



Older Persons, Transport and COVID-19

Research Summary Report

March 2021

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 In line with its statutory role, the Consumer Council commissioned research on the views and experiences of older consumers on transport in Northern Ireland. The research took place during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and the questions and responses reflect this. The research findings will inform our work in making appropriate policy recommendations to the Northern Ireland Executive and other stakeholders. The research was carried out in consultation with the Department for Infrastructure (DfI), with the particular aim of informing its development of a new Public Service Agreement with Translink.
- 1.2 The research was in two parts. The first and main part was telephone interviews of 1,010 persons with a representative sample of the older population, aged 55 and over. The interviews took place during November and December 2020 with each interview taking, on average, 10 to 15 minutes to complete. The second part was a single focus group of ten consumers aged over 55, organised and facilitated by Age NI. The focus group was used to provide a qualitative view on the quantitative findings of the survey. The final report on the survey, which contains the methodology, objectives and findings of the survey is attached at annex 1.
- 1.3 This summary report brings together the key findings of the survey and related comments from the focus group.

2. KEY FINDINGS

2.1 **The private car is a more attractive option for older people than using public transport**

- For most respondents a car is the preferred way to travel. 82% of respondents said that they have access to a car, with 97% of those using it on a weekly basis with this figure dropping to 86% since COVID-19 began.
- In contrast only 23% used public transport weekly prior to COVID-19.

The focus group identified:

- A lack of co-ordination of bus and train services and the lack of regular services has reduced the use of public transport.
- It was felt that some drivers and staff do not have an understanding of the mobility needs that some older people have accessing vehicles or stations.

Quote from the group:

“There is only one bus an hour from my village which dovetailed with the train to Belfast. Then the train times were changed but not the bus times so the service is now unreliable and not co-ordinated or integrated.”

2.2 Older persons will use public transport again once the COVID-19 pandemic is over.

- COVID-19 has impacted on all forms of transport but public transport has been effected most. Weekly usage of public transport has dropped from 23% to 7% over the past six months, with the percentage saying they never use it increasing from 25% prior to the COVID-19 pandemic to over 77% during it.
- 69% of older people say that after the end of the COVID-19 pandemic they are likely to use public transport the same amount, whilst 22% say they will use it more.

The focus group identified:

- A lack of enforcement of COVID-19 Regulations on masks and social distancing was a deterrent to using public transport.
- They would re-engage in the use of public transport when they had received COVID-19 vaccinations and lockdown was over.

Quote from the group:

“I used the train once for a medical appointment and felt unsafe on the way back as it was filled with school children no masks, no social distancing, and no policing.”

2.3 Knowledge of services available to passengers is low

- Only 4% of respondents were unaware of where their nearest transport service operates from, but 42% were not sure how frequently a scheduled bus or rail service operates on their nearest route and 21% were not sure where they would look for such information.
- 75% of respondents were not aware of the cost of tickets, although this may be due to only 16% of respondents using cash and 62% using their Senior Smartpass when they travel on public transport.
- With 42% of respondents using it, the Translink website was the most used source to find information about public transport services.

The focus group identified:

- There is a problem with accessing reliable timetable information and journey planning both online and on digital information at bus stops.
- The Translink Journey Planner should be redesigned using a co design approach with users.

Quotes from the group:

“Information is a problem for people who don’t have a smartphone as a lot of the timetables have been removed from the bus stops and not all older people are digitally aware.”

“People who aren’t familiar with the public transport network or have lost confidence in it during lockdown might need educating or retraining after the pandemic.”

2.4 Older people living in social housing rely more on public transport

- Car ownership is lowest amongst those living in social housing, with 50% of such respondents saying they have no access to a car compared to 18% overall.
- Use of public transport was highest amongst respondents in social housing, with 36% reporting weekly usage before the pandemic and 17% over the past six months.
- The use of a Senior Smartpass by people living in social housing when using public transport was joint lowest (56%) with those that privately rent, with 22% using cash to pay for their journeys.

The focus group did not identify specific issues relating to the housing tenure or socio-economic group of transport users.

