



# Northern Region Pensioners Convention Response to the North East Local Transport Plan

## A Vision for a Transport System that Works for Older People

The **Northern Region Pensioners Convention (NPC)** welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the **North East Local Transport Plan (LTP) consultation**. Older people are among the most frequent users of public transport, relying on **buses, trains, and the Metro** to attend **social activities, healthcare appointments, and essential services**. However, despite the **vital role of public transport in pensioners' lives**, many continue to face **significant barriers to accessing a safe, affordable, and reliable network**.

NPC acknowledges the **commitment of Mayor Kim McGuinness and Deputy Mayor and Leader of Gateshead Council Martin Gannon** to improving transport infrastructure across the region. However, **stronger action is needed** to ensure that older people are at the heart of transport policy. Without a **comprehensive strategy** to enhance **accessibility, reliability, and affordability**, many pensioners will continue to experience **transport poverty, social isolation, and restricted mobility**.

This report sets out **key recommendations** to ensure that the **North East Combined Authority (NECA), Mayor Kim McGuinness, and Deputy Mayor Martin Gannon** **prioritise the transport needs of older people** within the **LTP**. Addressing these issues is **not just about transport—it is about ensuring that pensioners can live independently, access vital services, and remain active members of their communities**.

## Key Areas Requiring Urgent Action

1. **Concessionary Travel:** Expand free travel for pensioners to **cover all times of the day**, ensuring older people are not restricted in accessing public transport when they need it most.
2. **Bus Services:** Improve **frequency, reliability, and accessibility**, ensuring all areas—particularly rural communities—have **consistent, affordable services**.
3. **Metro Expansion:** Support the **Washington Metro Loop** to provide **enhanced regional connectivity** for older people, reducing reliance on cars and making it easier to access key destinations.
4. **Rail Services: Reverse cuts to train services**, particularly restoring Sunderland’s direct rail connections, ensuring pensioners are not isolated due to inadequate transport links.
5. **Public Transport Accessibility and Safety:** Improve **lighting, surveillance, and travel information** across all transport modes to ensure older people feel safe and supported while travelling.
6. **Toilet Facilities at Transport Hubs:** Install **accessible public toilets** at key bus, Metro, and train stations to **remove a major barrier to travel for older people and those with additional health needs**.

NPC urges **Mayor Kim McGuinness, Deputy Mayor Martin Gannon, and NECA** to adopt these **policy recommendations** to create a **fairer, more inclusive transport system that supports older people’s independence and wellbeing**. Without immediate action, many pensioners will remain **excluded from essential services and community life**, reinforcing inequalities that must be addressed.

**A transport system that works for older people is a transport system that works for everyone**—ensuring accessibility, sustainability, and fairness for all generations.

---

## 2. Introduction

### The Role of the Northern Region Pensioners Convention (NPC) in Transport Advocacy

The **Northern Region Pensioners Convention (NPC)** is a leading organisation dedicated to championing the rights and needs of older people across the North East. Access to reliable, affordable, and accessible public transport is critical for pensioners, enabling them to maintain independence, participate in community life, and access essential services such as healthcare and shopping. NPC works closely

with local councils, transport authorities, trade unions, and community groups to ensure that older people's voices are heard in policy discussions and infrastructure planning.

Public transport is not just a convenience for pensioners—it is a **lifeline**. Many older people rely entirely on buses, trains, and the Metro for their daily travel. However, the current transport system presents **significant barriers** that limit mobility, increase social isolation, and reduce quality of life for pensioners. Without urgent improvements, many older residents will continue to struggle with inadequate transport options that fail to meet their needs.

## Challenges Faced by Older Transport Users

Despite being one of the most reliant groups on public transport, pensioners across the North East face numerous challenges when using buses, trains, and the Metro. Some of the **key barriers** include:

### 1. Unreliable and Infrequent Bus Services

- Many pensioners depend on bus services, yet timetables are often **inconsistent, with infrequent services in suburban and rural areas**.
- Evening and weekend services are **limited or non-existent**, making it difficult for older people to attend social activities or visit family and friends.
- **Service cuts and route reductions** have left many communities without a reliable bus connection, particularly in areas outside major city centres.

### 2. Limited Rail Connectivity

- Pensioners in **Sunderland and other parts of the North East face a decline in long-distance rail services**, with reductions in direct routes to cities such as London, Manchester, and Edinburgh.
- The loss of **LNER services to Sunderland** has further limited pensioners' ability to travel beyond the region, making long-distance trips more complex and expensive.
- Many train stations lack **step-free access, seating, and real-time service updates**, making rail travel difficult for older passengers with mobility impairments.

### 3. Lack of Accessible Transport Options

- Many **Metro and train stations do not have step-free access**, creating difficulties for older people with mobility issues.

- **Bus stops often lack seating and shelter**, making it uncomfortable for pensioners who may have to wait for long periods in bad weather.
- **A lack of public toilets at key transport hubs** makes journeys difficult for older passengers, particularly those with medical conditions.

#### 4. The High Cost of Travel for Pensioners

- Although concessionary travel schemes exist, **restrictions on free travel during peak hours** prevent pensioners from travelling freely.
- Many pensioners still **work part-time or volunteer**, but the current system forces them to pay full fares if travelling before 9:30 AM.
- The **lack of integrated ticketing across buses, Metro, and rail services** increases costs and complicates journeys, discouraging older passengers from using public transport.

#### 5. Safety Concerns on Public Transport

- Many pensioners feel **unsafe using public transport, particularly in the evening**, due to poor lighting at bus stops and Metro stations.
- **Incidents of anti-social behaviour** on buses and trains make older people hesitant to use public transport.
- There is a **lack of security personnel or transport officers** on public transport services, reducing confidence in safety.

## The North East Local Transport Plan (LTP) and Its Vision for 2040

The **North East Local Transport Plan (LTP)** is an ambitious strategy designed to transform the region's transport network by 2040. Its key priorities include:

- **Reducing carbon emissions** by promoting public transport, cycling, and walking.
- **Improving transport accessibility** for all residents, including older people and those with disabilities.
- **Enhancing safety and security** across all modes of transport.
- **Strengthening regional connectivity**, ensuring all communities are well served by public transport.

While the **NPC welcomes the LTP's vision for a more sustainable and integrated transport system**, it is **essential that the needs of older people are prioritised** within this framework. Pensioners represent one of the largest and most frequent

user groups of public transport, and **any failure to address their needs will result in a system that does not serve the entire community effectively.**

## **The Importance of Ensuring the LTP Meets the Needs of Pensioners**

The NPC strongly advocates for a **transport system that is accessible, affordable, and inclusive for all pensioners.** The **North East's ageing population** means that demand for **reliable public transport will only increase in the coming decades.** If the LTP is to be truly transformative, it must **remove the current barriers pensioners face** and ensure they can continue to travel independently and confidently.

This report outlines key **recommendations and priorities** for the North East Combined Authority (NECA) and the Mayor to consider, including:

- Expanding **free concessionary travel** to allow pensioners to travel at any time of the day.
- **Investing in bus service improvements** to ensure frequent, reliable, and accessible transport.
- Supporting the expansion of the **Washington Metro Loop** to enhance regional connectivity.
- **Restoring rail services** to ensure older people are not cut off from long-distance travel.
- **Implementing safety measures** to improve passenger confidence in using public transport.
- **Providing accessible public toilets** at transport hubs to support elderly and disabled passengers.

