

TRANSPORT FOR THE ELDERLY – WHAT HAPPENS IN RURAL AREAS?

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INTRODUCTION

This paper describes the transport needs of older people in rural areas in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The first section will describe the transport problems that are typically faced by older people in rural areas. The paper will then go on to describe the current situation regarding transport for older people in rural areas in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland and will set out some of the policies and projects that are currently in place to provide transport for older people in rural areas. The paper will also contrast the situation in the 2 countries and will set out what improvements and changes to policy are needed to bring about an improvement in the status of transport for older people in Ireland.

TRANSPORT PROBLEMS FACED BY OLDER PEOPLE IN RURAL AREAS

Introduction

By 2025 the number of older people in Northern Ireland aged 60 and over will account for 26% of the population, an increase of 54%. In the Republic of Ireland, the population is also ageing and the Central Statistics Office (2007) estimate that 29% of the population will be over 65 by 2050. Currently, that figures stands at only 11%. This increase will have an impact not only on population demographics, but also on the labour market, the provision of goods, facilities and services and the resources needed to ensure a decent quality of life. Central to well-being, independence, social inclusion and lifestyle is the need to maintain access to goods and services for those older people in rural areas who have lower levels of car access.

Car Use for Older People

As life expectancies increase and fertility rates decrease, the older populations in many western countries will continue to grow and the transport problems faced by older people will become more pertinent (Alsnih and Hensher, 2003). In addition, older people now travel more than before, have higher levels of car ownership and are more likely to continue driving for longer (Alsnih and Hensher, 2003; Banister and Bowing, 2004; Spinney et al, 2009). Banister and Bowing (2004) point out that 75% of those over 65 years have access to a car in the UK while in Melbourne 64% of trips made by those 65 and over are made by car (Alsnih and Hensher, 2003). Trip rates and lengths are longer for older people and while travel does decline with age, the increase in travel for older people in the last decade has been very high (Banister and Bowing, 2004). Therefore, many western countries are now facing increased levels of travel amongst older people and greater levels of car dependency in that population.

For older people, the car is the preferred mode of transport and if available, according to Banister and Bowing (2004) and to the Rural Community Network (2004) it will be used. However, it is noted by Gilhoody et al (2002) that a negative impact of the increased levels of older drivers is that there are greater difficulties and fewer alternatives provided for non-drivers. At the same time, the evidence shows that maintaining a good quality of life is dependent on being able to participate in activities and on being able to access those activities (Spinney et al, 2009; Gilhoody et al, 2002). Spinney et al (2009) point out restrictions on mobility may lead to more isolation and depression. Access to a car allows older people to access more activities and services, and for that reason, many researchers have found that for older people access to a car or the ability to drive have important impacts on the quality of life of older people, in particular in rural areas (Banister and Bowing, 2004; Gilhoody et al, 2002).

In rural areas, people are very dependent on car use, as there are few alternatives. This also has important implications for older women and for the “old-old” (those aged over 75 years). Many studies show that older women are less likely to drive than older men, are more likely to never have driven and if they have driven are more likely to give up driving prematurely, and so are particularly vulnerable to social isolation (Davey, 2007; Alshih and Hensher, 2003; Spinney et al, 2009). The same is true of people aged over 75 where levels of vehicle ownership are lower and less people drive (Glasgow and Blakely, 2000). Dependency on public transport is generally higher amongst the old-old (Glasgow and

Blakely, 2000) – there is a higher levels of disability and chronic illness reported by people as they get older, therefore people can experience multi-disadvantage in older age.

For many older people, driving cessation is seen as a watershed event in their lives, according to Gilhooey et al (2002) where they envisage that their quality of life will decrease and their ability to participate in activities will decline. Men are particularly negative about giving up driving as they are more likely to have driven for longer and to be less able or willing to adapt to life without a car (Davey, 2007; Alsnih and Hensher, 2007). The car represents an autonomous lifestyle and independence (Glasgow and Blakely, 2000; O'Neill, 1997; Davey, 2007).

