

THE ADDED VALUE OF ACCESSIBLE PUBLIC TRANSPORT FOR ALL IN THE CONTEXT OF DEMOGRAPHIC AGEING

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ABSTRACT

European transport systems play a key role in the transportation of people and goods, and are essential to Europe’s prosperity and most importantly, to achieve a full European citizenship through enhancing freedom of movement. Despite the progress made in recent years in improving accessibility for all, it is estimated that 10 to 20 percent of European citizens, including people with disabilities and older people, are still experiencing barriers and reduced accessibility to transportation. These barriers can lead to a lack of opportunities and limited possibilities for employment, social and leisure integration and full participation in society. The demand for accessible transport will increase as a result of the rapid growth in the number and proportion of older persons aged 60 years and above.

This presentation aims at explaining what are the views of older people and the need for an accessible public transport for all. It presents the current barriers they still face (financial, scarcity of public transport in rural areas and lack of an accessible built environment, among others). It also offers guiding principles on which public transport should be based: accessibility, safety, affordability, availability, acceptability.

1. INTRODUCTION

European transport systems play a key role in the transportation of people and goods, and are essential to Europe’s prosperity and most importantly, to achieve a full European citizenship through enhancing free movement. With a European and worldwide ageing population it is important to recognise that accessibility to public transport provides an “essential link to friends, family and the wider community”. In other words, it is the passport to independent living for all.

The demand for accessible transport will increase as a result of the rapid growth in the number and proportion of older persons aged 60 years and above. In 2010, 70 million people will be over the age of 65. The European Commission’s Green Paper (2005) “Confronting demographic change”¹ and the subsequent Communication (2006) “The demographic future of Europe – from challenge to opportunity”² indicates that the new generation of older people will be more active, more mobile, consume more goods and services and wanting to

¹ http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/news/2005/mar/comm2005-94_en.pdf

² http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/news/2006/oct/demography_en.pdf

participate actively in social life. Furthermore, rising expectations for access to goods and services are expected to further increase the demand for accessible public transport facilities.

There are factors that influence older people's mobility: "physical ability and individual characteristics and the transport environment" (Marsden et al 2007 p. 5). These factors must be taken into account by transport designers, local and regional transport authorities when planning and providing transport services for older people. It is therefore important for transport designers, local and regional authorities to understand the needs of older people and actively involve and consult them (especially representative organisations) in the transport and decision making process. "Wherever feasible the views of older people should be sought and, even better, they should be fully involved in the planning, implementation, and dissemination of local accessibility audits and actions plans" (Burnett, A. 2005, p. 4).

2. WHAT ARE THE TRANSPORT ISSUES FOR OLDER PEOPLE?

2. 1. Accessibility

Despite the progress made in recent years in improving accessibility for all, it is estimated that 10 to 20 percent of European citizens, including people with disabilities and older people, are still experiencing barriers and reduced accessibility to transportation. According to the European Union (EU) definition in the Bus and Coaches Directive³, people who have mobility impairments are addressed as People with Reduced Mobility (PRM): "passenger with reduced mobility means all people who have difficulty when using public transport, such as disabled people (including people with sensory and intellectual impairments, and wheelchair users), people with limb impairments, people of small stature, people with heavy luggage, elderly people, pregnant women, people with shopping trolleys, and people with children (including children seated in pushchairs)". This definition immediately gives an idea of all the possible different needs that "users" of public transport may have in relation to access.

The largest barriers to older people's mobility are psychophysical⁴ related impairments associated with walking and accessing public transport such as: uneven and narrow pavements, boarding/alighting from buses and trains, steps in stations, lack of or inadequate pedestrian crossings⁵, lack of accessible information (e.g. ticketing, travel information, language accessibility, customer service, lack of awareness of special transport services, etc.).

"Accessibility should be achieved through thoughtful designs and system planning for the whole population" (Suen, L and Michell, C., 2000, p. 1). In other words, taking into account the principle of "Design for All". A Design for All approach (mainstreaming the needs of the

³ Directive 2001/85/EC relating to special provisions for vehicles used for the carriage of passengers comprising more than eight seats in addition to the driver's seat, and amending Directives 70/156/EEC and 97/27/EC - http://europa.eu.int/eur-lex/pri/en/oj/dat/2002/l_042/l_04220020213en00010102.pdf

⁴ "Health is also perhaps the most universal factor affecting on outdoor mobility generally, independent of country, region and gender" Mollenkopf et al (2005 p. 302).

⁵ "The lack of pedestrian crossings on busy roads may force people to walk extra distances, and they can be intimidated by the speed and density of traffic on roads they need to cross. Short traffic light phases at intersections can make it difficult for older people to cross a road at a time, and turning vehicles often fail to give way to pedestrians" Davey, J and Nimmo, K (2003). Available at <http://www.ltsa.govt.nz/research/older-people/chapter3.html>

widest population) to include the majority of people in society and to fight discrimination must be the way forward. This will help to lower what the World Health Organisation calls the “disability threshold”.

The development of information and communication technology can provide new and improved opportunities for providing accessible transport. However, it is important to recognise that the development of technology does not need to be complex but can and should be user friendly.

