

***Alternative Methods of Assessing Eligibility for Concessionary Travel -
Research Findings***

Summary of Findings

- The national free concessionary travel scheme is helping to reduce costs for some disabled people, but not all disabled people are eligible and others are unable to take up the benefits.
- Current assessment methods for concessionary travel have significant problems:
 - There is widespread inconsistency in the take up of concessionary travel by disabled people.
 - Health practitioners assessing applicants note that they are almost entirely reliant on what the applicant tells them.
 - Health practitioners work within increasingly tight budgets, and in the absence of targeted financial incentives, concessionary travel assessments are not the highest priorities.
 - There is no information output from the assessment process to transport providers on the extent to which the needs of disabled people are being met.
- New assessment approaches for concessionary travel are needed to ensure better value for money, improved targeting of concessionary fares, and to ensure that concessionary fares policy complements wider transport policy.
- Government policy identifies that disabled people are best able to identify their own needs including through self-assessment. Adoption of self assessment is currently fostering improved management and customer focus amongst health and social services practitioners. Self-assessment for concessionary travel eligibility could help to foster similar skills development amongst transport professionals.
- Disabled people are heavily reliant on door to door transport which is not included in the national scheme. It is therefore important that the administration of the national scheme is closely linked with local initiatives such as taxicard schemes, Dial-a-Ride, and community transport.
- Investment in the national concessionary travel scheme has not been matched by an equivalent increase in investment for door to door transport, so there is a risk that the new scheme may be widening the gap between the travel opportunities available for mobile and less mobile groups. This makes the need for new assessment methods of people's needs and capabilities relatively more important.
- Efficient assessment relies on: simple qualification procedures, support from specialists for more complex issues, clear accountability for correct decisions, and regular auditing and monitoring to identify improvements and tackle irregularities.
- The impacts of concessionary travel investment on wider transport objectives for the development of bus networks, social inclusion and improved accessibility are important. They need to be better understood and linked into transport plans at national, regional and local levels.
- Practical approaches towards transport self-assessment need to be piloted locally. Further work is needed to design the pilot or pilots, but issues to be tested include: the scope and accuracy of user and professional inputs, user demand, costs, staff training, joint assessments with other transport schemes such as dial-a-ride, links to wider common shared assessments of needs and capabilities, and complementary investment to maximise the benefits of the new national scheme.

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 The Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland has suggested that a move away from the current medical model of disability to a more social approach would help to ensure national policy aims were better reflected in concessionary fares delivery. The Scottish Executive has cited the dearth of research evidence and noted that consideration could be given to a pilot project to look at its viability for the future.

1.2 This research has reviewed the evidence on assessment methods to inform the debate. It was undertaken by Derek Halden Consultancy between December 2005 and April 2006 and comprised: a literature review, consultation with stakeholders, a review of the Scottish Executive concessionary travel consultation responses, surveys and case studies, and recommendations for the next steps.

1.3 Further detail of the evidence, references and analysis which supports these findings can be found in the final report for MACS "Alternative Methods of Assessing Eligibility for Concessionary Travel".

2.0 The National Concessionary Travel Scheme

2.1 The national concessionary fares scheme has tightly defined eligibility criteria for disabled people. Since the assessment methods for these criteria are largely integral to the scheme design, the scope for alternative assessment methods is as much to determine the travel needs and capabilities of disabled people as for assessing participation in the national scheme.

2.2 Although the national scheme is marketed as being for elderly and disabled people, in practice only about a third of disabled people are eligible. Even for those that are eligible, there are still often barriers to use, including vehicle design, limited bus network coverage, difficulties accessing bus routes from home, and other challenges relating to people's personal needs and circumstances.

2.3 Disabled people rely heavily on door to door transport, but only registered routes for demand responsive services are included in the national scheme. In many local areas, supplementary schemes for disabled people based on demand responsive services have been implemented (Taxicard and Dial-a-Ride), but this provision varies across the country and eligibility criteria are determined locally.

3.0 Assessment Methods

3.1 Efficient assessment methods for concessionary travel have four main elements:

- Qualification criteria - Screening of basic information about the applicant, usually with a self-completion form. In many cases funding authorities can rely on benefits data to allocate concessionary travel passes, e.g. from the assessment of Disability Living Allowances.
- Specialist assessment - Additional information not easily provided by the applicant, such as medical tests, which need to be considered alongside the user provided information. These are only likely to be needed in a small minority of cases.
- Certification - Making decisions on eligibility and issuing passes. Current procedures for the national scheme are not as clear as they could be on whether medical practitioners or transport authorities are ultimately responsible for ensuring correct certification.
- Verification - A check or audit to validate the accuracy of the process. Whether or not self-assessment is used a regular audit and monitoring process is needed to