These measures will help **create a transport system that truly supports older people, allowing them to remain active, independent, and socially connected.** The NPC is committed to working with local authorities, transport providers, and community groups to ensure that the North East **delivers a transport network that works for pensioners now and in the future.**

---

## **3. Key Concerns and Recommendations**

The Northern Region Pensioners Convention (NPC) recognises that public transport is an essential service for older people, enabling them to maintain independence,

participate in social and community activities, and access essential services. However, pensioners across the North East face **significant challenges** due to unreliable services, inadequate infrastructure, and accessibility barriers. Without urgent improvements, many older residents will continue to experience **social isolation, financial hardship, and restricted mobility**.

This section outlines the **key transport issues affecting older people** and sets out specific **recommendations for improvement** to ensure that public transport is accessible, reliable, and affordable for all pensioners.

---

### 3.1 Bus Services

Buses are the primary mode of transport for pensioners across the North East. However, older people continue to experience **inconsistent services, limited routes, and high fares**, making it difficult to rely on buses for daily travel. **Cuts to evening and weekend services** further restrict mobility, particularly for pensioners living in suburban and rural areas.

#### Key Challenges:

- **Inconsistent and infrequent services:** Many areas, particularly in suburban and rural parts of the North East, suffer from **infrequent and unreliable bus services**, leaving pensioners stranded or forced to take long and complex journeys.
- **Limited evening and weekend services:** Many pensioners are unable to participate in social activities or visit family and friends due to **bus services being reduced or non-existent after early evening hours**.
- **Affordability concerns:** The **rising cost of bus fares** disproportionately affects pensioners, particularly those on fixed incomes.
- **Lack of integration with other transport modes:** The **absence of an integrated ticketing system** means that older people must pay separately for different forms of transport, increasing costs and complicating travel.

#### Recommendations:

- **Expand the 24-hour concessionary travel scheme** to allow pensioners to travel for free at all times, removing restrictions on peak-hour travel. This would enable pensioners who still work part-time, volunteer, or have early medical appointments to travel without financial barriers.

- **Improve bus frequency and reliability** by ensuring that services run regularly, including in the evenings and at weekends.
  - **Introduce an integrated ticketing system** that allows passengers to use a single pass or payment method across buses, Metro, and rail services, making travel more affordable and convenient.
  - **Invest in rural and suburban services** to ensure all communities have reliable public transport options.
- 

## 3.2 Metro Services

The Tyne and Wear Metro provides a critical transport link across the region, but **many pensioners face accessibility challenges at stations**, and certain areas—such as Washington—remain **completely disconnected from the network**.

### Key Challenges:

- **Lack of direct Metro access in Washington:** Washington is one of the largest towns in the UK without a Metro or rail link, forcing pensioners to rely on **slow and unreliable bus services**.
- **Accessibility issues at Metro stations:** Many Metro stations lack **step-free access, lifts, and clear signage**, making travel difficult for older people and those with mobility impairments.
- **Overcrowding and service delays:** Pensioners often struggle with overcrowding on Metro services, particularly during peak times.

### Recommendations:

- **Support the expansion of the Washington Metro Loop**, connecting Sunderland, Washington, and Newcastle. This will provide a fast, reliable alternative to buses and reduce car dependency.
  - **Invest in accessibility improvements** at Metro stations, including **step-free access, more seating, better signage, and real-time travel information**.
  - **Improve service reliability** by increasing Metro frequency and ensuring that trains run on time, particularly during peak hours.
- 

## 3.3 Train Services

Many pensioners in the North East rely on **train services for long-distance travel** to visit family, access healthcare, and attend leisure activities. However, Sunderland and other parts of the region have suffered from **declining rail connectivity**, making train travel increasingly difficult and expensive.

### Key Challenges:

- **Limited direct services from Sunderland to major cities** such as London, Manchester, and Edinburgh. The **reduction of LNER services** has left pensioners with fewer travel options.
- **High fares for long-distance travel**, making train services unaffordable for many pensioners on fixed incomes.
- **Accessibility barriers at train stations**, including a **lack of step-free access, poorly maintained lifts, and inadequate seating and shelter**.

### Recommendations:

- **Restore and increase long-distance rail services to Sunderland**, ensuring pensioners have regular access to national rail networks.
  - **Introduce pensioner rail discounts** or extend the existing concessionary travel scheme to cover off-peak rail services.
  - **Improve accessibility at train stations**, including step-free access, more seating, and clearer wayfinding for visually impaired passengers.
- 

## 3.4 Active Travel (Walking and Cycling)

Active travel—including **walking and cycling**—is an essential part of a sustainable transport strategy. However, many **older pedestrians feel unsafe due to poor infrastructure, uneven pavements, and lack of pedestrian-friendly routes**.

### Key Challenges:

- **Poorly maintained footpaths and crossings** make it difficult for pensioners to walk safely, particularly those with mobility aids.
- **Cycling infrastructure is not designed for older riders**, discouraging active travel among pensioners who wish to cycle.
- **Unsafe pedestrian routes around transport hubs** create barriers to accessing public transport.

### Recommendations:



- **Improve and maintain pedestrian pathways**, ensuring smooth, well-lit, and even surfaces.
  - **Create safer pedestrian routes around transport hubs** to improve access to buses, Metro, and rail services.
  - **Develop age-friendly cycling infrastructure** with safer, dedicated cycle lanes to encourage older people to cycle where possible.
- 

### 3.5 Safety and Accessibility

Many older people feel **unsafe when using public transport, particularly in the evenings**. Concerns about **poor lighting, anti-social behaviour, and a lack of security** deter pensioners from using buses, Metro, and trains. Additionally, **inaccessible travel information** makes it harder for older people to plan their journeys.

#### Key Challenges:

- **Poor lighting at bus stops, Metro stations, and train stations** increases the risk of crime and falls, particularly for older passengers.
- **Anti-social behaviour on public transport** creates an intimidating environment for pensioners.
- **Lack of real-time travel information** makes it difficult for pensioners to navigate the transport system, particularly those who are not comfortable using mobile apps.

#### Recommendations:

- **Improve lighting at all transport hubs** to enhance safety and visibility.
- **Increase the presence of transport officers and security personnel** to deter anti-social behaviour and provide reassurance to passengers.
- **Enhance real-time travel information** by ensuring that bus stops, Metro stations, and train platforms have **clear, easy-to-read updates on arrivals and departures**.
- **Develop user-friendly information systems** for older people, including audio announcements and printed timetables at key locations.

---

Older people are among the most **frequent and dependent users of public transport**, yet their needs are often overlooked in transport planning. The **Northern**

**Region Pensioners Convention calls on the North East Combined Authority and the Mayor to take immediate action** to address these concerns and ensure that pensioners have access to a **safe, reliable, and affordable transport network**.

By implementing the recommendations in this section, policymakers can **remove key barriers to mobility, improve accessibility, and create a transport system that genuinely supports older people's independence and quality of life**.

---

## **4. The Washington Metro Loop: Transforming Connectivity for Older People**

Expanding the **Tyne and Wear Metro system** to include Washington is one of the most **significant transport proposals for the North East**. Washington is one of the largest urban areas in the country **without a direct rail or Metro connection**, leaving residents heavily reliant on **buses and private cars** for daily travel.

