



**Report on Translink Site Visit with passengers with a disability or  
reduced mobility**

**December 2017**

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## **1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- 1.1 This report details the findings of a site visit to Translink stations in August 2017 with a group of passengers with a disability or reduced mobility to experience a journey using public transport services.
- 1.2 The Consumer Council arranged the visit in partnership with Translink, and participants from organisations that represent passengers with a disability or reduced mobility attended. The visit involved guiding the group around Belfast Central, Great Victoria and Europa stations including a train and bus journey. Participants made comments throughout the visit on the services provided and gave suggestions on how these could be improved.
- 1.3 The group was positive about using public transport. The main suggestions focused on signage around the stations. There were also suggestions about arriving at the station, boarding the train and bus, and on-board the vehicles.
- 1.4 The findings of the report will be provided to Translink, and The Consumer Council will work with Translink to ensure that the suggestions are progressed.
- 1.5 We would like to extend our thanks to Translink for hosting the visit and to all the participants who provided their insight on the day.

## 2. INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 Translink is the main provider of public bus and train services in Northern Ireland. Many people rely on public transport to access shops, travel to work, to access leisure activities or attend medical appointments.
- 2.2 In 2005, fewer than 8.5 million journeys were made on public transport by older people and people with a disability. By 2014/15, this increased to 13 million journeys.<sup>1</sup> There has been much work done in the last number of years to remove the barriers to using public transport such as new buses with improved accessibility and trains, improvements to stations and halts, as well as audio-visual announcements on Metro buses. However, it is recognised that there is still more to be done to remove barriers to accessing and using public transport.
- 2.3 The Consumer Council is the statutory passenger representative for public transport services in Northern Ireland. We investigate complaints about public buses and trains, and carry out research into passengers' views of public transport.
- 2.4 We also represent air and sea passengers travelling to and from Northern Ireland. The Consumer Council has worked with the Northern Ireland airports, ferry companies and port operators to review the assistance to passengers with a disability or reduced mobility.

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/drd/accessible-transport-strategy-consultation-2025.pdf>

2.5 To help improve passenger experience we arranged, in partnership with Translink, a site visit with a group of passengers with a disability or reduced mobility. The purpose of the visit was for the participants to make a journey through Belfast using bus and train services, including travelling through three stations. Participants were able to share their views on the services and make suggestions on how this journey could be made easier for them.

2.6 The objectives of the site visits were:

- To gain a better understanding of the assistance available to passengers;
- To become more aware of the specific issues experienced by passengers using these services; and
- To identify possible changes that could further assist passengers using these bus and rail services.

2.7 Overall, participants were positive about the stations and the services that were used, commenting on the helpfulness of the staff that they encountered. They made a number of suggestions surrounding the car park, signage, available wheelchairs, real time information and seating on trains and buses.

2.8 The intended outcome of this exercise is to work with Translink to ensure services meet passengers' needs.

2.9 The Consumer Council would like to thank Translink for facilitating the visit and those participants who took part on the day.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

3.1 The Consumer Council arranged a group visit with Translink on Friday 25 August 2017. Fifteen participants took part representing Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee (IMTAC), Guide Dogs NI, Jigsaw, Age Sector Platform, NOW Group, Equality Commission and Parkinsons' UK.

3.2 The Consumer Council and Translink staff guided the group, beginning at Belfast Central Train Station ticket desk with a discussion on arriving at the station. Participants then moved through the station to the train platform where they boarded a train destined for Great Victoria Street Station. On arrival at the station participants made their way to Europa Bus Station where they boarded a bus to George Best Belfast City Airport and completed a round trip. The visit concluded in Translink's offices allowing participants' to discuss any issues not captured during the journey.

3.3 Staff from The Consumer Council took notes at the visit and recorded the suggestions that were made by the group.

3.4 In order to ensure all participants' comments and suggestions were captured, a short questionnaire was distributed to participants and returned to The Consumer Council following the visit.

## 4. FINDINGS

- 4.1 The paragraphs below set out the findings in chronological order of the journey taken by participants.

