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IMPROVING ACCESSIBILITY FOR OLDER PEOPLE IS MORE THAN A RIGHT

Roger L Mackett

Centre for Transport Studies

University College London

Gower Street

London

WC1E 6BT

Great Britain

Tel: +44 207 6769 1554; Email: r.mackett@ucl.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

This paper commences by considering the right of older people to travel and then examines their contributions to society and how these can be valued, which shows that older people make an economic contribution to society that exceeds the costs that they impose. The benefits of greater mobility for older people, both to themselves and to wider society, are then considered, followed by discussion of the influence of ageing on mobility in terms of the types of journeys they make in terms of trip purpose and modal share. Having considered these issues, the paper examines ways of overcoming the barriers to access for older people so that they can travel more, and so enhancing their contribution to society while enjoying their right to travel.

Keywords: Older people, Rights, Accessibility, Mobility, Benefits,

INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities contains two Articles relevant to travel (1). Article 9 on 'Accessibility' says that, in order for people with disabilities to live independently and participate fully in all aspects of life, states should take appropriate measures to ensure to persons with disabilities have access, on an equal basis with others, to the physical environment, to transportation, to information and communications, and to other facilities and services open or provided to the public, both in urban and in rural areas, including the identification and elimination of obstacles and barriers to accessibility. Article 20 of the Convention on 'Personal Mobility' requires that states take effective measures to ensure personal mobility with the greatest possible independence for persons with disabilities.

These two Articles make it clear that disabled people have a right to travel just as everyone else does. There is no equivalent Convention for older people although there is a UN International Day of Older People. The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) has called for the full integration and participation of older persons in society, including the needs of older people in using public transport and in promoting both labour market participation and life-long learning and education for older people, which implies ensuring that older people can travel to such (2).

Many older people are disabled and so will have their rights to accessibility and personal mobility covered by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It seems clear that even without an explicit convention on the rights of older people, their ability to travel is a basic right. However, in addition to these human rights, there are many other good reasons why improving accessibility for older people is a good idea. The purpose of this paper is to explore these reasons, particularly economic ones.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF OLDER PEOPLE TO SOCIETY

All members of society, including older ones, have inherent value, for example, in terms of creativity and relationships. One aspect is their economic contribution to society. The value of this for people aged 65 and over in the United Kingdom has been estimated in a study commissioned by the WRVS (now the Royal Voluntary Service) (3). An economic model was constructed using a number of headings for people aged 65 and older. Table 1 shows the costs and the contributions. It can be seen that older people contribute more to society than they receive from it with a ratio of contributions to costs of 1.29 to 1. The assumptions underlying the figures shown in Table 1 have been examined and found to be reasonable (4). Much of the expenditure depends on the use of transport, for example enabling them to carry out much of their shopping, volunteering and employment. It has also been shown that improving accessibility for older people can increase their economic contribution to society (4).

TABLE 1 The costs and contributions of older people in the UK in 2010 in £million (at 2007 prices)

| Costs | £m | | Contributions | £m |
|------------------------------|----------------|--|--|----------------|
| Pensions | 68,205 | | Expenditure including multiplier effects | 75,944 |
| Age-related welfare payments | 23,127 | | Volunteering | 10,594 |
| Age-related health care | 44,954 | | Childcare | 2,730 |
| | | | Other non-tax contributions | 41,588 |
| | | | Employment taxes | 15,965 |
| | | | Taxes on expenditure | 16,939 |
| | | | Other taxes | 12,131 |
| Total | 136,286 | | Total | 175,891 |
| | | | Net financial contribution to society | 39,605 |
| | | | Ratio of contributions to costs | 1.29:1 |

Source: (3)

THE BENEFITS OF GREATER MOBILITY FOR OLDER PEOPLE

In the previous section, it was argued that older people contribute significantly to the economy and that travel facilitates much of this. Greater mobility by older people would also provide benefits to older people, improving their quality of life. For example, Gabriel and Browning (5) interviewed 999 older people who said that being able to walk and being mobile enabled them to retain their independence, which was seen as an important element of a good quality of life and reduced their dependence on others. Choi et al. (6) surveyed 1926 elderly women in Britain over a period of seven years. They found that regular physical activity, including walking and cycling, reduced the decline in health-related aspects of the quality of life.