For older people, this lack of connectivity presents **serious mobility challenges**, making it harder to access essential services, maintain independence, and stay socially connected. A **Metro expansion to Washington** would provide **fast, reliable, and accessible transport** for pensioners, helping them reach healthcare facilities, shopping centres, and social activities without relying on expensive or inconsistent bus services.

This section outlines the key benefits of the **Washington Metro Loop**, addressing **regional connectivity, congestion reduction, economic growth, and environmental sustainability**.

---

### **4.1 Improving Regional Connectivity for Older People**

Many pensioners in Washington and surrounding areas are **cut off from reliable public transport options**, making it difficult to travel to Sunderland, Newcastle, Gateshead, or key economic hubs such as Team Valley and Follingsby Park. The **Metro extension** would provide a **direct, accessible, and frequent connection**, reducing travel times and improving accessibility for older passengers.

#### **Key Benefits for Pensioners:**

- **Seamless Metro access:** Pensioners would no longer have to rely on multiple bus connections, reducing long waiting times and inconvenient route changes.
  - **Better access to healthcare:** Many older people need **frequent medical appointments**. The Metro would provide a **direct link to hospitals, GP surgeries, and healthcare centres**, improving access to vital services.
  - **Enhanced social mobility:** The Metro expansion would enable pensioners to visit **friends, family, and social groups** without depending on expensive taxis or infrequent buses.
  - **Reliable alternative to bus services:** While buses are essential, they **often suffer from delays, route cancellations, and overcrowding**. A **Metro connection** would offer a **consistent, reliable transport option** for pensioners.
- 

## 4.2 Reducing Road Congestion and Car Dependency

Many **older people in Washington feel forced to drive** due to the lack of reliable public transport alternatives. However, **not all pensioners can afford or are able to drive**, leading to significant mobility restrictions.

### How the Washington Metro Loop Will Reduce Congestion:

- **Providing a viable alternative to car travel** – A Metro connection would allow pensioners to use **safe, step-free, and accessible transport** rather than relying on private vehicles.
  - **Reducing peak-time traffic on major roads** – The A19, A1231, and A1 are frequently **congested due to high volumes of car traffic**. Expanding the Metro would **ease pressure on these routes**, making travel easier for all road users.
  - **Less reliance on buses for long-distance travel** – While buses are a vital transport mode, **pensioners often struggle with long and unreliable bus journeys** between Washington and surrounding areas. A Metro connection would provide **faster, more direct journeys**.
- 

## 4.3 Supporting Economic Growth and Access to Key Services

For many pensioners, access to **key services, employment opportunities, and retail centres** is a major concern. Expanding the Metro to Washington would allow older

people to **remain independent, access part-time jobs, and reach major shopping and leisure facilities without difficulty.**

### **Economic Benefits of the Metro Expansion:**

- **Better access to retail hubs:** Pensioners often travel to shopping centres such as **The Galleries, Sunderland City Centre, Newcastle Eldon Square, and Gateshead Metrocentre.** A Metro extension would provide **direct access to key shopping destinations,** reducing dependence on multiple transport modes.
  - **Increased employment opportunities for older workers:** Many pensioners remain in **part-time employment** to supplement their pensions. The Metro expansion would provide **easier access to job opportunities** in Sunderland, Newcastle, and Washington's business districts.
  - **Stronger local economies:** With improved transport links, **businesses in Washington, Sunderland, and Newcastle would see an increase in footfall,** supporting local retailers, restaurants, and services.
- 

## **4.4 Promoting Environmental Sustainability**

The North East has ambitious **net-zero goals** aimed at reducing carbon emissions and encouraging sustainable transport choices. The Washington Metro Loop aligns perfectly with these goals by **reducing car dependency and promoting clean, efficient public transport.**

### **How the Metro Expansion Supports Sustainability:**

- **Lower carbon emissions** – Metro trains run on **electric power,** producing significantly **fewer emissions** than cars and buses. A Metro extension would encourage pensioners and other passengers to switch from car travel, reducing overall **transport-related pollution.**
  - **Improved air quality** – Air pollution from road traffic disproportionately affects **older people and those with health conditions.** Expanding the Metro will help **cut harmful emissions,** leading to **better air quality and improved public health.**
  - **Encouraging sustainable travel habits** – Making public transport **more convenient and accessible** will help **reduce overall car dependency,** creating a more **sustainable transport network for future generations.**
-

## 4.5 Financial Considerations and Projected Ridership

A Metro expansion to Washington would require **significant investment**, but the long-term **economic, social, and environmental benefits** would outweigh the initial costs.

### Funding Options and Cost Considerations:

- **Government Infrastructure Investment** – National and regional transport funding could be used to finance the Metro extension, particularly given the project's **alignment with net-zero and sustainability targets**.
- **Regional Transport Budgets** – The North East Combined Authority (NECA) could prioritise investment in this **high-impact infrastructure project** as part of broader transport improvements.
- **Private Sector Contributions** – Businesses in Washington and surrounding areas would **benefit from better connectivity** and could contribute through **public-private partnerships**.

### Projected Ridership and Demand:

- **Significant demand from pensioners, commuters, and students** – Many residents in Washington and surrounding areas rely on public transport. A Metro connection would attract **tens of thousands of daily users**, reducing congestion and increasing public transport use.
- **High long-term cost savings** – While the project requires upfront investment, it would lead to **reduced congestion, lower emissions, and improved access to key economic hubs**, delivering **substantial long-term savings for the region**.

---

## Why the Washington Metro Loop Must Be Prioritised

The expansion of the Metro to Washington is a **transformational transport project** that will provide older people with **greater mobility, better access to services, and a sustainable alternative to car travel**.

By investing in this **critical infrastructure**, policymakers can:  
**Reduce transport isolation** for pensioners in Washington.

**Encourage economic growth** by improving access to key employment and shopping areas.

**Cut road congestion and emissions** by providing a viable public transport alternative.

**Support the region's net-zero targets** and improve air quality.

The **Northern Region Pensioners Convention (NPC) urges the North East Combined Authority (NECA) and the Mayor to prioritise this project**, ensuring that older people in Washington and the wider region have **access to a modern, integrated, and sustainable transport network**.

---

## **5. Environmental and Social Impacts: A Transport Network that Supports a Sustainable and Inclusive Future**

The North East Local Transport Plan (LTP) presents a crucial opportunity to align the region's transport policies with the United Kingdom's **net-zero targets** and broader sustainability commitments. An effective and environmentally responsible transport system should not only reduce carbon emissions but also improve public health, enhance air quality, and create an inclusive network that supports older people, disabled passengers, and those on lower incomes.

Currently, **transport is one of the largest contributors to emissions in the North East**, with heavy reliance on cars and outdated public transport infrastructure leading to high pollution levels, particularly in urban centres. Older people are disproportionately affected by poor air quality and transport-related social exclusion. Without accessible, affordable, and sustainable public transport, many pensioners face **isolation, financial hardship, and restricted mobility**.

This section outlines the key environmental and social challenges associated with transport in the North East and presents **targeted recommendations** to ensure that the LTP delivers **measurable improvements in sustainability, accessibility, and public wellbeing**.

---

### **5.1 Investment in Sustainable Transport Options**

To meet net-zero targets and create a cleaner, more efficient transport system, the North East must invest in **sustainable transport solutions** that reduce reliance on private cars while improving accessibility for older people.

