



'HANDS OFF OUR TRAVEL PASS'

1. Context

The National Positive Ageing Strategy¹ identifies transport as a priority area in addressing ageing. The first goal of this Strategy is to 'Remove barriers to participation and provide more opportunities for the continued involvement of people as they age in all aspects of cultural, economic and social life in their communities according to their needs, preferences and capacities' (Department of Health, 2013: 19). The provision of an accessible and affordable transport system is identified as an objective in delivering this goal. The Strategy states that people should be enabled 'as they age 'to get out and about' through the provision of accessible, affordable, and flexible transport systems in both rural and urban areas' (Op.Cit).

¹ Department of Health (2013) *National Positive Ageing Strategy* - <http://health.gov.ie/blog/publications/national-positive-ageing-strategy/>

While many older people have access to car, others are unable to drive due to health reasons or the high costs of maintaining a car. The proportion holding a drivers licence also falls off with Census 2011 highlighting that 60% of those aged 70 to 79 years and 30% of those aged 80 years and older having a drivers licence. This is a lower proportion to the younger age cohorts (i.e. 79% amongst those age 40 to 49 years). Car ownership is also lower amongst households aged 65 years and older (72%) than those younger households (for instance 89% amongst those age 45 to 49 years).

Free Travel Scheme Overview and Statistics

The Free Travel Pass, a universal entitlement to those aged 66 years and over, is an essential support for older people. The provision of a Travel Pass is made available under the conditions of the Free Travel Scheme which was introduced in 1967. The objectives of this Scheme are:

- To act as a mechanism to encourage older people and people with disabilities to remain independent and active in the community, therefore reducing the need for institutional care
- To facilitate mobility to those who do not have access to cars
- To ensure good use of transport infrastructure
- To encourage people to use public transport thus reducing traffic congestion, pollution and the cost of extending the road and parking infrastructure.

Under the Programme for National Recovery 2011 to 2014, funding for the Free Travel Scheme has been frozen at 2010 levels. This is illustrated in Table 1 which also shows a growth in the number of recipients during this period. Ultimately this has led to a situation whereby more people are using this support without an increase in funding. For instance, in 2009 the per person funding was €108 whereas this had fallen to €100 in 2012.

Table 1 Expenditure and Number of Travel Pass Recipients

€'000 Number of recipients

| | | |
|-------------|--------|---------|
| 2009 | 73,489 | 678,477 |
| 2010 | 74,094 | 699,164 |

| | | |
|-------------|--------|---------|
| 2011 | 75,597 | 726,412 |
| 2012 | 75,518 | 754,731 |

Source: Department of Social Protection, Statistical Information on Social Services (various years)

A working group comprised of representatives from the National Transport Authority and the Departments of Social Protection, Transport and Public Expenditure Reform has just completed a review of the scheme. The group has made a recommendation and it is expected that this decision may be announced as part of Budget 2015.

2. Survey of Members

In response to the review of the Free Travel Scheme being carried out, Age Action carried out a survey of our members on the Free Travel Pass earlier this year. The purpose of the survey was to highlight the importance of this support and to further understand how older people use their Travel Pass.

The findings from the survey indicate that the Travel Pass is an essential support for older people as it enables them to participate in social activities, access goods and services as well as combating isolation. A brief presentation of the key findings is outlined below. The Survey was distributed to members through our monthly magazine, *Ageing Matters*, and at regional meetings held earlier this year. A total of 516 individuals replied to the survey with responses coming from 25 of the 26 counties.

