



# Get on board!

**Accessible Transport Summary Report:  
a research study of the public transport  
needs of blind and partially sighted people  
in Northern Ireland.**

**RNIB**  
Northern  
Ireland

Supporting people  
with sight loss

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# Accessible Transport

The Royal National Institute of Blind People Northern Ireland (RNIB NI) has just completed a comprehensive research study of the public transport needs of blind and partially sighted people across Northern Ireland. The findings are concerning and we are demanding immediate action from the relevant authorities to address the issues that have been uncovered.

Safe, accessible transport is central to the wellbeing, independence and day-to-day lives of the 31,000 blind and partially sighted people currently living in Northern Ireland. It is not a luxury. It is a fundamental right. This is acknowledged by both the Department for Regional Development (DRD) and Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMdfM).

Northern Ireland has made great strides in improving access to transport, and DRD is currently preparing a new ten-year Accessible Transport Strategy. However, there is still a long way to go: barriers to travel are still the most common issue reported by people with sight loss. This causes frustration, despair and in many cases problems with the physical, social and mental wellbeing of those with sight loss.

Our research highlights areas of serious concern that need to be urgently addressed with almost half of our respondents reporting negative emotional impacts such as feeling “isolated”, “despondent” and “frustrated” as a result of inadequacies in the public transport system.

We are calling on all relevant authorities, transport companies and politicians to act on our recommendations in order to ensure that people with sight loss have their rights upheld.

## Our research has uncovered four key areas where barriers still exist in Northern Ireland: affordability, availability, accessibility and awareness.



### Affordability

Currently whilst blind people can travel free on public transport, partially sighted people have to pay half fare. This is unfair. Partially sighted people invariably experience the same barriers as those who are blind, for example not being able to drive, and excluding them from a full rebate has no logical basis.

In addition, companions do not get any rebate on fares, unlike in the Republic of Ireland where they receive a free travel concession. This again is unjust as many people with sight loss need a friend or relative to help them find their way around.

We are calling for the same system that is in place in the Republic of Ireland where partially sighted people and companions of blind and partially sighted passengers travel free of charge.

In some areas, the cost of community transport is too high for those on low incomes. Our evidence highlighted some areas where costs are as high as taxi fares.

Where people with sight loss are completely dependent on community transport to get around, this can have serious detrimental consequences: isolation, loneliness and depression – as well as grave practical consequences such as missing medical appointments and impinging on social independence.

At a time when public transport is increasingly infrequent or not available at all in some rural areas, it is imperative that investment is made in community transport to make it affordable for those on limited incomes.

### Availability

Availability of public transport has long been an issue in rural areas.

Budget cuts are further reducing the availability of public transport, especially in rural areas, leaving people isolated and vulnerable.

People with sight loss are especially prone to mental health issues, as isolation and loneliness can take their toll. Denying the fundamental right to get out and about only makes this worse. We believe that the impact on people with sight loss needs to be factored into decisions on transport.

Lack of buses in evenings and weekends due to cuts impact all but those living in Greater Belfast, while in some areas community transport is not even available for hospital visits.

Community transport schemes, though valued and welcomed, are inconsistent across Northern Ireland, so whether you get a good service or not is a postcode lottery. Both these areas need to be addressed at both a Government policy and operational level.



## Accessibility

Audio announcement services are currently being implemented on the Metro buses in Belfast. This is welcome and the feedback we have received from people with sight loss is very positive.

However, the general lack of audio provision across Northern Ireland remains the biggest single barrier to blind and partially sighted people using buses.

Given the success of the Belfast Metro scheme in Belfast it is imperative that DRD and Translink immediately roll this great service out across Northern Ireland.

Drivers also need to talk to people with sight loss and tell them when they have reached their destination. People with sight loss should not miss their stops because this basic service is not always provided.

Many bus stations now have audio systems in place. However our research uncovered that they are not always consistently in use. There are many instances of people with sight loss missing their buses because announcements about departures were never made.

Other issues include poor signage at bus stops and stations, the need for better online accessibility and improved physical accessibility to some vehicles. Even Translink's own website was criticised for not being user-friendly: it has not been properly adapted for the needs of people with sight loss.

This is especially disappointing as guidance around accessibility is readily available to designers and we would be happy to help and advise on best practice.



## Awareness

There is a need for visual awareness training for transport staff. This applies equally to front line staff at stations, on trains and buses as well as planners and management. This will ensure that the needs of those with sight loss are factored into decision making at every stage, from the initial planning of services through to implementation.

All those involved need to fully understand that making transport accessible means paying attention to every stage of a journey, whether part of it is on foot, access to bus stops, shelters and stations as well as the experience on board.

## What needs to be done?

Progress has been made, and we acknowledge that. However many deficiencies remain. Access to transport is a right and not a privilege and there can be no excuse for continuing with practices that are causing stress, anxiety and in many cases impacting on the social, physical and mental wellbeing of those with sight loss.

We want your support to ensure that the relevant authorities act without delay in implementing the following recommendations we want DRD to adopt in its new Accessible Transport Strategy.

Until they do, people with sight loss will continue to be unfairly discriminated against, many will be isolated in their homes, facing social exclusion and neglect and deprived of the rights enjoyed by other citizens.

## Recommendations

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### We want to see:

- Free travel for partially sighted people and free travel for companions of blind and partially sighted passengers
- Adequate Government funding for community transport
- The abolition of community transport cancellation fees
- A strategic and consistent approach to community transport provision across Northern Ireland, ending the current postcode lottery
- More frequent Translink services in rural areas, particularly during the evenings and weekends
- The extension of audio announcement systems across all Translink bus services
- Audio systems being used to its full capacity within bus and train stations
- Fully accessible signage and timetables
- The development of a Smartphone travel app for blind and partially sighted people



- Talking sign systems installed across bus and train stations as well as bus stops in Northern Ireland
- Translink replace all of its high-floored buses as soon as possible
- A redesign of Translink's website to make it more accessible to people with sight loss
- Government and transport providers sign up to RNIB's Bus Charter
- The continued delivery of "Stop for Me, Speak to Me" access advice sessions for Translink and community transport providers through RNIB NI's Campaigners Active Network
- The incorporation of RNIB's visual awareness training module 'Visibility' into Translink's accredited disability equality and awareness training
- Identification of RNIB NI as a strategic partner within DRD's new Accessible Transport Strategy, feeding into the development and implementation of the strategy's action plans.

Every day thousands of people across the UK are campaigning for change at local, national and international level.

You can find out about all the campaigns we work on, by visiting [rnib.org.uk/campaigning](http://rnib.org.uk/campaigning)

For further information about our campaign work in Northern Ireland or to request the full version of our Accessible Transport Research Report, please contact our Campaigns team on 028 9032 9373 or email [campaignsni@rnib.org.uk](mailto:campaignsni@rnib.org.uk)

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