## Key Areas for Investment:

- **Electric and hydrogen-powered buses** – Transitioning to low-emission public transport is essential for **reducing carbon emissions and improving air quality**. The region must prioritise the **replacement of diesel buses with electric and hydrogen-powered alternatives**.
- **Expansion of the Metro network** – Investing in Metro expansion, particularly the **Washington Metro Loop**, will provide a **viable alternative to car travel**, reducing road congestion and emissions.
- **Better integration of bus, Metro, and rail services** – An efficient, well-connected network will encourage more people to use public transport, helping to **cut emissions by reducing single-occupancy car journeys**.
- **Improved walking and cycling infrastructure** – Many older people and those with mobility challenges are discouraged from walking or cycling due to **unsafe roads, poor pavements, and a lack of pedestrian-friendly routes**. Safe, well-maintained paths and crossings must be prioritised to **encourage active travel**.
- **Investment in Park and Ride schemes** – Encouraging drivers to park at designated transport hubs and use public transport for the remainder of their journey will **help reduce congestion in city centres and lower overall emissions**.

By prioritising these investments, the North East can create a **modern, low-emission transport network** that benefits both the environment and passengers, particularly older people who rely on public transport for daily mobility.

---

## 5.2 Clear, Measurable Targets for Reducing Emissions and Traffic Congestion

Meeting net-zero goals requires **clear, enforceable targets** to ensure that policies are delivering real reductions in carbon emissions and road traffic.

### Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for Environmental Progress:

- **Reduction in transport-related carbon emissions** – Local authorities must measure and track progress towards reducing emissions from **buses, taxis, and private vehicles**. This should include **targets for public transport electrification and reduced car usage**.
- **Increased use of public transport** – The effectiveness of transport improvements should be measured by tracking **public transport ridership**

**figures**, ensuring that more people are choosing buses, Metro, and trains instead of cars.

- **Traffic reduction in urban areas** – A decrease in congestion and shorter journey times should be key indicators of success, demonstrating **improved efficiency in public transport and road infrastructure**.
- **Growth in active travel usage** – Local authorities should collect data on **walking and cycling rates**, ensuring that investments in **pavements, pedestrian crossings, and cycling infrastructure** lead to measurable increases in active travel.
- **Expansion of low-emission transport fleets** – Public transport operators should be required to report on **fleet electrification and the reduction of diesel-powered vehicles**, ensuring that the transition to cleaner transport remains on schedule.

Without these measurable targets, transport policies risk being **ineffective or underfunded**, delaying progress towards a sustainable future.

---

### 5.3 Improving Air Quality and Public Health

Poor air quality in urban areas is a major public health concern, particularly for older people and those with respiratory conditions. Air pollution from transport is linked to an increased risk of **lung disease, heart disease, and other serious health conditions**, disproportionately affecting **pensioners, children, and those with pre-existing health issues**.

#### Steps to Improve Air Quality in the North East:

- **Reducing road traffic emissions** – Encouraging greater use of public transport, particularly electric buses and Metro services, will help **lower pollution from cars and diesel vehicles**.
- **Low-emission zones** – The introduction of **Clean Air Zones (CAZ)** in major urban centres, similar to those in London and Birmingham, could restrict access for high-polluting vehicles, **incentivising greener travel choices**.
- **Increased investment in green spaces near transport hubs** – Planting trees and creating urban green spaces can **help filter air pollutants and create healthier environments around transport hubs**.
- **Electrification of the rail network** – A transition away from **diesel-powered trains** towards electrification will help **reduce emissions from long-distance and regional rail services**.



By improving air quality, the North East can create a **healthier living environment for older people and future generations**, reducing the burden on healthcare services and enhancing overall quality of life.

---

## 5.4 Ensuring Public Transport is Accessible, Safe, and Inclusive

Environmental progress cannot come at the cost of **accessibility and social inclusion**. A truly sustainable transport network must ensure that **older people, disabled passengers, and low-income communities are not left behind**.

### Key Recommendations for an Inclusive Transport Network:

- **Ensuring step-free access at all Metro, rail, and bus stations** – Many older passengers and those with disabilities struggle to use public transport due to **poor accessibility at stations and interchanges**. Investment in **lifts, ramps, and step-free infrastructure** is essential.
- **Affordable and concessionary travel schemes** – Sustainable transport must remain **affordable and financially viable** for pensioners. Expanding **24-hour concessionary bus and Metro passes for those aged 60 and over** would ensure **no financial barriers to public transport use**.
- **Improving transport safety, particularly for women and vulnerable passengers** – Well-lit stations, **CCTV monitoring, and increased security personnel** will help older passengers feel **safe when travelling at night or in quieter areas**.
- **Providing real-time travel information in accessible formats** – Many pensioners rely on **printed timetables, clear signage, and audio announcements**. Any digital upgrades to travel information must **not exclude those without smartphones or internet access**.
- **Expanding rural and community transport options** – Many older residents in rural areas lack access to frequent public transport. Funding for **community transport schemes and on-demand shuttle services** should be prioritised to ensure **rural pensioners remain connected**.

By embedding accessibility and inclusion into sustainable transport planning, the North East can **create a system that works for everyone**, ensuring that environmental policies also improve quality of life for older people and vulnerable passengers.

---

The North East must take **bold action** to align transport policies with net-zero targets, while also ensuring that **public transport remains accessible, affordable, and inclusive** for all passengers.

By investing in **low-emission transport, improving public health, setting measurable environmental targets, and prioritising accessibility**, the region can create a **modern, sustainable, and people-focused transport network**.

The **Northern Region Pensioners Convention urges the North East Combined Authority and the Mayor to:**

- **Accelerate investment in electric buses, Metro expansion, and sustainable infrastructure.**
- **Introduce clear, measurable targets to track reductions in emissions and congestion.**
- **Improve air quality through low-emission transport policies and green urban planning.**
- **Ensure that all public transport improvements prioritise accessibility, affordability, and passenger safety.**

Sustainability is not just about the environment—it is about **creating a transport network that works for all generations**, particularly older people who rely on public transport the most.

---

## **6. Challenges with Current Infrastructure: Addressing Ageing Transport Systems and Ensuring Long-Term Resilience**

The North East's transport infrastructure is under significant strain due to ageing assets, underinvestment, and increasing demand for reliable public transport. The **recent closure of the Gateshead Flyover** has highlighted critical weaknesses in the region's transport network, causing disruption to road and rail users and exposing **a lack of contingency planning for major infrastructure failures**.

For older passengers who rely on buses, Metro, and trains as their primary means of transport, these **failures can have a significant impact on daily life**, limiting access to essential services, increasing journey times, and exacerbating transport-related social isolation.

This section examines the **key challenges facing the North East's transport infrastructure**, the impact of **recent disruptions**, and **proposes targeted solutions** to ensure **reliability, resilience, and long-term sustainability**.

---

## 6.1 The Gateshead Flyover Closure: A Case Study in Infrastructure Vulnerability

The closure of the **A167 Gateshead Flyover** in December 2024 due to structural concerns caused widespread travel disruption across the region, with knock-on effects for bus, Metro, and road users. The **suspension of Tyne and Wear Metro services** running beneath the structure for almost two weeks further demonstrated how critical transport infrastructure failures **sever key travel routes and isolate communities**.

