Department for Infrastructure
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RE: Foundations for a Better Future - Including people

14 March 2025

Dear Minister Kimmins

The Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland (COPNI) welcomes the Foundations for a Better Future initiative from the Department for Infrastructure. Your acknowledgement of infrastructure as "the key when it comes to unlocking economic potential, addressing rural imbalance, and delivering the positive changes" is encouraging, as is your commitment to improving social inclusiveness under the "Including People" foundation. I have outlined, in the sections below, COPNI's response to your department's questionnaire.

Identifying challenges

Getting to and from public transport

The Department's Travel Survey for Northern Ireland (2021) offers an indicative view of how long it takes for people in Northern Ireland to get to their closest bus stop. Almost a fifth (19%) of people in Northern Ireland live beyond a fourteen-minute walk from their closest stop. In rural areas this increases to 39%.[1] Having to walk to bus stops can be an issue for older people, particularly in areas where walking infrastructure is degraded or doesn't exist. Even if there are car park provision at stations or in town centres, older people are more likely to have a long-term health condition that can impact their willingness or ability to drive. Older householders are also less likely to own a car.[2] [3] As such, access to private transport should

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[1] Department for Infrastructure (2021) *Travel Survey for Northern Ireland In-depth Report*. Available at: https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk%2Fsystem%2Ffiles%2Fpublications%2Finfrastructure%2Ftsni-in-depth-report-2021-tables.xlsx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK

[2] Government Office for Science (2015) *How can transport provision and associated built environment infrastructure be enhanced and developed to support the mobility needs of individuals as they age?* Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a81973b40f0b6230269820f/gs -15-7-future-ageing-transport-er23.pdf

[3] Census (2021) *Health Problem or Disability (Long-term) by Age*. Available at: https://build.nisra.gov.uk/en/custom/data?d=PEOPLE&v=DISABILITY_DVO&v=AGE_SYOA

therefore not be assumed or seen as an alternative to safe active travel infrastructure. This is an important consideration in light of the Department's most recent budget, which proposed only a limited level of road maintenance and removal of funding for footway enhancements for poor footways for 2024/25. [4]

Using public transport

The Department's Travel Survey suggests 20% of the total population have difficulty travelling due to physical disability. This issue is more prominent among older age groups (a third of all older people have trouble travelling due to disability).[5] IMTAC have set out some of the accessibility issues experienced by older people. For example, competition for the wheelchair user's space is an issue, as it can often be occupied by prams or other public transport users with additional needs.[6] Academics such as Brendan Murtagh and others,[7] highlight the importance of improving transport as part of the wider built environment:

> *"Translink argued that public transport was the 'weakest link in the chain' because they cannot always get access to footpaths for low floor buses, integrate with sheltered accommodation or plan more flexible services where there are known concentrations of older people. For transit and health authorities, this is the type of programme coupling that is needed to think through, in problem stream terms, how a city might be future-proofed. Similarly, housing officials argued that we need to re-examine transport options for older people, the growth in suburban mobility and how roads, footpaths and public spaces will need to be re-imagined."*

The previous Department for Regional Development also pointed to general issues in public transport. It noted that just over two fifths (41%) of the population felt public transport did not

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[4] COPNI (2024) *Budget 2024/25 Equality Impact Assessment Public Consultation*. Available at: https://copni.org/assets/general/resources/July-2024-COPNI-response-to-Department-for-Infrastructure-Budget-2024-25-Equality-Impact-Assessment-Public-Consultation.pdf

[5] Department for Infrastructure (2021) *Travel Survey for Northern Ireland In-depth Report*. Available at: https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk%2Fsystem%2Ffiles%2Fpublications%2Finfrastructure%2Ftsni-in-depth-report-2021-tables.xlsx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK

[6] IMTAC (2023) *Comments from Imtac about the Department for Transport (DfT) Call for Evidence on the Review of the Public Service Accessibility Regulation 2000 (PSVAR)*. Available at: https://www.imtac.org.uk/files/imtac/2023-09/PSVAR%20CfE%20response%20%28Final%20Version%29.pdf

[7] Murtagh and others (2022) *Planning for an ageing city: place, older people and urban restructuring*. Available at: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/23748834.2021.1914506

meet their needs.[8] Given this, a further consideration for the Department should be to what extent public transport is seen as a viable travel option that meets the needs of the population.

Moving around our towns, villages, and rural areas

Age NI recently completed a study with Queen's University Belfast that looks at healthy ageing in rural and coastal communities in Northern Ireland.[9] In this study, transport and travel was discussed in focus groups, particularly the physical effort required to get from point A to B. A key takeaway from this report is the requirement to tackle accessibility issues holistically, looking at transport alongside other aspects of the built environment.