A good example of a policy to increase mobility by older people in Britain is the concessionary travel pass (CTP) scheme which allows free off-peak bus travel across the whole country of residence (England, Scotland or Wales) of the passholder. There have been a number of studies that have examined various aspects of the impact of the scheme (7, 8). Overall, it can be argued that the policy of offering concessionary bus travel to older people has achieved its objectives of increasing their public transport usage, improving their access to services and increasing social inclusion (9).

Another important element of mobility is being able to drive a car. In their literature review on the elderly and mobility Whelan et al. argue that driving represents a symbol of freedom, independence and self-reliance, and having some control of their life while poor mobility places a substantial burden on the individual, family, community and society (10). Musselwhite and Haddad have shown that giving up driving is linked to a reduction in quality of life (11).

THE INFLUENCE OF AGEING ON MOBILITY

In this section the journeys that older people make will be examined. Table 2 shows that, as they age, people living in England, make fewer commuting and business trips, but more shopping, personal business and leisure trips. Even as they become quite elderly, some people are still

carrying out escort trips, that is, taking other people to places, including children to school, quite possibly their grandchildren. Even at the age of over 70, some people are still making commuting trips. These trip patterns reflect the contributions to the economy discussed in Section 2.

TABLE 2 Average number of trips (trip rates) per person by age and purpose: England, 2017

| Purpose | All ages | 50-59 | 60-69 | 70+ |
|---------------------------|-----------------|--------------|--------------|------------|
| Commuting | 144 | 225 | 89 | 9 |
| Business | 27 | 56 | 24 | 4 |
| Education | 67 | 1 | - | - |
| Escort education | 54 | 29 | 20 | 9 |
| Shopping | 189 | 245 | 318 | 295 |
| Other escort | 87 | 81 | 65 | 40 |
| Personal business | 96 | 107 | 137 | 134 |
| Leisure | 252 | 262 | 316 | 248 |
| Other including just walk | 58 | 80 | 88 | 56 |
| All purposes | 975 | 1086 | 1058 | 793 |

Source: Table NTS0611 in (12).

Another way to consider travel patterns is to look at the mode of travel used, as shown in Table 3. It can be seen that car driving decreases with age, but that trips as a car passenger are higher for older people than those aged 50-59. This partly reflects the cessation of driving or a voluntary reduction, perhaps not driving trips that are found difficult such as at night, in bad weather or in city centres. Bus use increases with age above the age of 50, reflecting the availability of concessionary travel passes and, probably, the reduction in driving. Taxi and minicab usage increases from being aged 60-69 to being 70+, reflecting the convenience of this mode and, possibly, increasing difficulty using other modes. The number of trips walked decreases at 70+, but increases as a proportion of all trips made. The number of rail trips declines from age 50-59 onwards, probably reflecting the decrease in commuting and business trips following retirement.

As people age, many of them have increasing mobility difficulties. The National Travel Survey in Great Britain (12) shows that this has an effect on trip making. Those with a mobility difficulty aged between 16 and 49 make about 79% of the number of trips that those with no mobility difficulties make whereas those aged 70+ with a mobility difficulty make only about 48% of the trips made by people of the same age with no difficulty.

TABLE 3 Average number of trips per person by age and mode: England, 2017

| Mode | | All ages | 50-59 | 60-69 | 70+ |
|---------------|--|-----------------|--------------|--------------|------------|
| Walk | | 255 | 242 | 246 | 179 |
| Bicycle | | 17 | 17 | 16 | 7 |
| Car driver | | 390 | 617 | 526 | 350 |
| Car passenger | | 204 | 122 | 170 | 159 |
| Bus | | 55 | 38 | 64 | 67 |
| Rail | | 31 | 31 | 18 | 8 |
| Taxi | | 9 | 7 | 7 | 11 |
| All modes | | 975 | 1086 | 1058 | 793 |

Source: Table NTS0601 in (12).

It has been shown in this section that travel patterns change as people become older. This partly reflects changing lifestyles with fewer of them in employment and consequently more time available for other activities. It also reflects increasing mobility difficulties. This raises the question whether older people are being prevented from making trips that they wish to make.

