

6 June 2008

Concessionary Fares Team
Department for Regional Development
Room 3-09
Clarence Court
10-18 Adelaide Street
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Response to Public Consultation on Free Travel for People aged 60-64

This submission represents a common viewpoint from the Eastern Area Transport Forum. This Forum consists of key transport agencies in the area, and was established to lead and monitor actions on transport in the *Healthy Ageing:InterAction* plan launched by Belfast Healthy Cities in May 2006. The Forum is currently widening its remit to promoting older people's transport issues and needs more generally in the eastern area.

The response has been collated by Belfast Healthy Cities on behalf of the Forum, which welcomes the opportunity to comment on the proposals.

The Transport Forum strongly supports the proposal to introduce free travel for people aged 60-64. This will significantly support the mobility of all persons aged 60 and over, and ensure equality between all older people. The existing age limit of 65 has placed a number of people at disadvantage, particularly single women who have retired at 60 and are thus reliant on pensions and benefits for income. We note that this point has been voiced strongly by a number of older people's groups and are pleased that their views have been taken on board.

We also emphasise that extending free travel in Northern Ireland to all people aged 60 and over will contribute to the health and wellbeing of older people, as it can help reduce isolation, improve opportunities to socialize and participate in society, and increase independence. However, to maximize these benefits it is also important to consider accessibility, ie. how user friendly services are and how well they connect older people to the places they want to go, at the times they need.

We suggest that these points should be central to route and timetable planning, particularly as older people are a key user group for public transport. Key needs

of older people include improved provision of flexible services, more orbital routes in Belfast and overall improved service frequencies in the evenings and at weekends. Such improvements would also benefit other groups often reliant on public transport.

We note that the review of the current Concessionary Fares Scheme was conducted without any user consultation. In our view, this significantly limited the review, as it was unable to chart reasons for low uptake of the SmartPass or consider factors that would improve it. We strongly recommend that older people, as well as other users, are consulted in future when services are reviewed or new services planned. This not only contributes to improving their health and wellbeing by engaging them in planning services, but also ensures that services meet their needs. Appropriate services, in turn, maximize utilization and as such potential health benefits from improved accessibility and mobility, which provides value for money by reducing expenditure on health and social care.