> *"In coastal areas, we are blessed with the coastline – but can you get there? And can you stay there? When you visit the coast, toilets and seating come up a lot – older people need suitable toilet facilities and changing facilities. It has a knock-on effect. If it was better designed, families with kids with disabilities would benefit from it. A drop kerb would help and would improve access for older people."*

> *"No matter what topic - especially health - transport has huge relevance. Our own research shows that most people rely on use of individual cars as public transport is not great and even if there is a bus, can you get there? And then there's no footpath to the bus stop, and no cover at the bus stop. And irregular services. People depend on transport for getting to the GP and hospital appointments. If you can't afford to get yourself there on time, there will be an impact on your physical health. Lack of suitable transport has a detrimental impact on interaction and participation. And it's the less well-off who struggle, the more isolated and deprived."*

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[8] Department for Regional Development (2015) *Attitudes of Disabled and Older People to Public Transport*. Available at:
https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2Fpublications%2Fdrd%2Fattitudes-of-disabled-and-older-people-to-public-transport-nov-2014-jan-2015.xls&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK

[9] Age NI (2024) *Healthy Ageing in Rural and Coastal Areas of Northern Ireland: Challenges and Solutions*. Available at:
https://www.qub.ac.uk/sites/space/Filestore/Healthy%20Ageing%20in%20Rural%20and%20Coastal%20Areas%20of%20Northern%20Ireland%20Challenges%20and%20Solutions.pdf

Access to healthcare persists as a significant issue for older people without cars.[10] This issue has broader implications for healthcare spend,[11] and should be tackled in collaboration with the Department of Health.

Better accommodating older people

Getting to and from public transport

As outlined above, older people are more likely to be limited by a health condition than other age groups and are less likely to have access to a car. This presents a significant challenge for access in rural communities. For safe active travel infrastructure to be put in place, most rural roads would need to be widened. The distribution of our rural communities means that this work would require significant planning, community engagement, and would cause significant disruption to rural road networks. While COPNI expects that this type of development will be linked to the Department's updated Active Travel Plan,[12] it is also important to look at what is achievable in the short-term.

In the immediate term, I would highlight the positive work of community transport in Northern Ireland, of which the Department for Infrastructure is the primary funder. It is important to look at what current services exist, and how this can be maximised to increase rural connectivity and access to bus stops and transport hubs. I would point the Department towards two reports, Driving Change: Shaping the Future of Community Transport in Northern Ireland[13] and Mapping Northern Ireland: State of the Sector Report 2025.[14] Both studies offer a strong foundation on which the Department can develop its community transport plans to better accommodate older people. This includes information on the strengths and limitations of the network currently. COPNI believes that by addressing these challenges, community transport will be well placed to improve access to central public transport routes.

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[10] Belfast Telegraph (2023) *Five hours and four buses: What it's like accessing healthcare in rural NI if you can't drive*. Available at: https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/health/five-hours-and-four-buses-what-its-like-accessing-healthcare-in-rural-ni-if-you-cant-drive/1841865676.html

[11] BBC (2024) *'We must scrutinise' £40m healthcare spend on taxis*. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c888nm7kkzgo

[12] COPNI (2025) *Consultation response to Department for Infrastructure Active Travel Delivery Plan*. Available at: https://copni.org/assets/general/resources/February-2025-COPNI-response-to-Department-for-Infrastructure-Active-Travel-Delivery-Plan.pdf

[13] Community Transport Association (2025) *Driving Change: Shaping the Future of Community Transport in Northern Ireland*. Available at: https://ctauk.org/sites/default/files/2025-02/Primary%20Members%20Report%202024.02.25.pdf

[14] Community Transport Association (2025) *Mapping Northern Ireland: State of the Sector 2025*. Available at: https://ctauk.org/sites/default/files/2025-02/Mapping%20Northern%20Ireland.pdf

Using public transport

To better understand how older people use public transport I would propose that the Department engages with the age sector networks and age friendly coordinators in respective council jurisdictions.[15] By engaging with these groups, the Department should be able to determine the unique barriers in different council areas, and also the perception of public transport among older people, which in itself represents a barrier to public transport use. In terms of accessibility, Transport for London offer guidance on how best to design bus stops. Practical measures include, for example, that they are properly signposted, that there are service markings for buses, that there is shelter, seating, and appropriate lighting.[16] IMTAC also offers guidance on accessibility in the Northern Ireland context and should be engaged.

Moving around our towns, villages, and rural areas

There are several publications relevant to the scope of the Department's ambitions that should inform future intervention. Alongside the recent work of Age NI, that offers localised knowledge relating to older people living in rural and coastal communities,[17] relevant academic papers specific to Northern Ireland include:

- Robert J. Hagan's qualitative study that looks at rural transport users in Northern Ireland.[18]
- Walsh and others' study that looks at rural old age exclusion as a multidimensional construct, drawing on data from over 100 interviews with older people aged 59-93.[19]

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[15] Age NI (no date) *Age Sector Networks*. Available at: https://www.ageni.org/services/age-sector/age-sector-networks/

[16] Transport for London (2017) *Accessible bus stop design guidance*. Available at: https://content.tfl.gov.uk/bus-stop-design-guidance.pdf