### Central Station

#### Arriving

##### *Car parking*

- 4.2 Two group participants arrived together at Central Station by car. When they approached the car park they noticed a sign said 'car park full'. However, when they proceeded to the car park ticket barrier they were able to get a ticket to enter the car park.
- 4.3 The Central Station car park is operated by GoPark, it has 177 spaces and five accessible parking bays<sup>2</sup>. Department for Transport guidelines state that for a car park with up to 200 bays there should be 'individual bays for each disabled employee plus two bays or 5% of total capacity whichever is greater.'<sup>3</sup> Following this guidance would mean that there should be nine accessible parking bays available for public use.

##### *Lower entrance*

- 4.4 Another participant who was unfamiliar with Central Station arrived by the lower entrance. The participant indicated that they did not see any signs for the ticket counter and therefore were unsure where to go. A

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<sup>2</sup><http://www.goparkni.co.uk/carpark/central-station-car-park/>

<sup>3</sup><http://tsrgd.co.uk/pdf/tal/1995/tal-5-95.pdf>

member of staff was helpful in directing them to the ticket counter but it was noted that clear signage would be helpful.

#### *Arriving by train*

- 4.5 A participant with a visual impairment arrived to the station by train. Again they noted that signage for the direction of the exit was not clear on the platform. A member of staff assisted the passenger but it was suggested that exit signs should be bigger and brighter.

### **SUGGESTIONS**

- Examine the process for placing 'car park full' sign at the entrance of the car park to ensure that passengers are not incorrectly advised that there are no parking spaces available;
- Ensure that the ratio of parking bays to accessible parking bays meets current best practice guidance; and
- Ensure signage that directs passengers around the station e.g. from entrances to ticket offices, to the platforms and from the platform to the exits is bright, clearly visible, of an appropriate size.

#### **At the Station**

##### *Ticket desk*

- 4.6 It was highlighted that the ticket desk was clearly signed and there was a low access counter. One participant commented that the available loop system worked well.



### *Concourse*

4.7 Participants commented that the concourse area was clean, bright and welcoming with plenty of seating availability. One participant explained that there were a large number of posters and signs throughout the area making it overwhelming and difficult to identify which were information signs.

4.8 It was discussed that where seats had previously been located has now been taken over by a food outlet and photographic display. Additional seating is available in the centre of the concourse however, at times when there is a long queue for the Enterprise service, the passageways for access to seating, the ticket barrier and toilets are often restricted making it difficult for passengers with a disability or reduced mobility to access these areas.

### **SUGGESTIONS**

- Review the signage around the station to ensure that information signs are clear and do not get over shadowed by advertising; and
- Examine the way passengers queue for the Enterprise service to ensure that passageways are not obstructed.

### *Wheelchair availability*

4.9 Participants commented that it was positive that there were a number of wheelchairs available at the ticket barrier at Central Station. The group had not known that these were available or the process of requesting use of these. One group member commented that the wheels of the chairs

appeared to have no treads, highlighting that ‘smooth wheels on a wet platform would be dangerous.’

## **SUGGESTIONS**

- All wheelchairs in Translink stations should be reviewed to confirm whether wheel treads meet the necessary standards; and
- Clearer information at the ticket desk and on the Translink website explaining that wheelchairs are available at the station and how passengers can request the use of them.

### *Platform access*

4.10 Those participants that were unfamiliar with Central Station explained that once through the ticket platform they did not know where the lift was to access the platforms. It was noted that directional signage was not present beside the lift.

4.11 A participant with a visual impairment explained that the openings to the escalator and stairs were not clearly enough marked to alert them of the risk. It was suggested that this could be more clearly marked, or a sensor audio warning played on approach.

### *Central Train Platform*

4.12 It was highlighted that the departure information was difficult to locate and read, and when you entered the platform the board was out of view, behind passengers. However, participants noted that the other signage in place around the platform was clear and easy to read.