Table 4 shows the type of activity that the 1445 respondents aged 60 or over in a household survey stated that they would like to do more of and the types of barrier that prevent them from doing so. It can be seen that social activities are the most popular type activity of which they would like to do more, followed by shopping, with small percentages wanting more day centre visits, trips to the Post Office and the chance to visit others in hospitals. These reflect the types of activities older people tend to travel to, as indicated in Table 2. This suggests that there are some older people who are prevented from reaching the types of activities in which others participate.

The barriers shown in Table 4 have been classified under three headings: direct transport/journey, mobility/sensory/health and non-transport. It should be acknowledged that the first two categories overlap: for example, if an elderly person has difficulty stepping on a high-floor vehicle that could be seen as a mobility barrier or a transport barrier since the vehicle is not appropriate for a person with that characteristic. Non-transport barriers are probably to do with the nature of the activity. It can be seen that transport barriers affect the three top answers of visiting and meeting friends and family. Most public transport systems tend to be radial, focusing on city and town centres, while the homes of family and friends are likely to be in the suburbs and other less accessible locations, which may be difficult to reach from the home of the older person. In other words, the transport barrier may be the lack of transport or a complex journey. Mobility and similar barriers affect more older people than the other barriers for shopping and Post Office journeys many of which would be in centres accessible by bus, suggesting that the difficulties lie in accessing buses. (The survey was carried out in 2000 before low-floor buses were so numerous). For leisure/sport and day centre visits the barriers are not on the journey and so probably lie at the destination.

TABLE 4 Barriers to activities for older people

| | Would like to do more % | Principle barrier | | |
|--------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------|
| | | Direct transport/ journey % | Mobility/sensory /health % | Non-transport % |
| Visit family | 12 | 58 | 18 | 24 |
| Visit friends' homes | 10 | 46 | 27 | 25 |
| Meet friends elsewhere | 10 | 46 | 21 | 33 |
| Leisure/sport | 8 | 15 | 24 | 57 |
| Other shopping | 7 | 37 | 43 | 21 |
| Food shopping | 6 | 33 | 50 | 16 |
| Day centre visit | 2 | 25 | 30 | 45 |
| Post Office | 2 | 40 | 42 | 19 |
| Visit others in hospital | 1 | 65 | 23 | 13 |

Source: Table 5.3 in (13).

Note: the figures in bold indicate the barrier which affects the highest proportion of older people for that trip purpose.

Because the internet has developed relatively recently, most older people will not have learnt to use computers at school. Some of them will have used the internet in the course of their work and it is likely that many of them will have retained their knowledge. However, there will be others who did not use computers in the course of their work: some of these may have learnt to use the internet in later life, but others will not have done so. Table 5 shows the use of internet and/or email by people aged 52 and over. It can be seen that usage declines with age. Usage is higher for men than women, with a more rapid decline for women, so that at the age of 80+ fewer than 25% of women use the internet and/or email compared with 46% of men.

TABLE 5 Use of internet and/or email by age and sex in England, 2014-15

| | 52-54 | 55-59 | 60-64 | 65-69 | 70-74 | 75-79 | 80+ | Total |
|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-----|-------|
| Men | 94 | 92 | 90 | 81 | 71 | 53 | 46 | 80 |
| Women | 93 | 90 | 87 | 78 | 64 | 47 | 23 | 73 |

Source: Table S3a in (14).

Having a licence to drive a car gives the holder the freedom to travel by car. The National Travel Survey (12) shows that in England, the level of licence holding increases with age to middle age and then declines. For men there is a decline after the age of 59. For women there is a decline after the age of 49 reflecting the fact that in the past, fewer women than men chose to learn to drive. There is a steeper decline after the age of 70 for women than for men.

The data cited in this section have shown that some older people are less able to travel than younger people, for a number of reasons including increasing mobility difficulties, and because fewer of them can access the internet or drive a car. However, as shown above they

would still like to travel. None of the factors discussed in this section mean that they should not be able to travel, just that it is more difficult. In the next section, ways in which it can be made easier for older people to travel are discussed.

OVERCOMING THE BARRIERS TO ACCESS FOR OLDER PEOPLE

In this section, the ways in which some of the barriers to travel for older people are being overcome in Great Britain will be considered (15).