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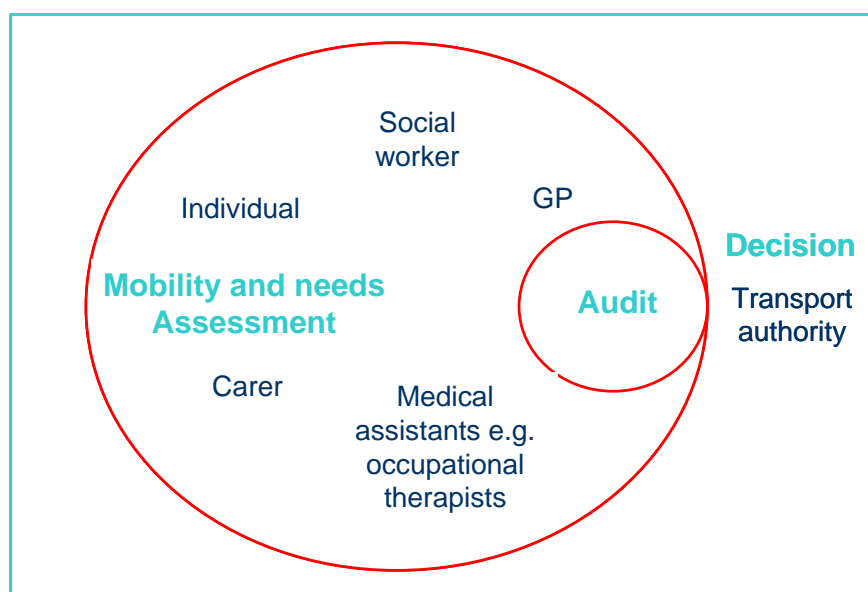
identify improvements and to identify inappropriate users who have been able to “beat the system”.

3.2 Improvements to ensure that disabled people are assessed more effectively in the future include:

- Greater use of self-assessment at qualification stages ensuring that the user’s perspective is the starting point for assessment procedures.
- Clearer accountability in transport authorities for ensuring funding decisions meet people’s needs
- More rigorous audit processes to ensure secure and equitable participation and use.

3.3 Wider adoption of self-assessment helps to foster a partnership between providers and users by encouraging and enabling people to take responsibility for the declarations they make; rather than only rewarding those who are able to find loopholes in “the system”. Self-assessment provides the flexibility for users to either undertake assessment themselves or seek advice from medical or other professionals as shown in Figure 1. The transport authority can perform both decision and audit functions (a similar role to the Inland Revenue for self-assessment income tax) or commission external auditors. The dearth of data on current take up and use of concessionary travel passes is a significant concern.

Figure 1 – Stakeholders in Assessment by Function



3.4 There is also scope to introduce more user choice to assessment and improve efficiency. Different users will prefer completing written forms, providing responses over the telephone, face to face discussions, and on-line information provided via the internet. Given the range and nature of different disabilities affecting travel it will be important for providers to offer as many of these options as possible.

4.0 Assessment in the context of transport delivery

4.1 The national concessionary travel scheme provides benefits for disabled people, but is only one element of public transport delivery. Consistent assessment methods are needed for all transport provision, including taxi-card, dial-a-ride and other disabled transport provision.

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4.2 National policy and legislation require transport authorities to work with partners to ensure that the needs of all travellers are met, and increasingly accessibility plans define joint working arrangements within which single shared assessments can be delivered.

4.3 Despite the progress to link the new national concessionary travel scheme in Scotland with the results of existing assessment (for example with the Disability Living Allowance mobility component), for a significant number of people further assessments are needed. To build consensus towards a shared approach it will be necessary to work with each stakeholder group to overcome potential obstacles:

- Many transport professionals favour assessments by medical practitioners. They are concerned about their own ability to correctly interpret the needs of disabled travellers, so training may be needed.
- Medical professionals favour self-assessment and point out they are unable to make satisfactory eligibility assessments consistent with the transport context. Improved referral guidance may therefore be needed from transport authorities when seeking specialist professional input.
- Users and their representatives are keen that scarce resources are targeted to those in greatest need and require transparency on the expertise and rigour applied in decision making. Participation in assessments should be actively supported to overcome any stigma associated with voluntary registration.
- Community and campaign groups are keen to champion greater responsibility for individuals and could be used to support individuals unsure about self-assessment.
- Transport operators want a consistent method that creates a stable and affordable marketplace for travel. Confidence in clear and robust approaches needs to be built.

5.0 Developing and piloting approaches

5.1 With so many complex linkages and potential obstacles, it will be important to develop new approaches on a small scale to demonstrate the benefits with a pilot or pilots to:

- Offer alternative assessment approaches including scoping the required training and support for stakeholders.
- Investigate the extent to which concessionary travel supports the needs of disabled people, and use the new assessments to guide users towards complementary schemes with equivalent benefits to the national scheme.
- Identify and demonstrate how assessments can assist with the administration of concessionary travel, bus market development, and fostering a more customer responsive culture in transport authorities.

6.0 Conclusions

6.1 As the budget holding organisation for concessionary travel, transport authorities are ultimately accountable for delivering value for money and ensuring that the needs of all disabled people are being met.

6.2 Some assessment of eligibility for concessionary travel is efficient and is already co-ordinated with wider assessments. However, significant improvements are needed to ensure greater comprehensiveness, better targeting of marketing, more choice of assessment method, and better links with wider transport policy for disabled people.