



inspire
wellbeing, ability, recovery

Response to the Transport Strategy 2035 Consultation

September 2025

INTRODUCTION

In 2024, Inspire submitted its response to the Northern Ireland Executive's consultation on the draft Programme for Government. Entitled "It Doesn't Have To Be Like This. Let's Change It", this document (see appendix) represented and amplified the views of the people who use our services, a principal tenet of our current strategic plan.

With vital input from our Service User Reference Forum (comprising people from across our services), we developed five policies most important to those we support. One of these was an integrated, accessible and affordable community transport network.

AN OPPORTUNITY FOR CHANGE

We welcome the Department for Infrastructure's (DfI) consultation on the Transport Strategy 2035. This extremely wide-ranging statement of intent focuses on the development of a transport system designed to cultivate economic growth, address regional inequalities and foster inclusivity. Furthermore, we also commend its focus on climate change, health and wellbeing.

However, we want to be clear in stating that successful strategies are backed by measurable targets, dedicated resourcing and meaningful stakeholder engagement. This is no different.

We are pleased to note the inclusion of community transport in this draft strategy and appreciate the DfI's commitment to an ongoing review of the operation of the scheme, the benefits it provides and its future as a more integrated part of the wider public infrastructure. This is a crucial step if the service is to deliver for people throughout Northern Ireland.



COMMUNITY TRANSPORT IS A LIFELINE

Community transport supports the individuals Inspire serves. For those who live far from adequate – or any – public transport, or who find it difficult to travel on buses and trains, community transport is a lifeline. At its best, the programme promotes social cohesion and connects people to the things they need and the places they want to go.

When we talk to Inspire service users, a theme that often emerges is one of connection. They frequently refer to the friends that they have met through Inspire and the sense of belonging that those relationships create. These bonds are important to maintaining positive mental health. Such moments are very significant.

Indeed, for some, a visit to the nearest Inspire hub may be the only human contact that they have during the week. Getting out to explore the world constitutes a thread of hope and the difference between a good day and a bad day.

In preparing this submission, we canvassed opinions of current community transport arrangements at an Inspire community wellbeing service in Mid Ulster. The feedback was almost wholly positive. Aside from a few specific complaints, the programme was viewed as being fundamental to many a person's day-to-day life. It is, in theory, an affordable alternative to more expensive and infrequent options, particularly in rural locations.

The people who use our services have the right to make choices that revolve around inclusion, independence and participation. They want to be ready for whatever life brings with it, from attending medical appointments to enjoying social opportunities and cultural events. Community transport, at its best, can mitigate the social and economic costs of ill health, loneliness and isolation.



Unfortunately, the community transport network continues to suffer from insufficient funding. In place of suitable alternatives, some people tend to rely on a patchwork of relations, neighbours, private vehicles, taxis and often irregular bus and train schedules.

Our members have expressed fear about the future viability of the scheme in an era of tighter government budgets and many remain unnerved by the threat of cuts levied against it in 2023.

While they welcomed the Minister for Infrastructure's intention to protect community transport, which she announced in May, they were keen to stress that whatever savings the Executive must make, those economies cannot come at the expense of this resource. In fact, the amount of money appropriated for community transport needs to be increased in order to attract more drivers and expand the service.

BUILD ON SUCCESS

We strongly urge the Minister and the Executive to secure the viability of community transport and invest in it. As stated above, it is especially essential to supporting and sustaining rural populations.

An accessible, integrated and fully funded community transport system, designed in partnership with those it is most likely to help, should empower people and enable them to prosper.

We look forward to the publication of the DfI's final strategy, as well as future engagement with the Minister, other elected representatives and departmental officials.



KATHY'S STORY

To illustrate the human impact of community transport provision, we have laid out a case study below.

Kathy has been attending an Inspire community wellbeing hub for the last 12 months.

While Kathy has a history of mental ill health, she was affected by the death of a close relative last year and sought out support from her GP, who, in turn, referred her to Inspire.

Kathy has benefitted greatly from her time as an Inspire member. She attends the service almost every day and has discovered a new purpose in her life. She has forged new friendships with the Inspire team and her peers, individuals who know what it is like to struggle.

Our hubs serve as places for people to meet, talk and start their recovery journeys. They drop in throughout the day to participate in activities, group sessions or one-to-one support. Staff will often arrange day trips to interesting places or Inspire events.

Kathy relies on community transport to access all of these things. She lives in a rural area, far from the nearest bus route and taxis are prohibitively expensive. For a small annual subscription fee, Kathy is able to utilise the scheme at no extra cost, enabling her to get to appointments, visit family and attend the Inspire service on a daily basis.

The ability to do all of this is an essential part of her health and wellbeing. For Kathy – and others – community transport plays a major role in her efforts to stay well and contribute to society.

She identifies a few problems with the scheme, such as occasionally sporadic availability and a small pool of drivers. However, she would be more than prepared to double her membership fee if it allowed community transport to expand and prosper.



WHO WE ARE

Inspire is an all-island charity and social enterprise, and our aim is wellbeing for all.

We work alongside people living with mental ill health, intellectual disability, autism and addictions, ensuring their dignity and helping them to realise their full potential.

We campaign to create a society free from stigma and a culture of compassion that focuses on individuals and their abilities.

Our Vision

Wellbeing for all

Our Values

We are Inclusive

We are Passionate

We are Determined

We are Kind

We are Honest

We are Innovative



APPENDIX



“It Doesn’t Have To Be Like This. Let’s Change It.” – Inspire’s response to the Northern Ireland Executive consultation on the draft Programme for Government, November 2024



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#TeamInspire

For more information about our services, visit:
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