

Transport Programme for People with Disabilities

Background

The Department for Regional Development (DRD) has for some years provided funding for the provision of specialised transport services for people with disabilities through its Transport Programme for People with Disabilities (TPPD). DRD became concerned about geographical inconsistencies in the programme's coverage and the consequent equality issues. We therefore appointed consultants to carry out an independent review of the Programme.

Approach

Following receipt of the consultants' report, DRD developed a series of proposals for the future direction of the programme. In order to ensure that the views of interested parties could be fully appreciated, DRD decided to undertake a consultation that would allow those parties the opportunity to comment on the findings of the review and on the Department's proposals.

The feedback from the consultation allowed the Department to refine its proposals and develop a final strategy for the future direction of the programme. DRD then obtained Ministerial approval on the proposed way forward and subjected the proposed programme to an Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) consultation, which concluded that it had positive equality impacts on people with disabilities.

Outcome

Following consultations, DRD proceeded to implement a number of improvements to the TPPD. These included:

1. The extension of Door-to-Door transport services for people with disabilities who find mainstream public transport either difficult or impossible to use. These services were extended from their current bases in Belfast and Londonderry to every urban area with a population of 10,000+.
2. The development of a better framework for providing assistance to Shopmobility schemes, the establishment of a Northern Ireland Federation for Shopmobility and a part time development officer.
3. The continued sponsorship of the Northern Ireland Transport Advisory Committee, which advises Government on issues relating to people with disabilities and the transport system.
4. Continued support of accessible public transport services in Bangor, Belfast and Londonderry (Easibus).

Lessons Learned

A number of key lessons were learned through this policy review process:

- Widespread consultation was valuable, together with one-on-one discussions with key stakeholders. Initial ideas were honed, resulting in better delivery of frontline services.

- The experience of other regions is valuable, helping to identify pitfalls and best practice.
- Despite consultation and considerable improvements being made, it is impossible to please all of the people all of the time: vested interests can react jealously when their role is reviewed, or if the mechanism for funding them is reconsidered.
- Once a way ahead has been decided, and it is clear that it is the best way forward, it is best to move decisively to ensure that improvements are made.
- A cross departmental team would have been useful for delivering certain aspects of the change programme, even if it only had to meet a handful of times.

Summary of Key Features of Policy Process

The Department was keen to future proof the Programme and ensure that it effectively met the needs of its target customers. Consultation was key to this. At times, hard decisions had to be made and it was clear that some of (the loudest!) advice was not the best advice. Decisions have to be made objectively and be realisable.

The policy will be kept under close review. It is anticipated that this will occur formally each quarter during the first two years of implementation, with amendments made as necessary.