### The Impact of the Gateshead Flyover Closure on Public Transport:

- **Severe Metro Disruptions:** The closure resulted in **significant delays and suspensions on the Metro network**, particularly affecting passengers travelling between Newcastle and Gateshead. Older people, many of whom rely on Metro services, were left **without a reliable alternative**.
- **Increased Congestion and Journey Times:** The diversion of road traffic onto surrounding routes **caused major congestion**, particularly during peak hours, making bus journeys significantly longer and less predictable.
- **Economic and Social Disruption:** Businesses, healthcare services, and commuters all felt the impact of reduced connectivity. Many older people reported difficulty accessing appointments, shopping areas, and community hubs due to increased travel times.

Although **temporary structural reinforcements** have been put in place to allow Metro services to continue, the **flyover itself remains closed**, with no immediate reopening plan. This situation highlights the **urgent need for long-term investment and strategic decision-making** to ensure that major infrastructure failures do not paralyse the region's transport system.

### Key Lessons from the Gateshead Flyover Crisis:

- **The North East's transport network lacks resilience, with no viable alternatives when key structures fail.**
- **Reactive emergency repairs are costly and disruptive—long-term preventative investment is required.**

- **Infrastructure failures disproportionately impact older passengers, low-income travellers, and those reliant on public transport.**

The **Northern Region Pensioners Convention (NPC)** calls on the **North East Combined Authority (NECA)** and the Mayor to take **decisive action** by **committing to a clear long-term plan for the Gateshead Flyover** and prioritising **investment in transport resilience across the region.**

---

## **6.2 The North East’s Ageing Transport Infrastructure: The Need for Long-Term Investment**

Many of the North East’s major transport assets—**bridges, roads, rail infrastructure, and Metro stations**—were built **decades ago** and are now reaching the **end of their operational lifespan**. Without sustained investment, these assets will continue to deteriorate, leading to **more frequent failures, emergency closures, and severe travel disruptions.**

### **Key Infrastructure Challenges in the North East:**

- **Outdated Rail and Metro Stations** – Many stations lack **step-free access, modern facilities, and up-to-date travel information**, making them difficult to navigate for older passengers.
- **Ageing Road and Bridge Networks** – Beyond the Gateshead Flyover, other critical transport structures—**such as the Tyne Bridge and key junctions on the A1 and A19**—are in urgent need of repair and long-term investment.
- **Limited Maintenance Budgets** – Many infrastructure upgrades have been **deferred due to funding constraints**, leading to **reactive emergency repairs rather than planned improvements.**
- **Weather Resilience Issues** – The region is **vulnerable to flooding, storms, and extreme temperatures**, all of which can **cause significant transport disruptions if infrastructure is not designed for resilience.**

### **Impact on Older People and Transport Users:**

For pensioners and those with mobility issues, an unreliable transport network can result in:

- **Longer, more complicated journeys** that discourage public transport use.
- **Reduced access to healthcare, shopping, and community services**, increasing **social isolation and dependence on others.**

- **A lack of safe, accessible transport options**, making travel stressful and, in some cases, impossible.

If the North East is to **create a modern, accessible, and sustainable transport system**, infrastructure investment must be **a top priority**.

---

## 6.3 Strengthening Infrastructure Resilience: Recommendations for Long-Term Stability

To prevent future transport failures and ensure **reliable services for older passengers and all public transport users**, the **Northern Region Pensioners Convention urges regional leaders to adopt a proactive approach to infrastructure investment and maintenance**.

### Key Proposals for Strengthening Transport Infrastructure Resilience:

#### 1. Accelerate Maintenance and Upgrade Projects

- Establish a **dedicated Infrastructure Resilience Fund** to support **ongoing maintenance of critical transport assets** such as **bridges, Metro stations, and key road networks**.
- Conduct **regular structural assessments** of bridges, tunnels, and transport hubs to **identify risks before failures occur**.
- Increase **government lobbying efforts** to secure additional funding for infrastructure improvements, particularly for projects that benefit older and disabled passengers.

#### 2. Develop Alternative Routing and Contingency Plans

- Expand **bus and Metro contingency plans** to **minimise service disruptions** in the event of infrastructure failures.
- Improve **multi-modal integration** so that Metro, bus, and rail networks can **serve as reliable backups for each other during closures**.
- Introduce **emergency shuttle services** to provide alternative transport options for isolated communities when key routes are closed.

#### 3. Ensure Proactive Planning for the Future of the Gateshead Flyover

- **Clearly outline whether the structure will be repaired or permanently replaced.** Uncertainty around the Flyover's long-term future is **causing planning difficulties for transport operators and local businesses.**
- If the **Flyover is to be retained**, commit to **comprehensive structural renewal** to extend its operational lifespan and prevent repeated emergency closures.
- If **demolition and redevelopment** remain the preferred option, develop a **clear, publicly accountable funding plan** to ensure the process is completed efficiently.

#### **4. Improve Resilience Against Extreme Weather Events**

- Introduce **flood protection measures** for vulnerable rail and Metro lines.
- Ensure **weather-resistant infrastructure** is prioritised in all new transport projects, including road surfacing, station refurbishments, and drainage improvements.
- Improve **communication and real-time travel updates** to inform passengers of extreme weather delays and alternative travel options.

---

The North East's ageing transport infrastructure **poses a serious risk to economic stability, public safety, and accessibility for older people.** If **major disruptions** such as the Gateshead Flyover closure continue, passengers will **lose confidence in public transport**, and those who rely on it the most—including **pensioners and disabled people**—will be **left without reliable travel options.**

The **Northern Region Pensioners Convention calls on the North East Combined Authority and the Mayor to:**

- **Commit to a long-term infrastructure resilience strategy** that ensures transport assets are regularly maintained and modernised.
- **Provide clear timelines and funding commitments for the future of the Gateshead Flyover.**
- **Improve contingency planning for Metro, bus, and rail networks** to ensure older people are never left stranded during infrastructure failures.
- **Deliver a transport network that is safe, reliable, and future-proofed, reducing the likelihood of costly emergency closures.**

By **investing in resilience today**, the North East can create a **sustainable, efficient, and accessible transport system** that serves **pensioners and future generations alike.**

---

## 7. Collaboration and Community Engagement: Building a Transport System That Works for Older People

Creating an effective, accessible, and sustainable transport network in the North East requires **strong partnerships between local authorities, transport providers, trade unions, and the communities they serve**. The **Northern Region Pensioners Convention (NPC)** plays a crucial role in ensuring that older people's voices are heard in transport decision-making, advocating for policies that enhance accessibility, affordability, and reliability.

This section highlights the **importance of collaboration** in achieving a transport system that works for everyone, with a particular focus on **older people, pensioners, and those with limited mobility**. It outlines the **NPC's ongoing engagement with key stakeholders**, the **importance of regional cooperation**, and **proposals for stronger community involvement in transport planning**.

---

### 7.1 Partnership Working: The NPC's Role in Shaping Transport Policy

The **NPC has been a strong advocate for transport improvements in Sunderland and across the North East**, working closely with key organisations to ensure the needs of older people are prioritised in policy and investment decisions.