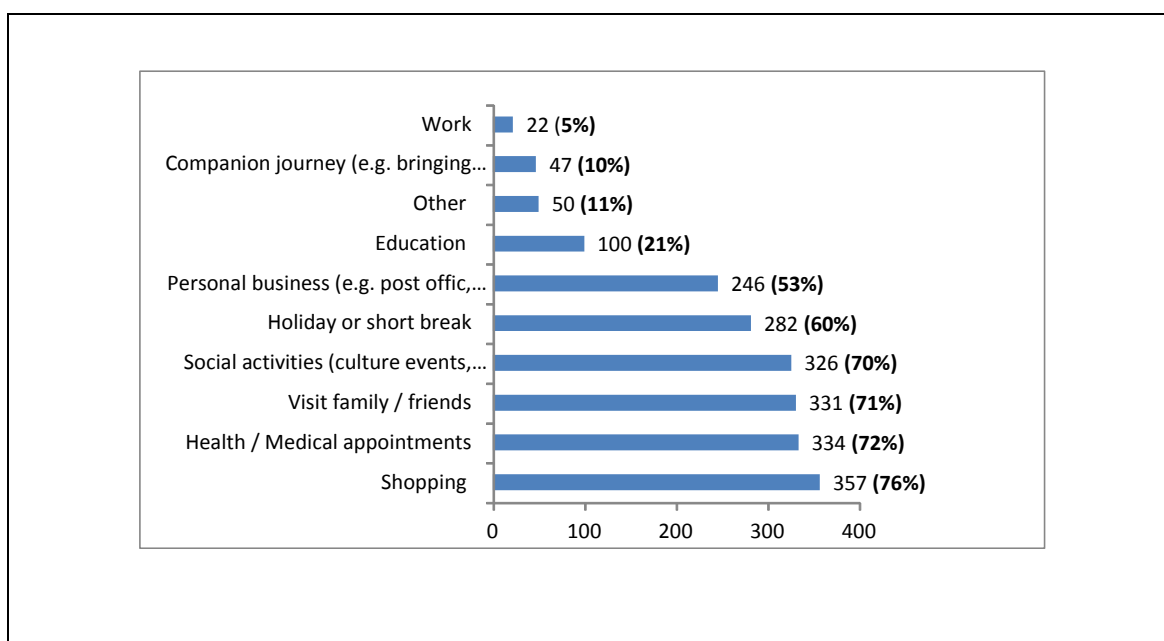
Level of usage of the Free Travel Pass

The majority of respondents to our survey, 95%, had a Travel Pass with the remaining 5% accounted for, we assume, as being under the age of 66, the age at which universal entitlement begins. Amongst those with a Travel Pass, 78% stated that they used their Pass at least once a week with 30% stating they used it on a daily basis. When asked about the number of journeys they took with their travel pass in the previous week, an average of 6 journeys was reported. The total journeys undertaken by those responding to this question was 2,735.

Type of journeys undertaken

It is evident from both the results of this survey and from talking to our members that the Travel Pass enables older people to participate in a wide range of activities in their local areas including engaging in activities which have an economic benefit to local businesses (and beyond). Respondents were asked about what type of activities they use their Travel Pass for (multiple responses were allowed). Figure 1 illustrates the most popular uses of the Pass by our respondents.

Figure 1: Type of activities respondents use the Travel Pass for



As can be seen from the diagram, the top three responses focus on a mixture of economic and social activities with 76% of respondents indicating that they use their pass when going shopping; 72% when attending health / medical appointments; 71% when visiting family and friends and 70% to attend social activities such as cultural events.

The significance of the Travel Pass for participating in these activities was further emphasised when we asked respondents what activities they would not be able to participate in if they no longer had a Travel Pass.

Table 2 Activities respondents would no longer be able to carry out / participate in?

| Activity | % unable to participate |
|--|--------------------------------|
| Work | 3% |
| Companion journey (e.g. bringing a child to school) | 9% |
| Other | 12% |
| Education | 17% |
| Personal business (e.g. post office, bank, library) | 43% |
| Shopping | 55% |
| Health / Medical appointments | 57% |
| Holiday or short break | 61% |
| Visit family / friends | 65% |
| Social activities (culture events, meal out etc.) | 68% |

Source: Age Action Survey of Members

As can be seen from the table above large proportions of the sample indicated they would no longer be able to participate in social activities (68%), visit family and friends (65%) or take a holiday or short break (61%).