Factors influencing the ability to stop driving include: having someone available to drive them; availability of other forms of transport; and a concern that their driving responses would not be fast enough in an emergency (Charlton et al, 2006). Whilst much research focuses on the likely impact on road safety, little work has been carried out examining the impact on older people themselves of their declining ability to cope with the road environment. It is known that because of their increased frailty older drivers are more at risk of sustaining a fatal or serious injury than younger road-users. Consequently older people often feel pressured by family members, health practitioners or an increasing inability to deal with traffic conditions, into giving up driving in favour of some other form of transport. However, the subsequent effect of this may actually be to increase the risk of exposure of older people as they become pedestrians and users of public transport.

In terms of driver safety the issue is the larger numbers of older people who will be driving in the future due to healthier ageing. The impact of the older driver in terms of road safety is a concern but is also offset somewhat by the declining amounts of annual mileage amongst drivers as they get older. In the Republic of Ireland, in 2007 7.7% of those killed or injured as car drivers were 65 or older (Road Safety Authority, 2007).

It is worth pointing out that the policy of many western governments is to reduce car use and to increase the use of public transport (Davey, 2007; Gilhooey et al 2002). However, research has shown that older people's quality of life is significantly improved by access to a car due to the poor perceptions older people have of the alternative and the lack of availability of alternatives (Gilhooey et al, 2002; Banister and Bowling, 2004; Davey, 2007). Several researchers point out that if governments are to bring about a reduction in car use, while maintaining mobility and quality of life for older people they must admit responsibility for providing transport that allows older people to continue to have an independent life (Spinney

et al, 2009). Davey (2007) points out that the alternatives need to more closely match what makes cars attractive by giving 24-hour service and a door-to-door service. It is apparent that governments will have to tackle this issue of the increased number of older drivers (Spinney et al, 2009).

For those who are unable to drive, the car is still an important mode of transport and many older people rely upon lifts from family and friends to carry out trips, rather than use public transport. Several studies have found escorted trips by car to be an extremely important mode of transport for older people (Rural Community Network 2004; Glasgow and Blakely, 2000; Davey, 2007, Gilhooey et al, 2002). While this represents a very important mode for older people, it appeared in all these studies that older people were reluctant to ask for too many lifts as they did not wish to impose a burden on family and friends. Davey (2007) makes the distinction between serious travel (medical appointments, food shopping) and discretionary travel (other shopping, social activities) and found that older people who do not drive find it easier to ask family and friends for lifts for serious travel rather than for discretionary travel.

Walking for Older People

For those people who do not drive and who do not have access to lifts from others, the choices of alternatives are limited and therefore these older people are at greater risk of social isolation, lower quality of life and poor participation rates. Walking is a popular mode for these older people. However, for older people the road environment is often perceived as highly dangerous. Older people are a significant feature of the road casualty data as pedestrians. Over the period 1997-2007, almost a third (31%) of pedestrians killed in Ireland were aged 65 or over (Road Safety Authority, 2009). In 2008 1,449 people, aged 60 and over were killed or seriously injured as pedestrians in Great Britain, this however is a reduction on previous years (DfT, 2009). In Northern Ireland a similar downward trend has been reported in pedestrian casualties. In 2001 the total number of pedestrians killed or seriously injured was 300 people. In 2005 this had declined to 204. Over the same period 2001-2005 the over 65s accounted for 16% of pedestrian casualties killed or seriously injured (Table 1).

Pedestrian casualty rates are lower in rural areas compared to urban areas where pedestrian activity levels are higher and exposure to risk is greater. It is not possible to obtain any further information on older pedestrian casualties from the data as accident and casualty data monitoring focuses specifically on children aged under 16 and all adults (PSNI, 2005)

Table 1 Pedestrian RTC Casualties by Age and Gender: 2001-2005 (Source: PSNI (2005) p4)

