

Accessible Transport Strategy 2025

Comments by

Northern Ireland Environment Link

20th November 2015

Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL) is the networking and forum body for non-statutory organisations concerned with the environment of Northern Ireland. Its 62 Full Members represent over 90,000 individuals, 262 subsidiary groups, have an annual turnover of £70 million and manage over 314,000 acres of land. Members are involved in environmental issues of all types and at all levels from the local community to the global environment. NIEL brings together a wide range of knowledge, experience and expertise which can be used to help develop policy, practice and implementation across a wide range of environmental fields.

These comments are made on behalf of Members, but some members may be providing independent comments as well. If you would like to discuss these comments further we would be delighted to do so.

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NIEL welcomes the opportunity to comment on DRD’s Accessible Transport Strategy 2025. Specific questions are dealt with below.

Do you think that there is a need for an Accessible Transport Strategy?

Yes. Many households in Northern Ireland do not have access to a car (40% in Belfast), and rely on public transport networks to fulfil their travel needs. We need a transport system that is genuinely inclusive and, because of the wide-reaching positive impact of such a system, fosters inclusivity in wider aspects of society (as well as having benefits across other sectors, for example, health). Well-functioning places, of which transports routes (of whatever mode) are a key element, pave the way for robust and stable societies.

Our vision for a new Accessible Transport Strategy is to have a transport network in Northern Ireland that is inclusive and accessible to all. Do you agree with this?

NIEL agrees with the vision.

THEME 1: Enhancing the accessibility of the public transport network

This theme is targeted at improving the accessibility of the public transport network. At a strategic level we aim to deliver this theme by maintaining and improving the public transport fleet and researching how to improve the coverage of the public transport network. Do you agree with this approach?

Private car dependency creates negative impacts economically (congestion, fuel price vulnerability, infrastructure costs, health costs), socially (social exclusion for non-drivers, ill health, loss of community) and environmentally (GHG emissions, air pollution, water pollution).

Creating greater accessibility to, and coverage of, the public and active transport network, while reducing private car use, requires increased investment in public transport. Table 1 shows the budget split in these spend areas from 2004 – 2014 (resource and investment), showing that budget continues to be heavily weighted in favour of roads.

Table shows roads / public transport budget split from 04/05 – 13/14¹

Resource:

	04/05	05/06	06/07	07/08	08/09	09/10	10/11	11/12	12/13	13/14
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Roads	73.2	71.6	69.4	69.3	70.1	67.3	66.7	68.5	68.0	71.9
Transport	26.8	28.4	30.6	30.7	29.9	32.7	33.3	31.5	32.0	28.1

Investment:

	04/05	05/06	06/07	07/08	08/09	09/10	10/11	11/12	12/13	13/14
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Roads	66.6	63.9	71.4	62.0	75.1	83.3	82.0	60.5	73.2	87.8
Transport	33.4	36.1	28.6	38.0	24.9	16.7	18.0	39.5	26.8	12.2

¹ <http://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/questions/writtensearchresults.aspx?&qf=0&qfv=1&ref=AQW%2025354/11-15>

THEME 2: Improving the accessibility of the wider transport network

This theme is targeted at improving the accessibility of the wider transport network. At a strategic level we aim to deliver this theme by improving the pedestrian environment and examining options to deliver integrated transport. Do you agree with this approach?

NIEL strongly endorses this. Public transport is one piece of the travel 'puzzle', but we would encourage an integrated transport system that makes it easy to use of other forms of transport over private cars – whether walking, cycling, or public transport use (road or rail). Hubs/nodal points will be important for joining up different modes of transport and facilitating multi-modal journeys.

The Connswater Community Greenway is an excellent emerging example of how this could work, allowing greater connectivity through an area of Belfast with multiple access points, the potential for park and cycle/walk points, nodes where people can exit the greenway and avail of public transport connections. NIEL would advise integration with, for example, the Belfast Bike scheme. Such a corridor of 'Green Infrastructure' through Belfast has multiple benefits, with inclusivity and ease of movement through the city a key element. NIEL would emphasise the opportunity here to work with the Bicycle Unit in DRD on integrated delivery for accessibility.