2.5 Poorer provision of services in rural areas

- Car ownership was highest amongst older people living in rural areas. (91%, compared to 75% in urban areas) and public transport usage lowest (16% weekly before the pandemic, compared to 29% in urban areas).
- Over one third (38%) of respondents in rural areas live within a six minute walk of their nearest bus stop.
- Services on their nearest route operate between every fifteen minutes and every hour for 27%, which suggests public transport is not a viable or convenient option for rural people when compared to using a car.
- A more frequent and reliable service (17%) and closer transport links (12%) were suggested by rural respondents as ways to increase their public transport usage.

The focus group identified:

- There is a huge difference between urban and rural settings in terms of connectivity and numbers of services.
- Community Transport should be better co-ordinated with public transport services.

2.6 Public transport use as people grow older

- Overall 46% of respondents expect their usage of public transport to remain the same as they get older age but 37% expect it to increase.
- This is most likely to happen for those aged 55 to 64 (48%), which is likely a result of this age group becoming eligible for their Senior Smartpass.
- Other reasons for increasing usage included the possibility of becoming unable to drive (15%) or becoming less keen on driving (10%).

The focus group identified:

- The older Smartpass which offers free or reduced cost travel to older people is viewed very positively. It is seen as helping older people maintain social connection and increase fitness.

Quotes from the group:

“On the train you can read, crochet, enjoy the views, and socially connect.”

“Public transport users are much more active than car drivers. Pre COVID-19, I constantly used public transport and could have easily clocked up 10,000 steps without realising it.”

2.7 Encouraging the use of public transport amongst older people

- 60% of respondents said that nothing could be done to encourage them to use public transport more in the absence of the pandemic.
- Measures mentioned that would encourage use of public transport were boarding points closer to home (10%), more routes (10%) and more frequent daytime services (10%).

3 CONCLUSION

- 3.1 The car is by far the most popular way for older people to travel, with car travel remaining high even during the pandemic. In contrast the relatively low use of public transport dropped dramatically during the pandemic. Public transport will not become a viable option for older people until after the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 3.2 It is interesting that the majority of older people said that after the end of the pandemic they are likely to use public transport the same amount or even more than before the pandemic. It remains to be seen as to whether travel habits are re-established to the same level as before, and public transport providers may want to look at measures to ensure older people feel safe when they do return to using buses or trains.
- 3.3 Notwithstanding the short term impact of COVID-19, increasing the use of public transport is a long term strategic aim of the Northern Ireland Government. This is likely to be a challenge as over half (60%) of older persons do not think anything would increase their current (in the absence of the pandemic) use of public transport. Transport providers will need to look at long term measures that will make public transport a more attractive option for those aged over 55. These include more accessible vehicles for older people and more frequent and reliable services with access points closer to home.
- 3.4 Awareness of the frequency and cost of public transport services amongst older people is low and this may be a barrier to older people seeing public transport as an option for them. It is important that information is easily accessible to older people when they want it. The Translink website was the most used source to find information about services, and so making this site more accessible to an older generation, who may not be as confident using technology, is one possible way to increase awareness of public transport services among older people.

- 3.5 The value of the Smart card that provides free travel to the over 60's may explain why almost half of the 55 to 64 age group expect their use of public transport to increase as they grow older. However, whilst older people living in social housing are the biggest users of public transport they are, along with those in the private rented sector, the least likely to use a free travel Senior Smartpass. More needs to be done to ensure that those who are eligible for a Senior Smartpass are aware of it and know how to apply for one.
- 3.6 Car ownership is highest and public transport usage lowest in rural areas. A more frequent and reliable service and closer transport links were suggested by rural respondents as ways to increase their public transport usage.

4. NEXT STEPS

- 4.1 The population of Northern Ireland is ageing and the needs of older people must be catered for if we are to increase their use of public transport. We will share the findings of our research with the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) and work with it as it develops a new Public Service Agreement with Translink.
- 4.2 We will also use the research findings to work with DfI on transport policy and strategy issues. We will also share the report with Translink as we work with it to help public transport recover from COVID-19 and improve its services to older people.



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