	Male			Female			Total		
	% Population	No of KSI Casualties	%	% Population	No of KSI Casualties	%	% Population	No of KSI Casualties	%
Under 16	12.1	275	22.1	11.5	153	12.3	23.6	428	34.4
16-24	6.3	161	12.9	6.2	58	4.7	12.5	219	17.6
25-34	7.1	85	6.8	7.3	36	2.9	14.4	121	9.7
35-44	7.2	78	6.3	7.5	30	2.4	14.7	108	8.7
45-54	5.9	70	5.6	6.0	14	1.1	11.9	84	6.8
55-64	4.7	50	4.0	4.9	35	2.8	9.6	85	6.8
65+	5.4	81	6.5	7.8	118	9.5	13.3	199	16.0
Total	48.7	800	64.3	51.3	444	35.7	100.0	1244	100.0

In the Republic of Ireland, older people also make up a large proportion of pedestrian casualties. Table 2 shows the pedestrian casualties by age in 2007.

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Table 2: Pedestrian casualties classified by age (Source: Road Safety Authority, 2007)

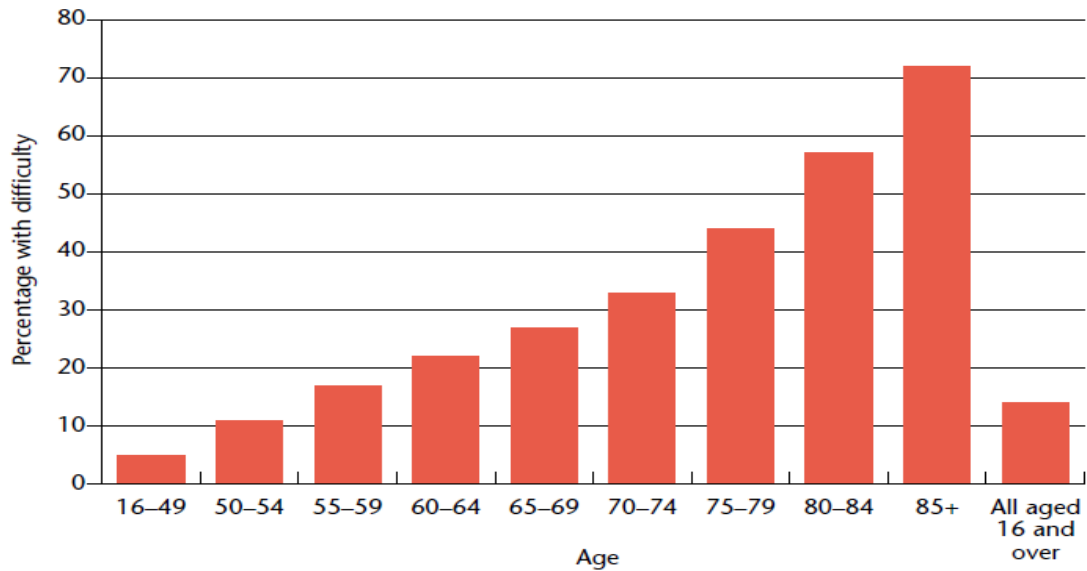
Age groups	Killed	Injured	Total	%	MALE CASUALTIES				FEMALE CASUALTIES			
					K	I	T	%	K	I	T	%
0-5	1	53	54	5.6	0	28	28	5.2	1	21	22	5.6
6-9	0	75	75	7.8	0	50	50	9.3	0	22	22	5.6
10-14	3	70	73	7.6	3	41	44	8.2	0	29	29	7.4
15-17	2	46	48	5.0	2	17	19	3.5	0	29	29	7.4
18-20	6	57	63	6.5	3	35	38	7.1	3	22	25	6.4
21-24	5	78	83	8.6	5	42	47	8.7	0	34	34	8.7
25-34	3	121	124	12.8	3	69	72	13.4	0	50	50	12.8
35-44	7	86	93	9.6	5	54	59	10.9	2	32	34	8.7
45-54	9	67	76	7.9	7	36	43	8.0	2	29	31	7.9
55-64	11	66	77	8.0	7	36	43	8.0	4	29	33	8.5
65+	32	116	148	15.3	16	61	77	14.3	16	53	69	17.7
Unknown	2	49	51	5.3	1	18	19	3.5	0	12	12	3.1

Walking for older people can be improved in a number of ways. A significant amount of research has focused on the design of neighbourhoods and the needs of older people (Handy et al, 2008) and the need to bring together public health specialists with transport engineering specialists (Marsden et al, 2008). In Northern California research has argued that the lower levels of mobility amongst older people can be raised through improvements in the design and functioning of local neighbourhoods and that in particular it can promote levels of walking amongst this age group (Cao et al, 2008).