Modes of Transport

We also asked respondents about the modes of public transport they use and whether they had access to private transport (i.e. own or have access to a car). The most frequent modes of public transport that are used by older people with a Travel Pass are Irish Rail (n=344); Dublin Bus (n=332) and the Luas (n=316) – this may somewhat reflect the high level of responses received from Dublin (n=238). With regard to car ownership half of the total respondents (49%) have their own car although almost one-third (31%) indicate that they are reliant solely on their travel pass.

Importance of Travel Scheme for older people

Finally, respondents were asked if they had any comments regarding the Travel scheme. These comments provide a deeper insight into the importance of the Travel Pass for older people. Respondents emphasised the importance of the Pass in addressing isolation as one individual noted *“I would be totally isolated without my bus pass”* while another commented *“it keeps me in touch with family etc which I could not afford to meet up as often”*.

The economic benefits for businesses was also emphasised *“people who use the free travel scheme are also a welcome source of income to the local economy and business owners in the places they visit”* while another commented *“a lot of over 60s go away for bridge breaks in the West. We all have travel passes and travel by train to the hotels. If we had no passes we could not afford to travel”*.

While half of the sample indicated that they had their own car, as individuals get older health and related issues can mean that this is not the preferred option for travel. Respondents raised various issues regarding safety; *“please note that I no longer wish to drive. I wouldn’t feel safe on the road”*; health issues *“I have a car and drive at the moment, but I do have a number of serious eye conditions will probably not be in a position to use a car in a few years time, therefore, it is vital that I have access to the Travel Pass”*; along with the issue of cost *“I do have a car. I only drive local. I do not drive at night and I’m thinking of giving up my car because I really can’t afford to keep it”*.

Finally, many respondents recognised that the Travel Scheme has multiple benefits to older people and society as a whole

“The scheme enables older people to engage in social activities, take short breaks, remain active and combat isolation. While some people own cars, with age, they become nervous, are scared to drive on busy roads and are totally dependent on public transport”.

5. The Future of the Free Travel Scheme

We ask that the Free Travel Scheme is maintained as a universal benefit to all those aged 66 years and over. The latest available information to Age Action

on this review is that three options are proposed in order to create savings from the Free Travel Scheme. These are:

1. A restriction on the hours during which the pass may be used
2. A small subscription charge
3. Restricted to one mode of transport

Age Action is utterly opposed to the implementation of any of these changes to the Free Travel Scheme. The restriction of the hours of use will be problematic for older people travelling to hospital and other care appointments as these are often scheduled early in the morning. In addition, for those in remote rural areas accessing appointments later in the day this can still mean travelling on early morning peak time services in order to reach urban towns and cities. Furthermore, the National Positive Ageing Strategy notes the importance of public transport linkages to major health facilities.

Given the raft of stealth charges and reduction in key supports for older people as outlined in this submission, a subscription charge would be yet another attack on the incomes of older people. While it may be proposed that this charge would be nominal, we have already seen a substantial increase in the prescription charges and while in itself this may not be a high charge for those on a low fixed income with a range of other charges to pay it can have a detrimental impact.

The final, proposal, to restrict usage to one form of public transport (of the user's choosing), is in our view unworkable. Our survey indicated that older people use their travel pass on more than one mode of transport. Many respondents indicated that they use both Dublin based services (such as the Luas and Dublin Bus) as well inter-county connections provided through Irish Rail and Bus Eireann. Given the importance of the Travel Pass for accessing health appointments, it can be assumed that more than one mode of transport is often used to attend hospitals particularly for those outside of Dublin who may travel to Dublin on the Train and then are required to take a connecting service via Dublin Bus or Luas to a hospital. Restricting older

people's usage of their Travel Pass would restrict their mobility and their ability to participate in a range of activities.