Overcoming the barriers to travelling by bus

As shown in Table 3, bus use increases with age. In Britain, much has been done to assist older people in Britain. All older people are entitled to free off-peak bus travel and all buses are low floor. A major issue is the attitudes of bus drivers: in the past training of bus drivers to show consideration to older and disabled travellers has been optional for operators in the past but it is now compulsory. However, a major issue in Britain is the reductions in the number of bus services, which is having a significant impact, particularly in rural areas, which is having a major impact on older people who can longer drive.

Overcoming the barriers to travelling by rail

All rail vehicles must be fully accessible in Britain including displaying audio-visual information showing the destination and next stop by 2020. Guidance on making stations more accessible is available. Funding is being made available to improve the accessibility of some stations, often by putting in lifts up to footbridges to allow transfer between platforms. The 'Passenger Assist' scheme offers free assistance from a member of staff on railway stations to all those who request it. Everybody in Britain aged 60 or over is entitled to purchase a Senior Railcard for £30 a year offering a saving of one third on most rail tickets except in the morning peak in London and the surrounding area.

Overcoming the barriers the barriers to walking

The provision of facilities on the street is the responsibility of the local authority. A key requirement of many older people is seating and uncluttered streets. Guidance on the design of streets and of escalators and lifts is given in the Inclusive Mobility Guidelines (16), but the focus tends to be on detailed design rather than the quantity of facilities that should be provided in an area. Very elderly people require about 50% longer to cross the road than the general population, which means that, if the timings of pedestrian signal are based on the speed of walking of the general population, they will be inadequate for many older people (17).

Overcoming the barriers to travelling by car

Deteriorating eyesight and reaction times may lead to some older people giving up driving or restricting their driving to certain locations or times of day. Others may be forced to cease driving because of conditions such as dementia that are associated with growing old. In Britain, the Blue Badge scheme provides parking facilities to those with severe mobility problems, including great difficulty in walking.

Improving the travel experience of older people

There are various other ways in which the travel experience of older people can be improved. The provision of high-quality travel information in a coherent way is important for all travellers.

There are some issues for older people because many of them cannot see or hear as well as younger people. Much information is provided on-line nowadays but, as shown in Table 5, many older people do not use the internet. Also, many choose to use simple mobile phones that cannot access apps to provide wayfinding information when on a journey. The availability of toilets is also important to many older people. Some older people have disabilities that are not visible. A scheme in Britain to make drivers aware of hidden disabilities is the Travel Support or Journey Assistance Card. These are cards issued by bus operators for passengers to show discretely to the bus driver to indicate the needs of specific passengers and contain messages such as 'Please wait for me to sit down in case I fall' or 'Please scan my pass for me'.

Into the future

The advent of more autonomous vehicles, eventually resulting in driverless cars, should mean that fewer older people will lose the ability to travel independently by car because technology will compensate for the deterioration in perceptive faculties (sight, hearing, and so on). More older people would be encouraged to continue in employment if more flexible smart ticketing for public transport were introduced so that season tickets would allow for part-time work. In Britain, allowing older people to use their free bus passes to buy cheap rail tickets would let those who make insufficient rail trips to justify the cost of the present railcard obtain a discount, and so they would be encouraged make more rail trips. More generally, greater flexibility in ticketing systems would enable more older people to enjoy the lifestyles that have evolved in modern times with some people working part-time, others working voluntarily, spending time in leisure pursuits and providing assistance to their extended families.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has shown that older people make valuable contributions to society and that increasing their mobility would enable them to contribute even more. They already make many trips, often for shopping and leisure, but also to work and in providing childcare for grandchildren. They would like to travel more, particularly to visit friends and family, but there are barriers. Many of these result from the interaction of the characteristics of the older person and the nature of the transport system. Some older people have disabilities that make all travelling difficult. Others have difficulty travelling resulting from declining abilities that make walking far, standing for long periods, handling coins or understanding timetables difficult. None of this means that they should be prevented from travelling in order to enjoy life or contribute further to society. By increasing understanding of the travel needs of older people and investing in suitable facilities and schemes, older people will not only be able to contribute even more to society economically and socially, they will also be able to enjoy their right to a good quality of life.

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