Walking continues to be a very important mode of transport for older people. The largest barriers to accessing transport are however the physical difficulty associated with walking. Common concerns include the poor condition of pavements, inadequate crossing facilities, boarding/alighting buses and trains; and steps at railway stations (DfT, 2001). In Great Britain walking accounts for 19% of trips amongst men and 24% amongst women aged 60-69. These proportions increase to 23% for men and 28 % for women for the over 70s. This reflects a greater reliance on local goods and services but also on public transport. In Northern Ireland walking is similarly important amongst the older age groups (over 60). Busy roads, anti-social behaviour and fear of crime can be important deterrents to travel particularly amongst older people.

Although walking is an important mode of transport a key issue is that with age physical disability and health can mean that it makes more difficult for older people to go out (figure 1). This means that as older people increasingly rely on walking and public transport to access local goods and services in both rural and urban areas that crossing facility location and the management and provision of seating at bus stops become important considerations.

Figure 1 People with Mobility Difficulties with Age 1998-2000 (Source: Social Exclusion Unit (2003), p27)



Walking trips in rural areas are as important as those in urban areas amongst groups in the population who have lower levels of access to the car. Research in Great Britain (Ruston, 2002) has found that walking in rural areas is very important for accessing local services.

Table 3 Access to services rural and urban areas, GB (Source Ruston (2002) taken from SEU (2003) p35)

		Foot	Car	Public Transport
Rural	GP	17	77	4
	Post Office	43	53	1
	Food shop	4	91	4
	Hospital	1	91	6
	Chemist	21	72	4
Urban	GP	38	51	9
	Post Office	62	33	3
	Food shop	15	74	9
	Hospital	7	72	17
	Chemist	52	40	4

Public Transport for Older People

For those people who do not drive, the choices of alternatives are limited and therefore these older people are at greater risk of social isolation, lower quality of life and poor participation rates. Public transport is seen as inadequate, infrequent and offering poor accessibility (Davey, 2007; Rural Community Network 2004; Gilhooey, et al, 2002). Community transport schemes are viewed more favourably as they are easier to use while normal public transport systems often have older vehicles or vehicles that are not suitable for use by older people (Gilhooey et al, 2002). This is particularly important as the most common reason for people to give up driving is because of health problems (O'Neill, 1997, Davey 2007, Adler and Rottunda, 2007). In fact, the largest barriers to accessing alternatives to the car are the physical difficulty associated with walking and using public transport. Common concerns include the poor condition of pavements, inadequate crossing facilities, boarding/alighting buses and trains; and steps at railway stations (DfT, 2001).

In rural areas, community transport schemes may offer a good alternative to conventional public transport. Providing conventional public transport schemes in rural areas is expensive due to the dispersed populations and these services are often unable to cope with the needs of special groups, like older people. In addition, research shows that community transport is seen as being easier to access for older people (Glasgow and Blakely, 2000). Community transport increases people's ability to participate in activities (Rural Community Network 2004). Glasgow and Blakely point out that effective alternative transport contributes to older people's ability to interact socially and to participate in the community and therefore, it is important to ensure that alternatives to the car, like community transport, are available.

Community transport schemes, and other unconventional modes of public transport, answer some of the needs of older people. A study by the Commission for Integrated Transport in the UK looked at the potential for taxi schemes and demand-responsive systems in rural areas. This study looked at similar national schemes in Switzerland and the Netherlands and pointed out that these demand responsive schemes work very well alongside conventional public transport, with integrated ticketing and are more cost-effective than conventional transport in rural areas (CfIT, 2008). It may be that transport like this would play a role in providing the type of transport that older people in rural areas need.

RURAL TRANSPORT IN IRELAND AND NORTHERN IRELAND

In both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, policy needs to develop in order to provide older people in rural areas with sustainable, reliable, consistent and safe public transport.

