

Consultation Document on 'Accessible Transport Strategy 2025'.

[Department for Regional Development]

Consultation Response from Fermanagh and Omagh District Council.

Fermanagh and Omagh District Council (Council) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Department for Regional Development's (DRD) consultation on the 'Accessible Transport Strategy 2025'.

Brief Background for Fermanagh and Omagh District Council

The District Council area is home to 114,992 people (as of 30 June 2014). The District Council area is Northern Ireland's largest region in terms of land mass - approximately 3,000km², or 20% of NI - and the smallest in terms of population. As a result, the population density of approximately 41 people per km² is the sparsest in NI. This is a feature of the region which also provides challenges to service delivery.

Consultation Feedback

Fermanagh and Omagh District Council (Council) welcomes this consultation and in general it's key aims/themes:

- Enhancing the accessibility of the public transport network.
- Improving accessibility of the wider transport network.
- Enhancing customer experience.
- Working in collaboration with partners and stakeholders.

Although broadly supportive of the consultation document, the Council does has a number of concerns which will be addressed in this consultation response.

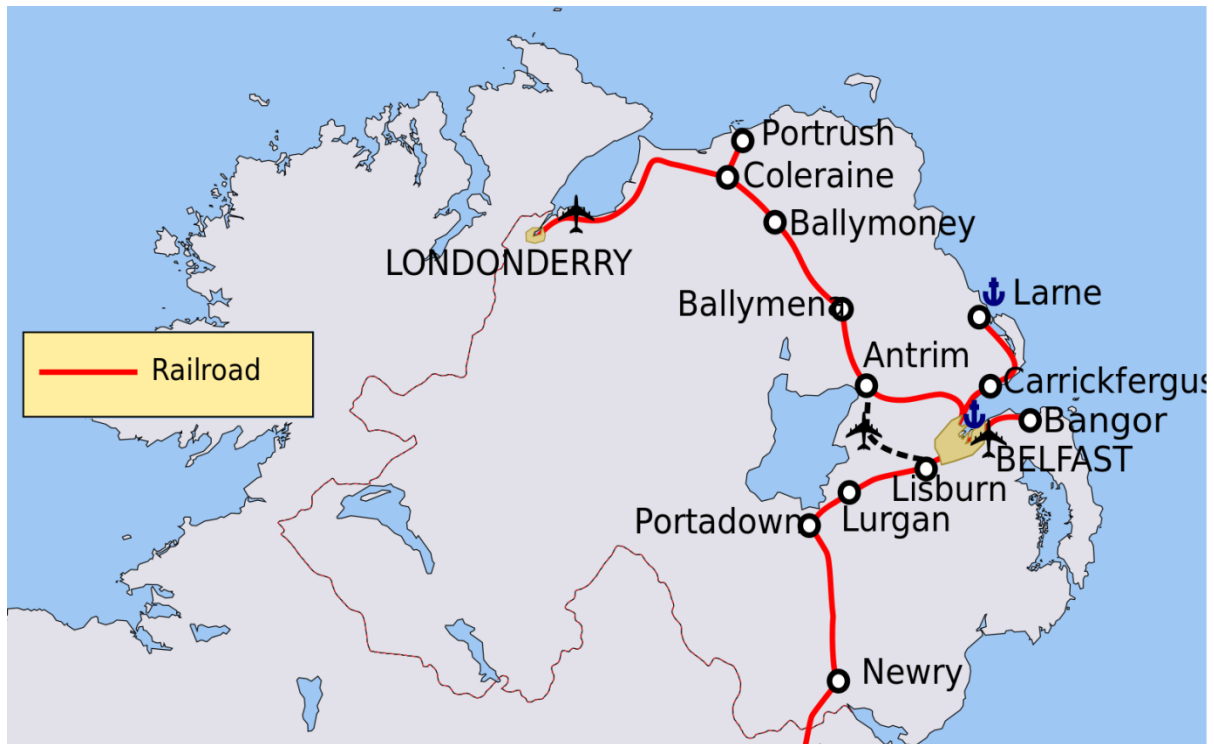
Feedback on the Previous Accessible Transport Strategy

As part of this consultation, DRD has asked for feedback on the previous 'Accessible Transport Strategy 2005'.

Without a doubt there has been many improvements within Northern Ireland since 2005, with regards to Transport (i.e. the public transport network, the wider transport network, etc.).

Since then, there has been the introduction of concessionary fares for those who are 60 years and over, as well as major improvements in the accessibility/availability of information. Funding has been spent on new buses, new trains, infrastructure, all of which has had somewhat of a positive impact on Northern Ireland.

However, some of these successes will have had little impact in rural areas including the Fermanagh and Omagh District. A lot of the successes seem to be 'city' focused, for example the improvements of train networks, railway stations, etc. Image one (below) shows the extent of the railways within Northern Ireland and, as is clear to see, there is no railway covering much of Northern Ireland.



(Image 1)

With regards to bus services and other methods of public transport, there has been a huge decrease in funding for public transport organisations due to increasing budgetary pressures, which has had a negative impact on those people who rely on public transport.