- 4.13 The group was aware that announcements were being made on the train platform, however at times it was difficult to hear these due to background noise.
- 4.14 There is an information kiosk in the middle of the platform but participants stated that this was not clearly signed. Some participants highlighted the importance of staff being available to ask for help when both boarding the train and exiting the platform.
- 4.15 One participant with a visual impairment explained that the tactile paving area that indicates the edge of the platform was quite narrow and could be extended.

### **SUGGESTIONS**

- Investigate the possibility of moving the departure information board to a more visible location on the platform. Review the font size and, if possible, increase the size and quality of the lettering;
- Evaluate the quality and volume of train announcements especially at busy periods when a number of trains are entering/leaving the station;
- Clearer signage of the kiosk on the platform as a passenger information point; and
- Check if the tactile paving on the platform meets current best practice guidance.

## **Boarding**

### *Train Boarding*

- 4.15 Participants explained their difficulty on accessing the train due to the gap between the train's step and the platform. The group highlighted that on the day, staff were very quick at deploying the ramp.
- 4.16 One participant noted that when travelling by train the ramp is not automatically deployed. Customers need to request access to the ramp from train staff. The participant questioned if all trains had ramps and whether it could always be placed at the same door so they knew where to stand on the platform.

## **SUGGESTION**

- Translink to consider deploying the ramp on all services and stops, at the wheelchair accessible carriage and for this carriage always to be at the same location at the front/rear of the train so passengers will know where it is located.

### *On-board the train*

- 4.17 Participants were complimentary of the train, commenting that the seats were comfortable, the priority seating area was spacious and it was good this seating area located beside a door (see above comment on knowing where the accessible carriage is located). It was also noted that the audio announcements were helpful, very clear and a good volume. One participant commented that the announcements do not always work.

4.18 A participant using a 'Rollator'<sup>4</sup> noted the difficulty in using the fold down seats in the accessible area. The participant explained that they did not feel secure in the seat as it had no arms and suggested fold down arms would be beneficial. They went on to explain that when getting ready to disembark the train, the lack of arms made it difficult for them to stand up. The passenger recognised that there was a bar opposite them which they could use but this would mean leaning over their walking aid to grab the bar.

### **SUGGESTION**

- Translink should clarify if the audio announcements are automatic or if they can they be controlled by the driver/conductor, and if there are instances where these are switched off; and
- Investigate the possibility of installing fold down arms beside the seats within the accessibility area on the train.

### *Disembarking the train*

4.19 A number of participants commented that when they arrived and disembarked the train they were unsure of where the exit was from the platform and suggested more signage directing towards the exit.

### **SUGGESTION**

- Review platform signage to ensure passengers are aware of station exits.

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<sup>4</sup> Walking aide

## **At the station**

### **Great Victoria Street Station/Europa Bus Station**

4.20 Many of the comments around the station focused on the clarity and visibility of the signage, particularly about the directional signage from the train to the bus station and at the station exits.

4.21 One participant explained that if you did not know Europa Bus Station you could get easily lost. Another group member stated that it was not obvious when entering Europa Bus Station from Great Victoria Street, or Glengall Street, that there was a train station. However, it was highlighted that a number of staff around the station in high-visibility vests could assist passengers and staff and were always very helpful if needed.

### **SUGGESTION**

- Conduct a review of all signage in Translink stations to ensure directional signage is clear and easily read.

## **At the station**

### *Real-time information board*

4.21 Participants believed that the real-time information board was very useful. However, the size of the font was small making it difficult to read. Due to the amount of information and the small text size, participants found that by the time they had focused on their bus the display had switched to the next screen.

- 4.22 One participant commented that the departure announcements were not made for all bus journeys, and suggested that this should be extended to include all journeys. Another participant, suggested that it would be useful to be able to hear the announcements in the toilets.
- 4.23 It was discussed that the information board beside the gates were useful but again the text was small making it difficult to read.

### **SUGGESTIONS**

- Examine the possibility of increasing the font size and decreasing the switching time between screens to allow passengers to easily read the information available; and
- Consider changing the font size on gate signs to aide passengers reading the information.

