

Regional Development Committee Briefing Paper - Disability Action

Date: May 2015

Impact of Budget Reduction on Personal Mobility Programmes.

For a significant number of years Disability Action provided a number of programmes grant funded by the Department for Regional Development (DRD). These included:

- Disability Action Transport Scheme (DATS)
- Group Transport Services
- Mobility Centre

On 12 March 2015 Disability Action was advised by DRD of funding reductions totalling £880,000 across these three service areas as follows:-

Programme	2014/15 Funding Level	2015/2016 Reduction	Percentage Reduction
DATS Service	£2,947,000	£631,000	21%
Group Service	£168,000	£168,000	100%
Mobility Centre	£81,000	£81,000	100%
Total	£3,196,000	£880,000	28%

The budget reduction took immediate effect 1 April 2015.

Impact on Disability Action Transport Scheme (DATS)

The DATS service has been provided across Northern Ireland by Disability Action in partnership with ten Community Transport Organisations since April 2013. Previous to that Disability Action provided transport service in Belfast for over 20 years through either grant or under contract.

Disability Action had anticipated a reduction in funding in 2015/2016 but not to the level that it was subsequently advised of in March 2015. Given the short timescale that was given to Disability Action we had to take immediate action to try and manage the service with a significantly reduced budget, whilst trying to mitigate the impact on customers.

Our first action was to reduce the management charge to Disability Action and re-negotiate with our partners in relation to the level of funding available to them.

Disability Action had already engaged with customers in October/November 2014 through our Service User Forums about a possible price increase for trips if a budget reduction happened. As this engagement had taken place already it was decided that a price increase was the second action that could be taken. The price per trip of the DATS service has not changed in 8 years. The fare increased from £1.50 per trip to £2.30 per trip from the 13 April 2015.

We have recently engaged through two service user forums about changing the hours of service. Currently the service runs from 7.30am - 11.30pm from Monday to Saturday and 8.00am to 8.00pm on Sunday. On public holidays there is a limited service or sometimes no service. We have discussed a number of proposals with service users and reached agreement that the one that will have the least impact on the individual customer is operating from 8.00am - 8.00pm from Monday to Friday and 9.00pm to 5.00pm on Saturday and Sunday. This would mean an overall reduction on the amount of trips available of 5% (based on direct delivery) which is around 28 trips per week. The savings from reducing the hours will come from a reduction in the vehicle fleet and staff redundancies.

Impact on DATS Customers

Given the level of the reduction in funding it has not been possible to completely mitigate the impact on people who use the service. Some of the areas identified are as follows:

- Price increase will impact on affordability and the number of trips a person may be able to take.
- Decrease in hours of availability will lead to further social isolation, particularly in rural areas.
- There is a lack of alternatives that are either accessible, affordable or available.
- Worry and stress for customers that this is only the start of a reduction in a service they highly value.
- Personal mobility of disabled people and older people will be affected.

Impact on Group Transport Service

The Group Transport Service ceased on the 1 April 2015 due to a 100% funding cut.

Group Transport provided accessible transport to groups across Northern Ireland. Many of the groups used the service to take people to social groups, on outings around Northern Ireland and for holidays in the UK.

Transport provision from the private sector was either not affordable or accessible vehicles were not available. Group Transport funding allowed for a grant funded model, where groups paid lower fees than in the private sector and were assured that the vehicles would be accessible and that drivers would be fully trained.

Impact on Group Transport Customers

- Higher costs for groups using private sector suppliers
- Lack of accessible transport options
- Social isolation if ultimately an individual cannot get to social groups

Impact on Mobility Centre

The Mobility Centre is the only fully accredited centre in Northern Ireland. It provides four main services:

- Driving assessments for people with disabilities (referred through DVA or privately)
- Driving lessons in specially adapted cars and with trained driving instructors.
- Driving Theory Courses, particularly for people with a learning disability.
- Information and Advice sessions for groups and health professionals.

The 100% cut in funding from DRD will have a significant impact on the service. Funding will still be received by the Centre through fees from DVA for the Driving Assessments but no other funding will be available.

The service implications of these cuts have been as follows:-

The driving assessment services will only be provided from our three regional offices instead of current eight locations currently we deliver from.

Our driving school will lose one driving instructor reducing our capacity for delivering lessons to young people with disabilities. In 2014/2015 we provided 1,981 driving lessons.

Driving lessons will no longer be delivered from a person's home. Customers will have to travel to our three office locations (in some cases this will be a round trip of 60 miles).

The price of a driving lesson will increase from £25 to £35

A reduction in the number of theory courses we provide and a price increase for these courses.

One administration post from the Mobility Centre will be made redundant which will impact on the information given via telephone to customers. Last year the Mobility Centre dealt with 5,472 calls from customers and statutory agencies.

Impact on Mobility Centre Customers

- Reduced availability of driving lessons and increased costs will mean that fewer people will be able to learn to drive. They have no other service which meets their needs in Northern Ireland. This will have an impact on their personal mobility and living independently, particularly for those in rural areas.
- The reduction in the number of regional/outreach locations for driving assessments means that drivers will not have access to our services in their own locality, forcing customers to undertake journeys of upwards of one hundred miles before they start the driving assessment. This will particularly impact those living in rural areas.
- Fewer people with a learning disability will pass their Theory Test, therefore impacting on their personal mobility and independent living.

Conclusions

All of the reductions in funding will impact on the lives of disabled people, particularly in relation to personal mobility and independent living. As an organisation we want to minimise the impact of such funding reductions on disabled people, however, it is not possible to completely mitigate the impact without making the organisation unsustainable.

Disability Action is particularly concerned that disabled people are being disproportionately impacted by reductions in budgets. Whilst we are very aware of the current pressures on budgets it is imperative that services and programmes that support disabled people to live independent lives are valued.

For further information on this paper please contact:

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