The issue of rural transport in the Republic of Ireland has been largely neglected in the past, with researchers criticising governments for the absence of a proper integrated nationwide rural transport policy (Weir and McCabe, 2008). Public transport investment to date has been primarily in urban areas. For example, in the National Development Plan (Government of Ireland, 2007a), the focus of investment in transport has been on investing in public transport in urban and suburban areas. The government recognise, however, that there are problems with rural transport in Ireland and set up an interdepartmental working group on rural transport in 2001. This group conducted a survey of transport needs in rural areas in 2002. This was the National Rural Transport Survey (Fitzpatrick Associates, 2002). This survey concluded that most rural residents do not have transport problems and that most travel in rural areas is by car. However, about 17% of residents of rural areas do have transport problems and 24% of the population in rural areas have unmet transport needs. This National Rural Transport Survey found that those who are most vulnerable include older people and women and that 37% of those aged 65 or over have unmet transport needs.

For those who do not have access to a car or who cannot drive, travel in rural Ireland can be very difficult (Weir and McCabe, 2008). Indeed, mobility is relative and high levels of car dependency and car ownership make providing public transport less important for governments and, therefore, make travel for those without a car more difficult. This is a problem that will become more important in future years as Ireland's population starts to age. At present, Ireland has a relatively young population, with 11% of the population aged 65 or older (Central Statistics Office, 2007). This proportion has remained relatively static over the past 40 years and is low compared to the EU27 average where 16.8% of the population is aged 65 and over, with nearly 20% of the population in Italy and Germany aged 65 and over (CSO, 2007). However, the Irish population is ageing and it is predicted that by 2050, 29% of the Irish population will be 65 or over (Government of Ireland, 2007b).

The government have set out, both in the National Development Plan and Towards 2016, that they wish to enable older people to remain living in their homes for as long as possible – this first appeared as official government policy in 1968 (Care for the Aged report) and was

reiterated in 1988 in the Years Ahead Report (Government of Ireland, 2007a; Government of Ireland, 2006) .This means providing access to good quality transport services. The government also state that they want to put in place environmental policy focusing on smarter and more sustainable travel and in the recently published renewed programme for Government (2009) they state “we will have a smart, efficient and citizen-orientated public service and we will be energy independent with a high quality living environment with smart transport solutions” .

At present, conventional transport services in rural areas are provided for the most part by Bus Eireann and private bus operators and these services tend to link urban areas to each other or to rural areas. Also in place in Ireland is a free travel scheme whereby people aged 66 years and over may use public transport (bus and rail) at no cost. Some private bus operators are also covered by the free travel scheme. The free travel scheme is of greater benefit to those living in urban areas than those living in rural areas.

The non-conventional services include the Rural Transport Initiative, introduced in 2002 and widely praised, which provides some more local services. The RTI was initially set up as a pilot project under the National Development Plan and arising from the success of that pilot project, was established as a permanent initiative in 2007 called the Rural Transport Program (RTP) under the new National Development Program (Government of Ireland, 2007a). The RTP is funded by the Department of Transport and is managed by POBAL. The RTP is delivered locally by 36 groups who operate on a not-for-profit basis. In this program, funding was increased to €3 million per year from 2002-2004, €4.5 million in 2005, €5million in 2006, €9 m in 2007 and €11 million in 2008. It was intended to gradually increase this funding to €18 million per annum. This funding is awarded by the Department of Transport who are responsible for transport policy and regulation in Ireland. In addition, the Department of Social and Family Affairs have, since 2002, provided a fixed sum to the RTP to allow free public transport pass holders to use the service. Pobal (2009) state that a high number of those using RTP projects are free pass users. Free travel pass holders accounted for 64% of passenger journeys on RTP services in 2008, with most of these being over 66 and most being female (Pobal, 2009).