#### Key Collaborative Partnerships:

##### 1. Working with Sunderland City Council and Local Authorities

Local councils play a key role in **transport planning, bus service regulation, and infrastructure investment**. The NPC works with Sunderland City Council and other North East local authorities to:

- **Influence transport policy decisions** to ensure that bus, Metro, and rail services meet the needs of older people.
- **Advocate for improvements to public transport accessibility**, including step-free access, better bus shelters, and real-time travel information.
- **Encourage investment in infrastructure projects**, such as the **Washington Metro Loop**, to connect communities more effectively.

By engaging with **council transport committees, elected representatives, and regional policymakers**, the NPC ensures that pensioners' concerns are **heard and acted upon**.

## **2. Collaboration with Trade Unions and Transport Operators**

The NPC works closely with **unions representing transport workers**, including **RMT, GMB, Unite, and Unison**, as well as transport operators such as **Go North East, Arriva, Stagecoach, and Nexus**.

Key areas of collaboration include:

- **Improving working conditions for transport staff** to ensure safe, reliable, and efficient services.
- **Ensuring passenger and worker safety** through investment in better security, lighting, and staffing at transport hubs.
- **Promoting driver and staff training programmes** to improve customer service and ensure that older and disabled passengers receive appropriate assistance.

Public transport services are only as good as the people who run them. Ensuring that **drivers, conductors, and station staff have good working conditions** leads to **better services, greater reliability, and a more positive passenger experience for everyone**.

## **3. Engaging with Community Groups and Older People's Organisations**

Transport decisions must reflect the needs of the people who rely on public transport the most. The **NPC works with community organisations, pensioners' groups, and disability advocates** to:

- **Gather first-hand experiences from older passengers** about the challenges they face when using public transport.
- **Provide direct feedback to councils and transport operators** on issues such as unreliable services, accessibility barriers, and safety concerns.
- **Organise public meetings, surveys, and consultations** to ensure that older people have a say in transport planning.

By working with **local charities, disability rights organisations, and resident associations**, the NPC ensures that transport policies are not made **without the input of those most affected by them**.

---



## 7.2 The Need for Stronger Regional Cooperation

The North East's transport network spans multiple local authority areas, meaning a **joined-up approach is essential** to ensure consistency in service provision and accessibility. However, at present, **regional coordination between different councils and transport providers remains fragmented**, making it harder to deliver a truly **integrated transport system**.

### Key Challenges in Regional Coordination:

- **Lack of uniform concessionary travel schemes across different areas**, making it harder for pensioners to travel freely within the region.
- **Inconsistent bus services and ticketing systems**, forcing passengers to pay multiple fares when switching operators.
- **Disjointed investment in infrastructure projects**, with some areas receiving better transport funding than others.

The NPC strongly **calls for better regional cooperation** between:

- The **North East Combined Authority (NECA)** and **Transport for the North (TfN)** to **develop a fully integrated transport strategy**.
- Local councils to **coordinate policies on bus services, ticketing, and concessionary travel**, ensuring equal access across the region.
- Transport operators to **align service timetables and ticketing policies**, making travel easier for passengers who rely on multiple modes of transport.

A **truly integrated public transport system** would:

- Allow pensioners and other passengers to **use a single ticket across Metro, rail, and bus services**.
- Ensure **consistent concessionary travel policies**, so older people are not disadvantaged based on where they live.
- Provide **better transport links between rural, suburban, and urban areas**, reducing isolation for those without access to a car.

---

## 7.3 Strengthening Community Engagement in Transport Planning

Older passengers and community groups **must have a direct voice in shaping transport decisions** to ensure services meet their needs. However, at present, **many**

**pensioners feel disconnected from transport decision-making** and struggle to influence policies that affect them.

### **Current Barriers to Pensioner Participation in Transport Planning:**

- **Lack of clear communication from transport authorities**, meaning many passengers are unaware of consultation processes.
- **Limited opportunities for direct engagement**, with most decisions made behind closed doors by policymakers.
- **Digital exclusion**, as many older passengers do not use online surveys or social media where consultations are often advertised.

The NPC calls for:

- **A dedicated Passenger Forum for Older People**, where pensioners can regularly meet with transport decision-makers to raise concerns and propose improvements.
- **Better publicity for public consultations**, using physical posters, leaflets, and community meetings to ensure pensioners are aware of how to have their say.
- **Regular engagement between local authorities and community transport groups**, ensuring passenger feedback is acted upon in policy decisions.

By **giving older people a stronger voice**, transport planners can **design services that genuinely reflect the needs of those who rely on them the most**.

---

## **7.4 Conclusion: A Transport System That Works for Everyone**

A **successful public transport system cannot be designed in isolation**—it must be shaped through **collaboration between councils, transport operators, unions, and the communities they serve**. The **NPC remains committed** to working with **all stakeholders** to ensure that the **North East's transport system is truly accessible, affordable, and inclusive for older people**.

The **NPC calls on NECA, Sunderland City Council, transport providers, and regional leaders to:**

- **Strengthen partnerships between local authorities and community organisations** to ensure pensioners' transport needs are prioritised.
- **Improve regional cooperation** to develop a **seamless, integrated transport network** that benefits all passengers.

- **Establish a formal Passenger Forum for Older People**, ensuring pensioners have a **direct voice in transport planning**.

By **listening to and acting on the experiences of older passengers**, the North East can **build a transport system that is truly inclusive and meets the needs of all generations**.

---

## **8. Toilets on the Public Transport Network: A Necessity, Not a Luxury**

Access to **public toilets at transport hubs** is a fundamental requirement for a **truly accessible** public transport system. However, across the North East, **many Metro, bus, and rail stations lack adequate toilet facilities**, causing **significant difficulties** for older passengers, disabled travellers, those with medical conditions, and transport workers.

This section highlights the **urgent need for better toilet provision across the region's transport network** and calls for **immediate investment** in new facilities, improved maintenance of existing toilets, and the inclusion of public toilets in all future transport planning.

---

### **8.1 The Current Problem: A Lack of Toilets at Key Transport Hubs**

At present, **most public transport stations in the North East do not have accessible toilets**. This disproportionately affects:

- **Older passengers**, particularly those with age-related health conditions such as incontinence or mobility issues.
- **People with disabilities**, who require accessible toilet facilities to use public transport comfortably.
- **Passengers with medical conditions**, including diabetes, Crohn's disease, and bladder issues, who may need **frequent and urgent** access to toilets.
- **Families with young children**, who often require toilet breaks while waiting for or using public transport.
- **Public transport workers**, such as bus and taxi drivers, who spend **long hours on shift** with no access to facilities.

The **lack of public toilets at transport hubs** can cause significant problems, including:

- **Passengers avoiding public transport altogether** due to the fear of being unable to find a toilet when needed.
- **Increased discomfort and stress** for those travelling long distances or waiting for delayed services.
- **Health risks**, particularly for older people and those with medical conditions who may not be able to wait until they reach their final destination.

The absence of **well-maintained and accessible toilets** in Metro stations, bus interchanges, and railway stations is **a major accessibility issue** that needs to be urgently addressed.

---

## 8.2 The NPC's Call for Action: Improving Toilet Access on the Transport Network

The **Northern Region Pensioners Convention (NPC)** strongly urges **the North East Combined Authority (NECA), Sunderland City Council, transport operators, and other stakeholders** to prioritise the provision of public toilets across all transport hubs.