As mentioned before accessibility for older people entails having accessible public transports, and build environments but it also means having neighbourhood amenities⁶ such as access to shops, post offices, hospitals, leisure places and community activity as all these contribute to well-being. Governments, regional and local authorities must take this aspect into account in their overall accessibility strategy and action plans. “There is ample evidence of “distance decay” amongst older people – i.e. that people are put off from using services if the journey seems too far, too time-consuming, too costly, too dangerous or too difficult” (Burnett, A. 2005, p. 11).

2.2. Safety

For older people safety is a crucial aspect when travelling by public transport. In general, older people worry about their safety and are reluctant to take public transport due to factors such as fear of crime, or falling over and becoming injured. In a study carried out by Marsden G. et al (2007 p.18) “many of the participants who had fallen on the bus or felt threatened in a certain environment did not put themselves in that situation again”. Older people are an easy target group and transport/route planners do not usually take safety issues into account when planning a route as they persist in creating isolated stops, with bad lighting, no shelter and with no seats or benches for waiting periods. This prevents older people from taking advantage of public transport facilities especially in cold seasons. Other factors preventing older people from travelling are public transport overcrowding, the attitude of transport providers and drivers (e.g. driving off before passengers are seated), transport design⁷ (lack of hand rails, lack of (comfortable) seats) and other travellers attitudes (e.g. sitting in designated areas for older people, pregnant women, disabled people or children). All these practices can increase the risk and perception of risk of accidents and exclude older people from public transport systems.

2.3 Affordability

The cost of travelling is still a major barrier for many old people, whose limited resources are insufficient to allow them to travel as often as they would like. This is particularly important for older people, who have low incomes and are at risk of poverty (Zaidi et al 2006) and are

⁶ In the UK about 2500 post offices are expected to close by 2009 because of rising losses and fewer people using the network. Most young people now pay their bills via phone or internet banking; cash point machines or direct debits to pay their bills. The most affected areas are rural areas where the vast majority of older people and pensioners live some of them enable to use new technologies to retrieve their pension. Scraping local amenities will lead to thousands of old people to isolation. http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/press_20070517 ; http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/6176929.stm

⁷ According to the study carried out by Marsden G. et al (2007, p. 25) on transport and older people “Lack of grab rails at the front [of a bus] meant there was nothing to hold when they got on. This was particularly the case with more modern buses that had an area for wheelchairs or prams at the front. The latter often spilled out of their allocated area meaning that older people had to negotiate their way around them whilst the bus was moving. The seats were also perceived to tip forward and be made of slippery material contributing to some participants sliding off them the bus braked”

sometimes unable to reach basic and necessary facilities (hospitals, supermarkets, pharmacies, etc.) only reachable by public transport. This is particularly true for example, for older people living in rural and peripheral areas which are often more deprived areas than urban areas “those living in inner cities areas do benefit from easy access to central city facilities” (Burnett, A. 2005, p.20). There is a need to ensure that older people on low incomes can afford public transport.

There are many actions that can be taken by public policy (through public financial support to help meet costs) and transport providers through flexible and creative pricing strategies (concessionary fare schemes, off peak travel prices, etc.) to reduce these types of barriers. Taxis rather than buses, trains or private cars are an alternative mode of travel usually preferred by older people because of mobility or timetable constraints and these are sometimes the only public transport alternative in small towns and rural areas⁸. “However, there is evidence that high fares and uncertainties about how much the trip will cost are deterring potential users.”

2.4. Availability

The impossibility of driving a car due to the physical related impairments (failing eye sight, hearing, arthritis, etc.) is one of the main reasons why older people give up driving which leaves them reliant on public transport and on lifts from families and friends. The loss of the freedom to drive makes older people feel dependent on others and on the existing public transport system. This means less flexibility and freedom to travel along with the psychological impact of loss of independence. This is felt to a higher degree in rural areas and small towns where public transport is frequently lacking. Older people who can no longer drive suffer from greater isolation from family, friends and the overall community. Improvements in accessibility, flexibility and the availability of public transport that take into account and meeting the needs of an ageing population is essential for greater social inclusion. Transport planners must plan routes that suit the overall community. This will also mean for public transport authorities either reduced demand for door-to-door services or better use of these vehicles by people who could never otherwise use mainstream public transport.

2.5. Acceptability --- Attitudes towards public transport

Having a car is considered to be a social status symbol and is hugely important for older people. It is a symbol of wealth and independence. Using public transport is sometimes perceived as an indicator of low socio-economic status (Davey, J. and Nimmo, K. 2003). Older people are sometimes reluctant to take public transport not only because of the change of their physical health conditions but especially because of the challenges that public transport poses to them. Older people who have used public transport throughout their lives can easily cope and are more open to considering the various transport alternatives than those who that have always used the car as their main mode of transport. This perception needs to be shifted by public authorities through public awareness campaigns. Older people

⁸ As Davey J. and Nimmo, K. (2003 p. 12) state in their study “Taxis therefore have some strengths as a transport option for older people, but they are likely to be attractive mainly for short trips because of the cost. They may be useful in small towns where public transport is not available. If taxi transport is to fulfil its promise, it will be necessary to find ways of making taxis more attractive for older people and changing their perceptions. It will also be important to make taxi drivers aware of issues for older people, such as dealing with passengers with limited mobility and those using a wheelchair or walking frame.”

need to know what type of public transports are available, how accessible these are and where they will take them.

