee MACS is located under the Private Car section. Other links do not connect people to appropriate information. For example under Information there is a link to a website around European Year for Disabled People which in reality is selling mobile phones. Many of the links connect people to generic pages with no specific information for disabled people and older people.

(3) DRD website

The DRD website is the only site that contains any detailed information about the Concessionary Fares Scheme here. This information may be difficult to locate for visitors accessing the site via the Department's Home page. The information on the Scheme is presented in very official language with an emphasis on terms and conditions. The following is an example in relation to the eligibility for the half-fare smartpass for people with a learning disability:

“This half fare concessionary travel pass is available to those who have a learning disability, that is, a state of arrested or incomplete development of mind, which includes significant impairment of intelligence and social functioning and who are known to their local Health & Social Services Trust; are aged between 16 and 64 and have been resident in Northern Ireland for a minimum period of 3 months.... “

The information contained on this site would benefit from a more user-orientated focus. A separate site has been developed to promote the extension of concessionary fares to people aged 60 to 64.

(4) Community Transport in Northern Ireland website

The CT website does provide information on all the operators funded by DRD here. However in some cases the operators are not updating important sections of their sites including services available and contact details. This will restrict the potential benefits of the site to visitors.

(5) The Imtac website

Imtac provides detailed and up to date information on the work of the Committee to visitors. The Committee does also try to keep visitors updated with service developments through the latest news section and a facility to register for regular email updates. Visitors can also contribute to a Have Your Say section. Finally there is basic information and advice available on travel options via the Imtac factsheets.

(6) The Translink website

Translink does provide specific “accessibility section” for disabled people about services but this is practically impossible to find for a casual visitor to the site. Many of the key pages concerning for example Metro, Ulsterbus or Northern Ireland Railways contain very little information for disabled passengers. Other than as a means of obtaining timetable information and journey planning the current Translink site is of limited use to disabled people and older people wanting information about accessible services.

(7) Dptac Door to door website

The Dptac site has comprehensive information on travel specifically targeted at disabled people, Whilst the information is general, it does provide detail on what is available that is lacking on Northern Ireland sites. For example the site does detail what disabled people can expect when travelling by buses and trains. The website also takes a broad approach to travel including information on travel to health appointments, education or accessing employment. This again is not available on any of the locally based websites.

The major drawback of the Dptac site is that it primarily focused on Great Britain and that some of the information is not only not relevant to Northern Ireland but differs to the degree that it will provide visitors from here with the wrong information. This limits the benefits of the site overall to visitors from Northern Ireland.

5 Key Findings

A number of key and consistent issues are raised by the assessment of current website provision. These are:

- There are too many websites providing information about transport for disabled people and older people
- Information and advice on the different websites is not always consistent – conflicting advice can only confuse people looking for information
- Websites are generally not being updated – this means that some information is wrong or that important information is not being provided
- The accessibility of most websites is limited – this means that some disabled people will have limited access to this information
- Current DRD policy as set out by the ATS is not being achieved through the existing provision

The current situation regarding the provision of travel information for disabled people and older people is unsatisfactory. Fresh thinking is required if the information potential of the internet is to be maximised and the DRD is to meet its policy objectives as outlined in the Accessible Transport Strategy.

6 The way forward – Developing an online One Stop Shop

Imtac believes that the sensible way forward is to concentrate resources in developing a single website that brings together the best elements of existing provision. The aim should be to develop a comprehensive, accurate and accessible resource on all the travel issues relevant to older people and disabled people. The website should meet best practice with regard to accessible design. The Committee believes that a single resource will meet DRD policy as outlined in the ATS and can form the basis of the one stop shop as envisaged by the Strategy.

Clearly it is not practical or possible to remove all of the existing websites as for example Translink's site is provided for use by all members of the public not just disabled people and older people. However Imtac does believe there is merit in looking at consolidating provision by bringing other sites under the single website. To encourage this process Imtac believes that all the organisations currently providing sites providing travel advice to older people and disabled people should be involved in developing a single website through a project group.

When considering how to establish a one stop shop problems arise with a web based resource because of the lower than average usage of the internet by disabled people and older people. One option could be to provide a dedicated resource to compliment the website that can provide information to people via other means including over the telephone, textphone, sms, and in alternative formats. Such a resource would require substantial resourcing in terms of staffing, office costs and marketing.

Imtac believes that such an approach is unnecessary and not cost effective. Many organisations are already working with disabled people and older people and providing information on a range of issues. Feedback we have received from these organisations is there is need for clear and accurate information about transport that they can use and rely on. Imtac believes that the most effective way of establishing a one stop shop is to provide the existing providers of information with the resource

(via the website) to provide information directly to older people and disabled people rather than to establish a new stand alone service.