#### *Ticket desk*

- 4.24 The group passed the bus ticket desk as they approached the bus boarding gate. The access to the ticket desk was via a barrier queuing system, and when combined with the separated queuing area for the Dublin airport bus, it caused the walkway to narrow, which had a bottle neck affect. This made it difficult for participants using a wheel chair and walking aid to navigate.

#### *Using the bus*

- 4.25 The bus was easily boarded by the group as the bus driver opened a ramp for access. Two participants highlighted that they needed this ramp access in order to board a bus, and while kneeling buses are available on some

services in their local area, they feel restricted in the buses they can use as Express Goldline services have steep steps. They are unclear on what they would do, or how a wheelchair would board these services.

- 4.26 One wheelchair user struggled to get past the drivers' area and into the wheelchair space. In discussion with the participant it was noted that the wheelchair safety barrier had not been deployed before the journey commenced and as the barrier was behind the participant, and difficult to reach, a Consumer Council member of staff assisted to lower it.
- 4.27 When boarding the bus there was some confusion among the group about how many wheelchair spaces were available on the bus. There was also some discussion about a wheelchair user transferring from their wheelchair into a bus seat once on-board.
- 4.28 An assistance dog user raised concerns when using the bus about requiring a seat at the front with a large enough gap for the dog to lie comfortably to ensure they do not obstruct the main walkway. It was suggested that a priority sticker indicating a space for an assistance dog would be helpful.
- 4.29 On returning to the Europa Bus Station the driver had to use a screwdriver to get the ramp to deploy. This appeared to be due to the catch (that needs to be removed to form a handle) being stuck which took several attempts to loosen.



## **SUGGESTIONS**

- Translink to review the information available about vehicles with step access to ensure passengers are aware of how they can use these services;
- Investigate the possibility of a priority sticker on an appropriate seat at the front of the bus for assistance dog users;
- Can Translink advise who should deploy the safety barrier on current vehicles and how this will be accommodated on the new Belfast Rapid Transit vehicles?;
- Translink should review bus signage so it is clearly visible to passengers the number of wheelchair spaces available on the bus; and
- Can Translink clarify its policy if a passenger using a wheelchair wants to board the bus, and transfer into a bus seat?

## **5. OTHER ISSUES**

5.1 Participants were asked to focus their comments on their experiences and views of services on the day while making the journey. However, time was allowed at the end for a wider discussion on their views. The bullet points below provide a synopsis of the issues raised for Translink's consideration:

- Metro bus drivers are good at recognising the JAM<sup>5</sup> card. However, bus inspectors can rush people when inspecting tickets; an announcement could be made when an inspector boards a bus;

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<sup>5</sup> JAM Card allows people with a learning difficulty, autism or Asperger's tell others they need 'Just A Minute' discreetly and easily.

- Busier morning bus services can rush passengers for payment;
- ‘Stations are great because they have staff’; if using bus stops you have to plan more in advance because of literacy issues;
- Not all bus stops have clear times and some bus shelters do not update their physical timetables when seasonal changes occur;
- Translink bus drivers do not help with luggage in the same way ‘Aircoach’ and private coaches do;
- Contradictory information was provided to a passenger when applying for a bus pass, information should be consistent; and
- Bus drivers do not always let passengers get seated before pulling off.

## **6. CONCLUSIONS**

- 6.1 Overall, participants were positive about the visit and the services provided by Translink. The group highlighted some of the difficulties they face when using public transport and made a number of suggestions to make travel more convenient for them.
- 6.2 Many of the comments focused on the signage around the stations including directional signage not being visible, advertising signs overwhelming information signs and the font size in real-time and gate signs being too small.
- 6.3 There were also suggestions about the deployment of the ramp when boarding the train and the bus. Participants also discussed wider transport issues.

## **7. NEXT STEPS**

- 7.1 The comments made by participants will be presented to Translink. The Consumer Council will work with Translink to support it as it implements the changes to ensure that services continue to meet passengers' needs.



Floor 3  
Seatem House  
28-32 Alfred Street  
Belfast  
BT2 8EN

Freephone: 0800 121 6022  
Switchboard: 028 9025 1600  
Fax: 028 9025 1663