19 RTP groups also received funding from organisations such as the HSE, FAS and VEC (Pobal, 2009). Organisations within communities have also provided funding in some cases. These organisations include retailers, day care centres and community organisations. In 2008, RTP groups were able to raise an additional €1,592,640. The RTP groups also received nearly €4 million in funding from the Community Services Programme between

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2006 and 2009. The Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs provided funding to 7 RTP groups to pilot night time services between May 2007 and July 2009. This funding amounted to €947,843 and will cease in December 2009.

The services offered by the local projects vary. Roberts et al (2007) describe 4 different models: -

- (a) Project own and operate their own vehicles
- (b) Project sub contract provision of service to other providers
- (c) Project using spacer capacity of vehicles owner by other voluntary organisations
- (d) Car sharing coordinated by project, voluntary car schemes.

It has recently been recommended in the new programme for Government that synergies need to be created between programmes like the RTP and transport services offered by the Health Service Executive and other agencies (Renewed Programme for Government, 2009; Pobal, 2009). A pilot project in May 2009 examined how Bus Eireann, the HSE and the RTP could work together in providing transport services in a more cost effective way. These pilot studies are underway in Meath and Louth and Sligo and Leitrim. The studies have suggested different methods that might be used to streamline the services offered by the different groups, including sharing marketing, synchronising training policies and setting up collect and connect feeder services where rural inhabitants are linked to mainstream services and facilities.

Already there are some links between RTP services and other public services. About half of all RTP service trips are linked to some public service, such as education, health or linking with other public transport services such as Bus Eireann, Irish Rail and ferry services (Pobal, 2009). Pobal (2009) state that the RTP can play a very important role in developing an integrated transport service for rural areas and 20% of RTP services link into other public transport services. Linking in with health services is also a very important function of RTP services and nearly a quarter of all RTP services link in with health services (Pobal, 2009).

However, travel in rural Ireland is still predominantly by car (Weir and McCabe, 2008, Fitzpatrick Associates, 2006). Weir and McCabe (2008) and Fitzpatrick Associates (2006) blame the failure of successive Irish governments to put in place a cohesive national

transport policy for rural areas as a reason for the poor transport services in rural Ireland. Where rural transport policy has been implemented, as with the Rural Transport Program, the focus has primarily been on providing transport for the socially excluded and not on sustainability. Weir and McCabe (2008) are critical of the fact that Ireland does not have a rural transport policy with any focus on sustainability. Fitzpatrick Associates (2006) recommend that the objectives of social inclusion and sustainability should not be seen as exclusive but should, rather be treated as equally important. A rural transport policy that sees promotion of social inclusion and sustainability as equally important is needed.

In Northern Ireland rural transport has, until recently, also been a largely neglected issue. The emphasis has tended to be placed on urban transport, especially the levels of investment in roads versus public transport and the problems associated with congestion and the effects that this has on urban bus operations. The implementation of the Regional Transport Strategy and the Regional Development Strategy in Northern Ireland have renewed interest in transport policy more generally and have resulted in new policy developments and statements of strategy (DRDNI, 2001; 2002). Research into transport disadvantage and its links with social exclusion in the UK (SEU, 2003; Hine and Mitchell, 2003) has also impacted on policy discussion and development in relation to the development of innovative transport schemes and the funding of concessionary travel in Northern Ireland (GCCNI, 2000).

Public transport in Northern Ireland is currently provided by Translink who operate Ulsterbus services in rural Northern Ireland and areas outside Belfast, in addition to Metro (Citybus) operations in Belfast. Northern Ireland Railways, another Translink subsidiary, provides rail services across Northern Ireland. These services are centred on Belfast which is central to the network. Rail lines currently from the north (Londonderry/Derry) and east (Larne/Whitehead) and south (Bangor) have benefited from investment in rolling stock, stations and line relaying following a strategic review of the railway. Recently, the Minister for Regional Development has announced a new consultation period on public transport reform (ref). This follows several announcements over the last 7 years concerning the need to restructure public transport organisation and delivery in Northern Ireland (DRDNI refs for new start etc) due to impending EU regulatory deadlines. This exercise is currently looking at reshaping the delivery of public transport in Northern Ireland and the introduction of competition in the delivery of bus services. In rural areas the exercise has identified particular problems in addressing the impact of changes due to the large degree of integration between Ulsterbus operations and school transport in rural areas. Ulsterbus has undergone a recent

strategic review which has resulted in the adoption of new local bus networks on more commercial lines in and around some of the larger towns in Northern Ireland.