[17] Age NI (2024) *Healthy Ageing in Rural and Coastal Areas of Northern Ireland: Challenges and Solutions*. Available at: https://www.qub.ac.uk/sites/space/Filestore/Healthy%20Ageing%20in%20Rural%20and%20Coastal%20Areas%20of%20Northern%20Ireland%20Challenges%20and%20Solutions.pdf

[18] Robert Hagan (2019) *Getting out of the house: the use of community transport as a third place for rural-dwelling older adults*. Available at: https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/623761/7/hagan%2019%20final%20e.pdf

[19] Kieran Walsh and others (2019) *Rural old-age social exclusion: a conceptual framework on mediators of exclusion across the lifecourse*. Available at: https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/9CD0246B27DE8E8B2E96E1BC45F31DE4/S0144686X19000606a.pdf/div-class-title-rural-old-age-social-exclusion-a-conceptual-framework-on-mediators-of-exclusion-across-the-lifecourse-div.pdf

- Olujoke Fakoya and others' study that looks at loneliness alleviation from the service provider perspective. This study outlines some of the barriers to reducing loneliness in a Northern Ireland setting.[20]
- Walsh and others' study that looks at the role of informal practices, across the state, private, voluntary, and family and friend systems in addressing social exclusion in rural communities across Ireland. This study is informed by 62 community stakeholders from 10 communities across both jurisdictions.[21]
- Murtagh and others, who completed two studies, looking at practical barriers to age-friendly policy in the Belfast setting.[22] [23]

More general guidance from the UK includes:

- Age UK's Future of Transport in an Ageing Society report.[24]
- The UK Government Office for Science research and analysis on the future of transport and ageing.[25]
- The Department of Transport's rural strategy call for evidence summary.[26]
- The Institute for Public Policy Research Scotland's recent study that looks at promoting fair and green transport in rural Scotland.[27]

[20] Olujoke Fakoya and others (2023) *Interventions aimed at Alleviating Loneliness and Social Isolation among the Older Population: Perspectives of Service Providers*. Available at: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1155/2023/5613153

[21] Kieran Walsh and others (2014) *Exploring the Impact of Informal Practices on Social Exclusion and Age-Friendliness for Older People in Rural Communities*. Available at: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/casp.2176

[22] Brendan Murtagh and others (2022) *Age-friendly cities, knowledge and urban* restructuring. Available at: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13563475.2021.1920374

[23] Brendan Murtagh and others (2022) *Planning for an ageing city: place, older people and urban restructuring*. Available at: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/23748834.2021.1914506

[24] Age UK (2015) *The Future of Transport in an Ageing Population*. Available at: https://www.ageuk.org.uk/siteassets/documents/reports-and-publications/reports-and-briefings/active-communities/rb_june15_the_future_of_transport_in_an_ageing_society.pdf

[25] Government Office for Science (2015) *Future of ageing: transport and mobility*. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/future-of-ageing-transport-and-mobility

[26] Department of Transport (2020) *Future of Transport: rural strategy – call for evidence*. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/calls-for-evidence/future-of-transport-rural-strategy-call-for-evidence

[27] Institute for Public Policy Research (2024) *Wheels of Change: Promoting Fair and Green Transport in Rural Scotland*. Available at: https://ippr-org.files.svdcdn.com/production/Downloads/Wheels-of-change-ID-May-24.pdf?dm=1728042360

Also notable are several government initiatives in development across Northern Ireland to which COPNI has provided policy responses. Collaboration with these teams in government will assist in identifying where priorities overlap. Responses include:

- January 2025 COPNI response to DAERA consultation on the establishment of a Just Transition Commission.[28]
- February 2025 COPNI response to DfC Review of Architecture and the Built Environment Policy stakeholder questionnaire.[29]
- February 2025 COPNI response to Department for Infrastructure Active Travel Delivery Plan.[30]

I hope that the information I have provided above supports the objectives of the Department. If you would like to engage with COPNI further, or have any questions on the information provided, please get in touch.

Many thanks

Conor Tinnelly

Policy Advice and Research Unit

Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland

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[28] COPNI (2025) *Consultation response on the Establishment of a Just Transition Commission.* Available at: https://copni.org/assets/general/resources/January-2025-COPNI-response-to-DAERA-consultation-on-the-establishment-of-a-Just-Transition-Commission.pdf
[29] COPNI (2025) *Review of Architecture and the Built Environment Policy – Stakeholder Questionnaire.* Available at: https://copni.org/assets/general/resources/February-2025-COPNI-response-to-DfC-Review-of-Architecture-and-the-Built-Environment-Policy-Stakeholder-questionnaire.pdf
[30] COPNI (2025) *Consultation Response to Department for Infrastructure Active Travel Delivery Plan.* Available at: https://copni.org/assets/general/resources/February-2025-COPNI-response-to-Department-for-Infrastructure-Active-Travel-Delivery-Plan.pdf