Examples of how this could work in practice are:

- Ensuring that key websites (including Translink) have prominent links to the website on their homepage
- Ensuring that the website is promoted on materials produced by the DRD about services and on the materials produced by other stakeholders such as Imtac, CTA, Translink etc.
- Targeting existing providers of information and advice for older people and disabled people (eg Seniorline) encouraging them to use the resource
- Targeting professionals who work directly with disabled people and older people encouraging them to use the resource
- Targeting other key organisations and stakeholders encouraging them to promote and use the resource
- Exploring the possibility of the Translink Call Centre using the resource to provide information contained on the site

7 Benefits and costs

The biggest beneficiaries of a single site will be the end users of the site – disabled people and older people as well as the large numbers of organisations and agencies who work directly with disabled people and older people. A single website will consolidate existing provision whilst removing problems of consistency and inaccurate information. Marketed in the right manner the single website can meet the aspiration contained in the ATS to create a one stop shop for accessible travel information.

There are other clear benefits to the proposal to develop a single site. With regard to cost currently multiple sites means that there are multiple costs for the hosting and maintenance of the sites. One single site could considerably reduce this cost. The single site will also assist DRD in meeting policies and actions contained in the ATS and overall Government aspirations to reduce the overall number of websites.

Developing a single website would have some initial start up costs in terms of design. There are also ongoing costs for maintenance and hosting of the website. These can be kept to a minimum however by ensuring a high level of content management at the design stage. Further resources will be required to market and update the website. These costs may be reduced by looking at how stakeholders can contribute to marketing and updating within current budgets.

The overall cost involved in developing, marketing and maintaining the website are likely to be substantially less than other methods of providing a one stop shop such as a dedicated travel information and advice service.

8 Conclusion

Having examined current provision of web based information Imtac believes that current provision is unsatisfactory. The key recommendation of our report is that a single website be developed that draws together the best of the existing websites, provides more information where necessary and that meets best practice in terms of accessibility and usability.

Imtac Members 2008/09

Frank Caddy	Chair
William Stewart	Vice-Chair
Elizabeth Black	
Terry Butler	
Ann Collins	Convenor Personal Mobility Group
Barbara Fleming	
Ann Gamble	
Anita Gracey	
Tom Hoey	Convenor Public Transport Group
Henry Mayne	
Norma Moore	
Joe McCusker	
David McDonald	Convenor Information & Training Group
Geraldine Mulhern	
Andrew Murdock	
Ronnie Patterson	
Etta Mann	
Neil Gillan	
Philip Blair	
Max O'Brien	

More information on our members is available on our website, visit www.imtac.org.uk.

Observers

Olaf Hvattum	Age Sector Platform
Kevin Doherty	Disability Action
Tony O'Reilly	Equality Commission for Northern Ireland
Alan Preston	Mobility and Inclusion Unit (DRD)
Janet Watson	Mobility and Inclusion Unit (DRD)
Claire Toner	General Consumer Council
Ryan Simpson	General Consumer Council

Appendix A – Further information of website accessibility

Websites are an increasingly important means of communication. It is essential that you incorporate accessible design standards into your website. This is best done at the earliest stage of design or redesign. There are two key sources of guidance that should be incorporated into your website application.

The definitive technical guidelines for accessible web design are published by the Web Accessibility Institute (WAI), part of the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C). These guidelines are available on the web at www.w3.org. The guidelines consist of 14 basic statements, each of which is broken down into a number of more specific “checkpoints” which are designated as priority one, two or three. In conjunction with their guidelines, the WAI define three standard of accessibility.

- ‘A’ The most basic standard. A site must comply with all of the priority of checkpoints to achieve this standard

- ‘AA’ A higher standard than the single ‘A’ standard. Sites must comply with all of the priority one and two checkpoints to achieve this standard

- ‘AAA’ A high standard of accessibility. Sites must comply with all priorities of one, two and three checkpoints to achieve this standard

Guidance published by the British Standards Institute in conjunction with the Disability Rights Commission again stresses the importance of the technical accessibility of websites. However, these guidelines also place an emphasis on the usability of the website. The guidance recommends the design and ongoing development of websites should include user testing involving disabled people with a range of impairments.

Examples of good practice include:

Equality Commission for Northern Ireland – www.equalityni.org

Equality & Human Rights Commission – www.equalityhumanrights.com

Office for Disability website - www.officefordisability.gov.uk