The Regional Transport Strategy for Northern Ireland (RTS) and the Regional Development Strategy (RDS) have defined transport policy (and spatial planning policy) in Northern Ireland since 2001 (DRDNI, 2001; 2002). At the time of writing both these strategies are currently under review. The RTS is regarded as a bidding document in that it outlines patterns of expenditure on transport infrastructure for the period to 2012. The RDS on the other hand has detailed statements of policy on transport and land use strategy for the whole of Northern Ireland. Both these strategies have provided a framework within which a whole series of transport plans have been provided including: Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan (BMAP) (DRDNI, 2004); Regional Strategic Transport Network Plan to 2015 (DRDNI, 2003); and the Sub Regional Transport Plan (DRDNI, 2007). The RDS contains specific statements of policy on the need for integrated and accessible rural areas. Central to this vision is the need for a flexible transport strategy which recognises reliance on the car but which also can serve those without access to a car effectively. The strategy also identifies the need to improve access to key and link transport corridors and provide a better integration of rural transport services with the strategic bus network (DRDNI, 2001).

More recently an Accessible Transport Strategy (ATS) has been published. The ATS seeks to improve travel opportunities by removing barriers that older people and people with disabilities experience in all areas, including those living in rural areas, villages and small settlements. Improved accessibility of transport would contribute towards the promotion of social inclusion and target social need in rural areas (DRDNI, 2005).

Policy in Northern Ireland has changed and increasingly recognises the problems experienced by the transport disadvantaged and older people. The Rural Development Council for Northern Ireland (2003) highlighted difficulties faced by people in rural areas across the province when accessing socially necessary facilities and services. One of the three main areas of concern raised by the report was access to transport. This report was followed up by the introduction of the Rural Development Council's Rural Transport Initiative, which sought to benefit nine areas of the province through enhancements to transport services (Down, Armagh, Mid-Ulster, Newry & Mourne, Dungannon & South Tyrone, Fermanagh, Omagh and North Antrim). This concern has also been evidenced by the publication of the Accessible Transport Strategy for Northern Ireland in 2005 (DRDNI, 2005). The rural transport provision can be divided between a number of elements: conventional bus and rail services, taxis and community and demand responsive transport. In addition, the

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Department for Regional Development has invested in the concessionary fares scheme in Northern Ireland which offers free travel to all those who are aged 65 years of age or over and who are resident in Northern Ireland (that is resident in Northern Ireland for a minimum of 3 months to be eligible) on any Translink rail or bus service. The Regional Transport Strategy estimated that this scheme over the ten year period 2002-2012 will cost £145.5 million (DRDNI, 2002).

Conventional bus services are extremely important for older people, especially in rural areas. In Northern Ireland the bus fleet is being modernised and one of the biggest challenges surrounds the provision of a full accessible bus fleet (low floors etc). The DDA requires all new buses to be fully accessible, this means that new vehicles in the fleet will be accessible. However, one of the issues will be the continuing ability of the operator (or under competition new operators) to provide new replacement vehicles at a time when patronage on buses is declining and increasing amounts of revenue are being sought through the farebox combined with an expansion in car use. Improvements are being made including the introduction of new services and networks in towns outside Belfast, some of which include the use of midi vehicles. In March 2008 Metro (City bus) vehicles were 83.5% accessible with an average bus age 8.9 years, while for Ulsterbus the figures were lower (60.2% of Ulsterbus fleet fully accessible; 26.2% of Goldline fleet being accessible). In 2004/2005 23 new trains were brought into service by Northern Ireland Railways this has increased the level of compliance with railway vehicle accessibility regulations to around 70% (DRDNI, 2005).

Taxis are an important mode of transport for older people without cars and disabled people. Currently they account for a relatively small proportion of trips per person per year (for the over 60s -9 for males and 28 trips for females) but are as important as public transport for this age group. Recently there have been calls for the introduction of a taxi card scheme for Northern Ireland which would provide people with disabilities access to subsidised taxi journeys (DRDNI, 2005; EqualityNI, 2003). To date no such scheme has been introduced.