Another factor for public transport authorities to take into account is that older people are a heterogeneous group and their levels of mobility and therefore transport needs change over time. “Younger people (approximately 65-74), with good levels of mobility, are usually able to access public transport (i.e. walk to a bus stop and get in and out of a bus). However, older people (75 or 80) tend to use public transport only if they live close to a route, especially where disability and health issues are involved. “Young-old” people are often more willing than “old-old” people to adapt to public transport. Their higher levels of activity provide an incentive” (Davey, J. and Nimmo, K. 2003, p. 15).

Public transport usage also has to be seen from a gender perspective. Older women are more likely to consider public transport as an alternative than men. This may be related to the role of women over the course of their life due to domestic responsibilities (e.g. taking their children to school, household shopping, etc.), absence of a driving licence or the existence of only one household car used by the partner to go to work everyday (Devey, J. and Nimmo, K. 2003).

3. THE ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

The European Union has a role to play in promoting equal opportunities for all in all sectors of society including public transport. The strong emphasis in the EU Treaties and the revised Lisbon strategy makes it clear that if Europe is to be one of the most competitive economies in the world older people need to be given opportunities to contribute to the economy. In other words, a full European citizenship is to be achieved through enhancing free movement.

In 1993 the European Commission produced an action plan for accessible transport and in 2001 published its White paper on transport policy⁹ which underlined accessibility as a priority and setting up guidelines. The European Union also adopted in 2001 Directive 2001/85/EC commonly known as the “bus/coach directive” for passenger vehicles with over 8 seats. This mainly focussed on safety but also included provisions for accessibility through technical solutions and combined with vehicle adaptation. Within this framework Member States are free to implement the most suitable mobility solutions in vehicles with less than 22 seats. Vehicles with more than 22 seats must comply with specific requirements (concerning steps, seats and space for PRM, pictograms for fitted vehicles, non-slip surface floors, wheelchair accommodation, retraining systems for wheelchairs, door control, lighting, boarding aids, lifts and ramps).

The EU funded COST project on accessibility to heavy rail developed by European Conference Ministers of Transport and International Union of Railways gathered best practices and guidelines for better services and Directive (1996/48/EC) for high speed rail interoperability which made reference to requirements detailed in the technical specifications for interoperability was adopted in 2002. These initiatives have both served to take forward the EU transport accessibility agenda.

⁹ White paper transport policy – time to decide http://europa.eu.int/eur-lex/en/com/wpr/2001/act370en01/com2001_0370en01-01.pdf

In 2006 the mid-term review of the European Commission's 2001 White Paper on Transport,¹⁰ the Commission proposed a number of new tools to achieve its objective of sustainable and more accessible transport, for example through Intelligent Transport Systems. It is believed that the use of new technologies in all transport modes will cut costs, boost energy efficiency and improve security by providing new services to citizens such as real-time management of traffic flows and tracking possibilities. Of course, this technology will have to be user friendly to avoid any type of exclusion, especially of the largest growing group of the population i.e. older people who often have more difficulties in dealing with new technologies.

The Commission will also launch a Green Paper on Urban Transport which is foreseen for September 2007. Mobility and accessibility in urban areas is an everyday problem for Europe's citizens. The Commission has collected the different views of stakeholders through internet consultations and technical workshops prior to the launch of this Green Paper. The results of this preliminary consultation show that public transport improvements should be a priority for the EU and should include the development and implementation of joint solutions.

Air transport as a right enjoyed by all has now been further emphasised by Regulation 1107/2006 which ensures access to air transport for persons with reduced mobility, giving access to air transport comparable to that of any other passengers flying from airports in the EU. The Regulation's provisions cover three areas: equal treatment of persons affected by reduced mobility; free assistance in all EU airports; and assistance on board. The first provision has already been in place since 26 July 2007 and the two later provisions will be implemented from 26 July 2008. The EU Member States will have to set up enforcement bodies responsible for ensuring that the Regulation is applied on their territory. This Regulation gives the possibility to any person with reduced mobility and who considers that their rights with regard to air travel have not been respected to bring the matter to the attention of the air port management or the airline in question. In case of an unsatisfactory response, a complaint can be made to the national enforcement body designated by the Member State¹¹.

4. CONCLUSION

The relevance of transport in ones life regardless of age is undeniable. Public and private transport has become part of people's everyday lives and is driven by globalisation, innovation, the development of new technologies and derived services. Recent developments within EU legislation and around the world are leading to the recognition of access to public transport, as a fundamental right. It is therefore essential that public transport authorities listen to the needs of their citizens, actively involve them and take into account the various guiding principles on which public transport should be based on: accessibility; safety; affordability; availability, acceptability. A sustainable public transport strategy cannot be driven without accessibility considerations. This is why a holistic approach to transport which takes into account the wider context of society is needed on a European-wide scale.

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