

## **Achieving efficiencies in public transport delivery**

**Public transport systems are criticised for low productivity, high costs, and the need for subsidy. In these austere times, government can redress this imbalance through joined up thinking.**

Public transport offers significant social benefits, connecting people to jobs, social networks, education and leisure activities. In terms of the environment it is a more sustainable alternative to the private car, however, it is crucial for government to increase productivity and reduce costs.

### **Current transport provision**

The Department for Regional Development (DRD) has responsibility for transport policy and planning. The DRD oversees the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company (NITHCo), a statutory public corporation that delivers most public transport services in Northern Ireland via its branded company Translink. The remainder of public transport services in Northern Ireland fall broadly within the areas of home to school transport, health and social services transport, and voluntary and community transport.

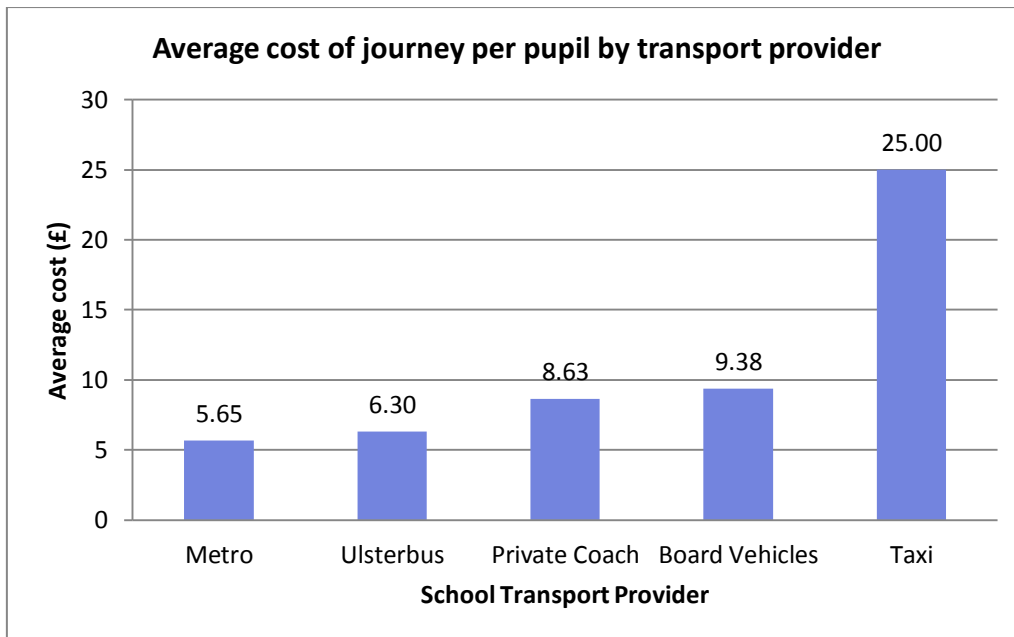
A strategic objective in DRD's Draft Regional Transport Strategy 2011 is to maximise the efficient use of all transport assets through better integration of these existing transport services. Interdepartmental cooperation will be essential if this is to be achieved.

### **Home to School Transport**

The DRD, DOE, Translink and DE(NI) are responsible for the regulation and provision of home to school transport (HST). HST is a significant operation with approximately 110,000 children travelling to and from school by bus in Northern Ireland each day, at a cost of £74m (2008/2009); around 30% of pupils receive free home to school transport. Of those who use public transport 65% are carried by Translink, 27% by ELB buses and 8% by private operators. £7.8m was spent on carrying just over 3,000 pupils in taxis in 2008/09 (see figure one).

Figure one shows significant variability in the cost pupil journey across these providers, with Translink services – Ulsterbus and Metro, having a significantly lower cost than all other providers. This could suggest Translink are able to achieve greater efficiencies, given public transport provision is their primary function, and demonstrates that there is scope for efficiency savings in HST. If the 27,236 pupils carried annually in ELB vehicles were transported on Translink services, a saving of £8.6 million could potentially be realised.

Although responsibility for HST is cross departmental, joined up working is not apparent. Translink have been criticised by the ELBs for increasing their prices, suggesting the payments are commensurate to education subsidising public transport, while Translink argue that they have to subsidise loss making school transport services through their more profitable routes. Rather than showing cooperation, this clearly demonstrates two Departments at odds, within the context of budgetary restraints. While this is understandable, particularly in light of the latest budget, individuals need to take a more holistic view and understand they are working towards a common goal.



### Health and Social Services Transport

The DHSSPS has a statutory duty to provide transport to enable eligible people to receive health and personal social services at an estimated cost of £30 million per annum. The DHSSPS Transport Strategy (2007) suggests that the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service provides most non-emergency transport for patients, however, Trusts have the flexibility to commission transport services from a range of other providers, including, community transport organisations and taxi operators. Collectively the Trusts spend around £5m per annum on taxis; some 17 per cent of their total transport spend.

Data from DHSSPS shows that patients missed a total of 172,877 appointments during 2009/10. This comes at a substantial cost, both in terms of budgets and service provision. One of the main reasons cited for patients not attending outpatient appointments are difficulties travelling due to time and location. While the DHSSPS has flexibility to consider the needs of people with particular mobility problems, or individuals who are rurally isolated, significant efficiencies have been found by offering a more comprehensive transport programme for non emergency patients. In the UK for example, a number of NHS Trusts have successful relationships with the community and voluntary transport sector that have successfully reduced the number of missed appointments.

### Community Transport (CT)

Traditionally the voluntary sector provided transport services regarded as ancillary to statutory provision but it has increasingly attracted funding from government to deliver key frontline services. In Northern Ireland CT is funded through DRD's Rural Transport Fund (RTF) and Transport Programme for People with Disabilities (TPPD). In dispersed communities across Northern Ireland CT provides a vital service, enabling vulnerable individuals and groups, access to essential services. In areas such as County Fermanagh, CT has adapted to suit the needs of a particularly dispersed community running a combination of demand responsive and scheduled services.

There is significant scope for CT to contribute more to mainstream transport provision. In rural areas in particular, where many routes are under used and unprofitable, community transport providers are potentially more adaptable than Translink. This type of cooperation would undermine current funding arrangements; however, it provides another example of where cross departmental co-operation may increase efficiency.

#### **A call to action**

This paper has identified how interdepartmental collaboration has the potential to deliver real benefits both in terms of saving money and improving service, what is now required is a engagement between all the relevant stakeholders to bring forward proposals for action. This paper has identified some ways in which collaboration in service provision may save money but there are other opportunities, not least through joint purchasing, particularly in terms of fuel while joint stabling i.e. sharing of storage and mechanical facilities could help to create economies of scale.