

Transport Committee call for evidence: mobility scooters Response submitted on behalf of Independent Age

About Independent Age

Independent Age works to keep older people independent and out of poverty by providing them with practical support, financial help and lifelong friendship.

We focus on supporting those who:

- Are over 70
- Are in financial need
- Are lonely or isolated
- Have made a sustained and significant contribution to society, particularly through voluntary work

The charity has around 6000 current service users across the UK and Ireland. It is currently developing its services in order to better meet the needs of older people in today's society. Our aim is to make sure that all those we help are receiving their entitlements from statutory and other providers and then to provide additional support tailored to the individual's particular needs. This support is likely to be a combination of:

- Regular befriending and support from an Independent Age volunteer visitor
- Financial help in emergencies
- Additional practical support, such as providing household items and toiletry packs for hospital visits
- Membership of the Independent Age community, including regular correspondence, magazines and cards on birthdays and at Christmas
- Increasingly, the opportunity to meet and correspond with other members of the Independent Age community

Our Research

At Independent Age our experience is specifically in the context of older people. We have supplied over 200 mobility scooters in the past three years. Our response is therefore based on anecdotal evidence from frontline staff, beneficiaries and volunteers combined with the following research:

- I. Our **Annual Survey 2008** and our **Interim Survey 2009**, in which a series of topical questions on life, society, and our services were posed to 6,500 and 3000 of our beneficiaries respectively, to which 3,315 and 1,579 responded.
- II. A series of **focus groups and interviews** conducted by a research agency on behalf of Independent Age in **2008**. Seven focus groups were held comprising between three and seven beneficiaries, and each lasted between one and a half to two hours. Eighteen in-depth interviews were conducted involving one interviewer and one respondent, and in some cases respondents were paired, involving some couples. These interviews lasted between 45 minutes and an hour and a half. In total, 69 respondents were interviewed across three regions in England, including the North East, the Midlands and the South West.
- III. A series of **focus groups and interviews** conducted by Independent Age in **2009**. Nine focus groups were held comprising between four and nine beneficiaries, and each lasted between one and a half to two hours. Four in-depth interviews were conducted involving one interviewer and one respondent, and in one case a married couple. These lasted between forty five minutes and an hour and a half. Groups took place in London, Newcastle, Cardiff, Eastbourne and Lincoln, and 61 respondents were interviewed in total.

- 1.1 Independent Age would like to stress that while it is undoubtedly vital to ensure that mobility scooters are safe for both users and the public, we must avoid restrictions on usage that could affect the ability of older people to retain their mobility and independence.
- 1.2 At Independent Age we have not only experienced firsthand the effect that a loss of mobility can have on an older person's quality of life via our frontline services, but conducted quantitative and qualitative research in this area. Our findings demonstrate that 91% and 85% of Independent Age beneficiaries, respectively, cite independence and the ability to get around as essential or very important to their well-being¹. In addition, over half (56%) of those we support have a disability or serious health condition², two thirds live alone and one in twenty have contact with friends and family once a year or never³. 22% of Independent Age beneficiaries say that a lack of transport affects the contact they are able to have with family and friends⁴. Recognising and addressing the impact that a loss of mobility can have on an older persons' quality of life is therefore crucial to addressing social isolation.
- 1.3 Anecdotal evidence from Independent Age staff, beneficiaries and volunteers, suggests that in the vast majority of cases a mobility scooter grants independence to those previously forced to rely on others for help. The research conducted by the charity in focus groups during 2009, shows that mobility scooters enable older people to remain in contact with their friends and family, stay in touch with social networks and the local community, as well as undertake essential journeys, such as to their hospital, GP or dentist.

(Female focus group respondent, Lincoln) "I hate to think what my life would be like without it. I do everything on it! It's my lifeline".

- 1.4 If safety concerns do arise regarding the use of mobility scooters, it is important to recognise that this can be due to a lack of awareness and understanding in society of the needs of those with restricted mobility. While a significant number of our beneficiaries see their scooter as a lifeline, a number of problems appear to accompany this. Retail environments, for example, can be problematic and potentially hazardous. In these situations the problem is not necessarily the use of mobility scooters, but rather the failure of shops to provide a safely accessible environment:

(Male focus group respondent, Lincoln) "Display stands are an absolute nightmare, especially around Christmas because they move everything closer".

(Female focus group respondent, Lincoln) "Lots of department stores have lifts, but they're often too small for scooters. You can drive in but you can't see behind you to reverse out. Lots of them have extra space in the toilets too, but it's pointless if you can't get into them in the first place. Too often there's a display stand in the way or the door is just too small".

¹ Independent Age Annual Survey 2008

² Independent Age Interim Survey 2009

³ Independent Age Annual Survey 2008

⁴ Ibid

A number of focus group respondents have reported a lack of understanding and support from staff:

(Male focus group respondent, Lincoln) "They look at you like you're not supposed to be there. One woman asked me to leave. I don't understand it, prams are allowed in!"

We must also consider whether local communities are designed to safely and adequately meet the needs of those with mobility problems. Focus group participants complained that their local areas could be very difficult to negotiate:

(Male focus group respondent, Eastbourne) "I have to go halfway to where I don't want to go, just to get back to where I want to start. That's just where the slope is. It's so frustrating!"

A significant number commented on a lack of public awareness, and in some cases disregard, for those using mobility scooters:

(Female focus group respondent, Lincoln) "People on their mobile phones just don't see you. They run into you and then look at you like it's your fault. I've been sworn at a number of times before".

1.5 In order to minimise problems and safety concerns, the sensible assessment of an individual's capability and the appropriate matching of a scooter to meet their needs is crucial to avoiding problems.