



transportation professional

Free fares in Luxembourg



active travel

Schools support street closures and cycling
p5

reducing noise

New barrier installed on M1 near Wakefield
p7

new packaging

Delivering TP in a compostable starch wrapper
p9

productivity

Minister speaks up for technology at CIHT conference
p26

Glider breaks Belfast's car habit

Popularity of a new bus rapid transit scheme is helping to turn the tide on private car use in Belfast, with a second phase of the project now in planning.

Travel behaviours in Belfast look to be shifting away from the private car in favour of public transport, as demonstrated by the success of a bus rapid transit (BRT) system introduced to the city seven months ago.

The Northern Ireland capital's new 'Glider' system spans the city on a 22km east-west corridor with an additional spur running north from the centre to the Titanic Quarter – a key employment site.

The service operates much like a light rail system with off board ticketing, large halts similar to those used for the Luas in Dublin and 18m long vehicles resembling trams.

But rather than installing rails in the road Northern Ireland's Department for Infrastructure opted for a less expensive BRT scheme – coming in at £95M. This included installing new bus lanes to allow the system to bypass peak time traffic congestion, which is significant in the city, and resurfacing the entire route.

"Private car use in Northern Ireland is really high," says the Department's director for transport projects and business services Ciarán de Búrca. He explains that during the Troubles a lot of people moved out of Belfast but continued to drive in for work. "The difficulty then is that you have low density, which is the enemy of public transport.

"There was a need to make a step change and bring about modal shift," he emphasises, which required a public transport service providing – most crucially – journey time reliability.

Ciarán adds: "We are not anti-car, this was about making the best use of our road space. Some people objected to us putting in the bus lanes but a full glider vehicle carries the equivalent of half a kilometre of queuing cars."



↑ Glider services run along a 22km route across Belfast via the city centre TRANSLINK



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Ciarán de Búrca

Since its introduction in September, the Glider has far exceeded expectations for patronage. In the first six months of operation journey numbers are already hitting levels that the business case projected for 2031. This amounts to an additional 40,000 passenger journeys a week compared to bus patronage along the route in 2017. The system is also helping to reduce emissions and increase community integration.

"I'm gobsmacked at how quickly we have reached our 2031 target," says Ciarán. "I thought it would be a slow burn and people would gradually get used to it, but they have come to it in droves." He adds: "A big problem now is providing vehicles to meet demand."

Ciarán says the success of Belfast's BRT system has been in part down to extensive consultation and engagement. "We spent a lot of money on communications and I think the project caught people's imagination."

Lindsay Rainey from the project team played a key role in stakeholder engagement and is particularly proud of work that the Department did with the Inclusive Mobility Transport Advisory Committee to make the system accessible.

"Small changes can make a huge difference for people with visual impairment or wheelchairs," says Lindsay. "There has been a huge increase in people with disabilities using the service because it is accessible."

In addition to road resurfacing the project involved a package of upgraded footpaths, improved drainage, new public lighting and traffic signals and landscaping and environmental improvements.

New feeder bus services have been introduced for the Glider with a major park and ride site installed at Dundonald in the east and a transport hub at Colin town centre in the west.

Second phase in the pipeline

Calls are increasing in volume to bring the Glider network to north and south Belfast with an extension to Queen's University and City Hospital, explains Ciarán de Búrca.

Plans for this second phase are included in the proposed Belfast Region City Deal and a strategic outline business case with preliminary design options has been developed for a north-south route, likely to cost £110M.

But, says Ciarán: "There is an issue with decision making due to us not currently having a Minister." Northern Ireland has been without a Government since January 2017 when a power sharing arrangement collapsed.

A particularly challenging decision requiring a Minister will need to be taken on the route through north Belfast, where divisions between unionist and nationalist communities remain sensitive.