### 1. Installation of Accessible Toilets at Key Transport Hubs

To ensure that public transport remains **accessible to all**, the NPC calls for:

- **The immediate installation of toilets at major Metro, rail, and bus interchanges**, including Sunderland, Newcastle Central, Gateshead Interchange, and other high-footfall locations.
- **A commitment that all new transport infrastructure projects include toilet facilities** as a standard requirement.
- **Free-to-use public toilets**, ensuring that cost is not a barrier for passengers needing to access facilities.

Accessible toilets must include:

- **Step-free access and space for wheelchair users.**
- **Baby-changing facilities** to support families.
- **Adjustable-height sinks and handrails** for those with mobility impairments.

### 2. Improved Maintenance and Hygiene Standards

In cases where toilets do exist at transport hubs, **poor cleanliness, lack of maintenance, and security concerns often deter passengers from using them.**

The NPC calls for:

- **Regular cleaning schedules** to ensure that toilets are kept in **hygienic condition** at all times.
- **Adequate lighting and security** to prevent anti-social behaviour in and around toilet facilities.
- **Clearly visible signage at stations** to direct passengers to available toilets.

### **3. Including Toilet Provision in All Future Transport Infrastructure Projects**

Transport providers must **recognise toilets as essential infrastructure**, not optional extras. The NPC calls for:

- **Public toilets to be factored into all future Metro, rail, and bus station refurbishments.**
  - **A formal requirement that new transport infrastructure includes accessible toilet facilities.**
  - **Dedicated funding for toilet installation and maintenance**, ensuring long-term sustainability.
- 

## **8.3 The Case for Investment in Public Toilets**

Improving toilet provision is not just about convenience—it has **real economic, health, and accessibility benefits:**

### **1. Encouraging More People to Use Public Transport**

A lack of toilets **deters many pensioners, disabled passengers, and families from using public transport.** Investing in toilet facilities will:

- **Make bus, Metro, and train travel more viable for those with accessibility needs.**
- **Increase public transport usage**, helping to reduce car dependency, congestion, and emissions.

### **2. Supporting Public Transport Workers**

Many **bus, taxi, and Metro drivers do not have regular access to toilets** while on duty, leading to significant discomfort and stress. Providing toilet facilities at key transport hubs would:

- Improve working conditions for drivers and transport staff.
- Reduce the risk of **health problems** caused by lack of toilet access during long shifts.

### **3. Creating a More Inclusive and Dignified Transport Network**

Older passengers and those with medical conditions **should not have to avoid travel** due to **lack of toilet access**. Providing well-maintained toilets at transport hubs will:

- **Enhance the dignity and independence of older people** using public transport.
  - **Reduce anxiety and stress for passengers** who need **frequent toilet access**.
  - **Ensure that the transport system is truly accessible for all.**
- 

## **8.4 Toilets Are a Basic Right, Not a Luxury**

The **lack of toilet facilities at public transport stations is a major barrier to accessibility** and **must be urgently addressed**.

The **NPC calls on NECA, Sunderland City Council, and transport operators to:**

1. **Install accessible toilets at all major transport hubs** as a priority.
2. **Ensure proper maintenance and security measures** for existing toilets.
3. **Commit to including toilets in all future transport development plans.**

A truly modern, accessible, and inclusive transport system **must provide essential facilities for all passengers**—and toilets are **non-negotiable** in achieving this vision.

---

## **9. Taxi Services: Addressing Licensing, Accessibility, and Passenger Needs**

Taxis play a crucial role in **ensuring mobility for older passengers, disabled individuals, and those without access to private vehicles**. However, taxi services in Sunderland face **several key challenges** related to **licensing regulations, accessibility, and basic passenger amenities**.

This section highlights the need for **fairer licensing rules**, improved **wheelchair-accessible taxis**, and the **installation of public toilet facilities at major taxi ranks** to support both drivers and passengers.

---

## 9.1 Licensing Disparities: Addressing Out-of-Area Taxis

One of the biggest concerns among taxi operators and passengers in Sunderland is the **issue of out-of-area taxis operating within the city**.

Currently, **taxis licensed in other local authority areas—particularly Newcastle—are frequently taking fares in Sunderland**, creating an **unfair competitive environment** for locally licensed drivers.

### Problems Caused by Out-of-Area Taxis

- **Unfair Competition** – Sunderland-licensed taxi operators must adhere to **local licensing regulations**, insurance policies, and fare structures, while out-of-area drivers may not be subject to the same rules.
- **Passenger Safety Concerns** – Passengers may unknowingly enter taxis that **do not comply with Sunderland’s licensing standards**, leading to concerns about vehicle safety, driver vetting, and accountability.
- **Financial Impact on Local Drivers** – Sunderland taxi drivers **pay licensing fees and meet local regulations**, yet they are losing fares to out-of-area operators who are **not held to the same conditions**.

### NPC’s Recommendations for Fair Licensing

The **Northern Region Pensioners Convention (NPC)** supports **immediate action** to **address this issue and protect local taxi services**:

1. **Stronger Enforcement of Licensing Rules** – Local authorities must **increase enforcement** to **prevent out-of-area taxis from operating unfairly in Sunderland**. Licensing officers should conduct **regular checks and issue penalties** to non-compliant drivers.

2. **A Regional Licensing Framework** – NECA and local councils should **consider a unified licensing approach** to create a **level playing field** and ensure **consistent regulations** across the North East.
3. **Geofencing and Monitoring Technology** – GPS tracking and **geofencing technology** should be explored to **restrict out-of-area taxis from operating within Sunderland without the appropriate licensing**.

These measures would help **protect local drivers, ensure safer taxi services, and create a fairer transport system for passengers**.

---

## 9.2 Accessibility Improvements: Ensuring Inclusive Taxi Services

For many older passengers and disabled individuals, **taxis are the only viable mode of transport** due to **limited public transport options, mobility issues, or a lack of step-free access at transport hubs**.

However, Sunderland has **a shortage of wheelchair-accessible taxis**, limiting **travel options for those who depend on them**.

### Key Barriers to Taxi Accessibility

- **Limited Availability of Wheelchair-Accessible Vehicles** – Many licensed taxis in Sunderland **are not equipped to accommodate wheelchair users or passengers with other mobility impairments**.
- **High Costs for Accessible Taxis** – Operators often **face higher costs** for maintaining and purchasing wheelchair-accessible vehicles, leading to **fewer taxis with these features**.
- **Inconsistent Standards Across Operators** – Different taxi firms **have varying levels of accessibility**, creating **confusion and difficulty** for passengers who require accessible transport.

### NPC's Recommendations for Improving Accessibility

The NPC calls for **urgent action** to **improve taxi accessibility and ensure transport equity**:

1. **Incentives for Accessible Vehicles** – Financial incentives, such as **grants or reduced licensing fees**, should be introduced to **encourage taxi operators to invest in wheelchair-accessible vehicles**.



2. **Mandatory Accessibility Standards** – Licensing authorities should set **stricter requirements**, ensuring **a proportion of all licensed taxis in Sunderland are wheelchair accessible**.
3. **Driver Training for Passenger Assistance** – All taxi drivers should receive **mandatory disability awareness training**, ensuring they can **assist passengers with mobility impairments safely and respectfully**.

These measures will help **increase travel independence for older and disabled passengers**, ensuring that **taxis remain a viable and accessible transport option**.