Beyond Greenways, however, the on-road cycling network requires consistent and continuous improvement. Broadly speaking, cycling is on the increase in NI, which brings benefits for health, sport and the environment. However, when compared to other parts of the UK, and especially to other areas of Northern Europe, it is clear that a lot more can be achieved in NI in terms of cross-sectoral policy objectives. 'Retrofitting' of the cycle network in many urban areas of NI has led to access and safety issues which discourage many from taking up cycling as a realistic mode of commuter transport. Because of this retrospective installation of the network it is common to see, for example, cars parking across cycle lanes. Likewise, the green cycle boxes at traffic lights (which took considerable investment) are often ignored by drivers of motorised vehicles. Many of these issues stem from a car-dependant culture, where awareness of cyclists is poor. As a result, many potential cyclists are discouraged from using our current cycling network through fear of personal injury.

We would highlight synergies with the health and wellbeing agenda too, emphasising that accessible and integrated transport can deliver multiple benefits and savings to society across many different Departments and policy areas. The strategy could potentially include linkages to health and health strategy bodies in order to improve outdoor activity as a means to treating health problems through the environment. Related to this is the issue of making outdoor/countryside recreation more accessible to society through an integrated transport network – NIEL would urge that the Strategy includes this. Use of these shared outdoor spaces is important for social inclusion and cohesion.

Accessibility to the transport network, in its widest sense, for disadvantaged groups should also be a priority for government.

THEME 3: Enhancing the customer experience

This theme is targeted at improving the passenger experience. At a strategic level we aim to deliver this theme by examining how those who provide transport services are trained to deal

with customers; by encouraging mentoring or travel training schemes and by working with the voluntary sector to explore the potential of new technology. Do you agree with this approach?

Yes, NIEL broadly agrees with this approach.

Customer experience is vital for the success of transport services. The use of private cars is seen as the 'easy' option – public transport and use of walking and cycling networks needs to be just as easy. DRD should explore innovative ways to encourage the use of public transport in NI through ease-of-use for customers. To this end, we recommend that new ticketing systems are smart and fully integrated across different modes of transport throughout Northern Ireland. For example, a contactless debit card system that automatically calculates best value for passengers (based on their usage of the service) is technically feasible (introduced to London in 2014) and would greatly increase ease of travel on public transport by, for example, removing any requirement for cash, ticket queues and avoiding the need to top-up smart cards.

THEME 4: Enhancing the accessibility of information

This theme is targeted at improving the accessibility of information. At a strategic level we aim to deliver this theme by looking at ways to improve the detail of travel information, how it is presented, and its availability within different formats or media. Do you agree with this approach?

NIEL broadly agrees with the approach outlined. Different organisations should work in partnership to improve accessibility to information by using, for example, social media.

THEME 5: Working in collaboration with partners and stakeholders

This theme is targeted at improving working with partners and stakeholders to deliver transport services aimed at the needs of the user. At a strategic level we aim to deliver this theme by examining new ways to maximise meaningful engagement and participation. Do you agree with this approach?

NIEL agrees with the approach – meaningful engagement with stakeholders will be crucial to the success of the Strategy. It will be beneficial to work in partnership with organisations that can have a positive impact on the implementation of the Strategy. NIEL can, for example, act as a conduit to the environment sector, and we work to demonstrate the multiple benefits of accessible, integrated, transport networks. As such, NIEL can add value to the delivery of the Accessible Transport Strategy.

NIEL would also encourage DRD to hold regular focus groups with, for example, disadvantaged groups, where feedback can be given and approaches adjusted accordingly.

Specific Actions Recommended:

- **We would encourage transport planners to engage with spatial planning at Council level on an ongoing basis.** Land use and transport planning must be integrated more fully - for example, more compact redevelopment is required in cities and towns to increase walkability and encourage cycling, with development focussed around public and active transport nodes. Urban sprawl to accommodate population growth (as evidenced any many

global cities such as Mumbai or Mexico) results in increased car usage with negative consequences, such as air pollution and more road traffic accidents. However, lessons from successful cities (e.g. Freiburg) show that compact urban areas can have a positive impact on human health and safety, with vehicles making more frequent stops and typically travelling at slower speeds. Cities with lower average car speeds and less complex intersections are safer for cyclists and pedestrians, and contribute to reduced energy usage and pollution. Compact urban design can also encourage physical activity. Dense cities such as Amsterdam, New York, and Copenhagen offer residents more opportunities to cycle or walk.

- **Adopt mode-shift targets (aimed at reducing journeys by private car year on year).**
- **Increase investment in integrated public transport networks (including road/rail, cycling and walking).**
- **More dedicated (and safer) cycle lanes in urban areas, particularly in the form of green infrastructure networks.** We commend the model of Connswater Community Greenway, and would urge the funding and development of similar green infrastructure corridors that run from suburbs to city centre.