Community and demand responsive transport is typically provided on a not for profit basis by voluntary and community groups. These schemes also include volunteer car schemes. The DRDNI (2005) has estimated that there are around 1,300 minibuses in use by the community transport sector in Northern Ireland, but has also indicated that many of these are used to provide transport for members of organisations such as sports clubs or churches, although some voluntary organisations make them available on a wider basis. For older people steps in minibuses can cause access problems, although some of these vehicles are fitted with ramps or lifts for disabled people. In Northern Ireland grants are provided to community

transport organisations under the Transport Programme for People with Disabilities and the Rural Transport Fund (RTF). This scheme was introduced in 1998 and led to a significant growth in the community transport sector. DRD's approach is to encourage the development of Rural Community Transport Partnerships (RCTPs), which are set up and managed by volunteers on a non-profit basis, in response to local awareness of or experience of transport need. The Partnerships take many different forms reflecting their local nature. RCTPs employ some full time staff to develop and manage the organisations' transport initiatives and to provide transport services. They also encourage volunteers to use their own cars as part of social car schemes or to drive minibuses to provide low cost transport for individuals or groups of people. The RTF now supports 18 RCTPs and their operations cover all of rural Northern Ireland. Financial support for the RTF is projected to increase from £1.8M in 2003/04 to £3.75M in 2005/06 (DRD, 2005).

CONCLUSIONS

In both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, there are challenges to be faced in terms of providing safe, sustainable transport for older people living in rural areas. In an ageing society, governments and policy makers have a duty to enable their older citizens to maintain a high quality of life and to be able to access services, in a sustainable way. For many older people, access to a car, car ownership and car use allows them to access services and live independent lives. At the same time, these governments and policy makers must also reduce levels of car use and travel demand and encourage more sustainable transport.

The report has outlined the difficulties faced by older people who do not drive: problems with poor public transport provision, road safety issues and physical barriers associated with walking.

This paper has outlined the transport problems that exist for older people. In general, the car is still the mode of choice for older people. However, there are 2 main issues that we face:

- (1) When older people are no longer able to drive, due to physical disability or other reasons, the alternatives are often seen as being substandard and as limiting the ability of the older person to be fully engaged in an active social life or to access vital services. Ensuring that walking and use of public transport is accessible to older

people is very important, as they face greater physical impairments that mean walking and accessing public transport can become more problematic.

- (2) Alternatives need to be made more attractive in order to encourage those older people who can still drive to use those alternatives instead of the car and to encourage those older people to travel in a more sustainable way as they age.

This report has outlined the policies and transport schemes for older people in rural areas that have been put in place in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. It is apparent in both countries that emphasis has been put on developing community transport schemes that meet the needs of the socially excluded. However, there are differences in the approaches and objectives of these schemes. In the Republic of Ireland, the community transport schemes described in this paper are not solely for the use of older people or socially excluded people. It is hoped that others will choose to use these schemes and that the schemes will become part of the solution for producing sustainable public transport in rural areas. In Northern Ireland, the community transport schemes are very much focussed on reducing social exclusion, and less so on promoting sustainable living or encouraging other users to use them.

In both countries, there is a need for a more cohesive rural transport policy that meets the twin objectives of maintaining the quality of life of older people and of encouraging older people, and others living in rural areas, to travel in a more sustainable way. Research is needed to examine how these objectives can be reached and to explore how greater synergies can be created between community transport schemes, designed to answer the needs of certain groups and society, and other more conventional forms of public transport. Research is also needed to examine what are the transport needs of older people in rural areas and to assess how those differ from the needs faced by older people in urban areas. Another important area that needs to be explored in greater detail is how we can ensure provision of transport across the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Innovative community transport schemes are in place in both countries but there are significant opportunities to develop cross border, trans-national community transport schemes. It is hoped that this project will play a role in achieving this as it will create links and networks between community transport schemes in both countries.

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