---

### 9.3 Better Facilities for Taxi Drivers and Passengers

Despite playing a **vital role in Sunderland’s transport network**, taxi services often **lack the necessary infrastructure** to support both **drivers and passengers**. One of the most pressing issues is the **lack of public toilet facilities at major taxi ranks**.

#### Problems Caused by the Lack of Public Toilets

- **Passengers, particularly older people and those with medical conditions, often struggle to find toilet facilities when using taxis.**
- **Taxi drivers spend long hours waiting for fares without access to public toilets, leading to significant discomfort and potential health risks.**
- **Tourists and visitors arriving at key transport hubs, such as Sunderland Station and bus interchanges, have no access to toilet facilities before taking a taxi.**

#### NPC’s Recommendations for Taxi Rank Facilities

To improve **working conditions for taxi drivers** and **enhance the passenger experience**, the NPC urges local authorities to:

1. **Install Public Toilets at Major Taxi Ranks**
  - High-demand locations, such as **Sunderland city centre, transport interchanges, and hospitals**, should have **dedicated public toilet facilities** for passengers and drivers.
2. **Introduce Designated Rest Facilities for Taxi Drivers**
  - Taxi drivers should have access to **dedicated rest areas**, allowing them to **take breaks without having to leave their operating areas**.
3. **Improve Taxi Rank Signage and Accessibility**

- **Better signage and dedicated pick-up/drop-off points** should be introduced to **enhance the experience for both drivers and passengers.**

## **The Case for Investment in Taxi Rank Facilities**

- **Improving passenger comfort** – Public toilets **reduce stress and anxiety** for passengers who need toilet access while waiting for a taxi.
  - **Supporting taxi driver welfare** – Ensuring that drivers have **basic amenities** improves their **working conditions** and **reduces health issues** caused by lack of access to rest facilities.
  - **Encouraging greater use of taxis** – Older passengers are **more likely to use taxi services if they know there are adequate facilities available** at transport hubs.
- 

## **9.4 A Fair, Accessible, and Passenger-Friendly Taxi System**

Taxis are a **lifeline for many older and disabled residents in Sunderland**, yet **licensing disparities, accessibility issues, and a lack of public toilet facilities** are limiting their effectiveness.

The **NPC calls on the North East Combined Authority (NECA), Sunderland City Council, and local transport regulators to take immediate action by:**

1. **Implementing fair licensing policies** to prevent out-of-area taxis from unfairly competing with local operators.
2. **Increasing the number of wheelchair-accessible taxis** by offering financial incentives and setting stronger accessibility requirements.
3. **Providing public toilet facilities at major taxi ranks** to improve the experience for both passengers and drivers.

By addressing these issues, Sunderland can **develop a taxi network that is safe, fair, and inclusive for all residents**—ensuring that **taxis remain a vital and reliable mode of transport for older people and those with mobility challenges.**

---

## **10. Conclusion and Call to Action**

The **Northern Region Pensioners Convention (NPC)** strongly believes that a **well-connected, accessible, and affordable transport system** is **fundamental** to ensuring **older people can live independently, participate fully in society, and maintain a high quality of life**. The current transport system in the North East **fails to adequately meet the needs of older passengers**, with unreliable services, poor accessibility, and a lack of essential facilities creating **barriers to mobility**.

This report presents **clear, practical recommendations** to improve public transport **so that older people are not left isolated** or disadvantaged by inadequate services.

The **North East Local Transport Plan (LTP)** provides a **once-in-a-generation opportunity** to transform the region's transport network. However, for it to be truly effective, it **must prioritise the needs of older people**. NPC urges the **North East Combined Authority (NECA) and the Mayor** to take decisive action and commit to meaningful improvements.

---

## A Vision for a Fairer, More Accessible Transport System

Older people in the North East **should not have to struggle** to access public transport. A transport system that is **reliable, affordable, and accessible** is vital to:

- **Reducing isolation** – Many pensioners rely on public transport to visit family and friends, attend community events, and stay socially engaged. Poor transport options **exacerbate loneliness and exclusion**.
- **Providing access to essential services** – Older people need **reliable transport to reach GP surgeries, hospitals, pharmacies, and shops**. Without accessible transport, many struggle to attend medical appointments or carry out daily activities.
- **Supporting economic participation** – Many pensioners still work, volunteer, or contribute to local economies. **Affordable and reliable transport** allows them to remain **active in the workforce and community**.
- **Promoting sustainable travel** – Encouraging **older people to use public transport** rather than relying on private cars **reduces congestion and carbon emissions**, supporting the **region's environmental goals**.

By **prioritising pensioners' transport needs**, the NECA and the Mayor can **deliver a fairer and more inclusive transport system** that benefits the entire community.

---

# Key Actions Required from the North East Combined Authority and the Mayor

## 1. Prioritising Pensioners' Transport Needs in the Local Transport Plan

The **North East Local Transport Plan (LTP)** must **explicitly recognise** older people as a **priority group** and ensure that **transport policies reflect their needs**. NPC urges decision-makers to:

- **Guarantee pensioners' access to free 24-hour concessionary travel**, ensuring older people can travel at all times, including early mornings and late evenings.
- **Improve accessibility across all transport modes**, including buses, Metro, trains, and taxis, so that **no older person is excluded from travel due to mobility issues**.
- **Expand and enhance rural transport options**, ensuring pensioners in **smaller towns and villages are not cut off from essential services** due to poor connectivity.

## 2. Implementing Clear Timelines for Delivering Key Improvements

Promises of improvements must be backed by **actionable commitments**. NECA and the Mayor must:

- **Publish a clear timeline** outlining when key transport improvements will be implemented, including bus service enhancements, Metro expansions, and accessibility upgrades.
- **Allocate funding for transport improvements that directly benefit older people**, ensuring that investment is **targeted towards the most pressing issues**.
- **Set measurable targets for transport accessibility**, tracking progress in making **stations, bus stops, and travel information more inclusive** for older people.

## 3. Ensuring Continued Engagement with Older People in Transport Decision-Making

Older people **must have a say** in shaping the transport system they rely on. The NPC calls for:

- **Regular consultations with pensioner groups and accessibility advocates** to ensure that transport policy decisions reflect the lived experiences of older passengers.
  - **A dedicated pensioners' transport forum** within the North East Combined Authority, allowing **ongoing feedback and policy discussions** on transport accessibility and affordability.
  - **Stronger partnerships between NECA, local councils, and pensioners' organisations** to develop policies that truly address the needs of older people.
- 

## A Call for Urgent Action

The North East stands at a **pivotal moment** in shaping its transport future. Decisions made today will **determine whether older people have the freedom and independence to move around their communities** for years to come. Without bold action, many pensioners will **remain isolated, unable to access vital services, and excluded from public life** due to inadequate transport options.

This report makes it clear that:

- **Pensioners need a transport system that is reliable, affordable, and accessible.**
- **Investment in better transport infrastructure and services is essential.**
- **Older people must be actively involved in shaping transport policies.**

NPC **urges NECA, the Mayor, and transport operators to act now** and deliver a **transport network that truly meets the needs of older people**. A **well-connected, inclusive, and sustainable system will benefit everyone**—ensuring that **future generations of pensioners can live independently, travel safely, and stay connected to their communities**.

The **time for action is now**—pensioners cannot afford to wait.