Within the Fermanagh and Omagh District there have been a number of services cut whilst others have been reduced significantly, leaving some rural communities quite isolated when it comes to transport provision and transport networks.

It is worth remembering that within the Fermanagh and Omagh District there are 14 wards within the 'Top 50' most deprived areas within Northern Ireland with regards to 'Proximity to Services', including 5 within the 'Top 10'. [NISRA Statistics].

This clearly shows that within the District transport, and indeed rural transport, is a key issue for residents, many of whom would rely on rural transport and rural transport networks in order to access key services.

Accessibility

With regards to accessibility, a rural public transport system is vital for the community. There are many older people, persons with disabilities and people on

low-level incomes who do not have access to their own vehicles and as such are heavily reliant on public transport. In many rural areas if an individual has a hospital appointment for example in Enniskillen at 12.00noon, they may have to get a bus before 8.00am and wait for a return bus home until after 4.00pm. Taxis and other forms of transport may not be cost effective or viable as the return journey may be 30 - 40 miles.

Improved Communication and Consultation

The Council believes that any change to services, either the removal or addition of services to areas/communities needs to be communicated more effectively. This better communication will allow the community to be better prepared for any changes.

All communication and consultation should be undertaken both at a national level, as well as a local level with local community groups being consulted and involved in any issues which may affect them.

Partnership Working

The Council views it as essential that the Department works more in partnership with its partners/stakeholders within the public, private and community transport services, to make them easier to understand and ultimately improving people's confidence in using them.

There are various possibilities for the Department to look into in order to facilitate improvement in the provision of transport in rural communities for example partnership working (or a more 'joined-up approach').

A key example of this would be the fact that there are a number of transport schemes which are available for those who are based in urban areas enabling those who are not able to use public transport to get around more freely. The Department should look into ways that schemes such as these can be facilitated within rural areas, and in particular these which seem to continually suffer by the removal of key services, including transport services.

People/Groups with Disabilities

The Council as part of its statutory duties works very closely with various groups that represent people with disabilities. The Council's Accessibility Steering Group had the following comments to make on the public consultation, namely:

- Ensure Bus and Railway Station pathways/routes are accessible for people who use wheelchairs and people with poor mobility. For example, keep dropped kerbs clear and have automatic door openings where doors are heavy, and so forth.

- Possibility of having Bus and Railway Station toilets opened earlier in the mornings and later at night. There are issues where people arriving between buses and late at night they may have no access to toilet facilities. It would be helpful if the accessible toilets could be opened slightly earlier and later to provide people with disabilities and older people the opportunity and more time to access toilets.
- It would be helpful to have the Bus and Train Timetables and Information provided in alternative formats. For example in Braille, Audio, Easy-Read and Large Print.

Bus Travel

It's essential that people within rural communities are not disadvantaged when it comes to transport facilities or the transport network, in comparison with those who reside in urban areas.

Within the Fermanagh and Omagh District there is a very poor public transport network with other major towns and cities in the local area. For example, the two major population centres within the Council District (Enniskillen and Omagh) are connected by a minimal number of services. Monday - Friday sees seven services per day however, on Saturdays there are only three services and only one service on a Sunday (each way).

Bus services to other, more rural, parts of the District are even more limited with some only receiving one service per day.

Following communication with a local Community Transport organisation, the Council has particular concerns about the implications of this strategy for older people and for people with disabilities, particularly within rural communities, and also the fact that there is an apparent lack of clarity in relation to the future of the Community Transport sector. As this response outlines above, the Fermanagh and Omagh District is comprised of some very deprived areas with regards to 'Proximity to Services' as well as having some areas particularly adversely affected by transport budget, and service, cuts.

The majority of users of rural Dial a Lift and Disability Action Transport Service are older people. Last year Community Transport services provided approximately 220,000 rural Dial a lift passenger trips, 150,000 urban Disability Action Transport trips plus 390,000 rural group passenger trips throughout N. Ireland. Over 97,000 of these trips were within the Fermanagh and Omagh district, clearly showing how reliant the residents of the district are upon Community Transport services.

Other Transport Methods

One method of transport, to which the Council believes that the Department should improve access to within Northern Ireland, and in particular within the Fermanagh and Omagh District, is cycling.

Currently there significant numbers of cyclists utilising the roads, and many of the existing local roads are not suitable for this form of transport.

The Council urges the Department to work with other agencies and organisations to improve the infrastructure sufficiently in order to facilitate the numbers of cyclists on the roads.

Conclusion

To conclude, Fermanagh and Omagh District Council welcome the Department's consultation on the 'Accessible Transport Strategy 2025'.

Overall, the Council essentially supports the aims outlined in the Accessible Transport Strategy, however has outlined some issues within this response document to which the Department should pay additional attention to.

The Council also recommends that the Department should ensure that the Strategy is rolled out efficiently and consistently across Northern Ireland, ensuring that those in rural areas (such as many parts of the Fermanagh and Omagh District) are not disadvantaged compared to those in more urban areas.