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Foreword



The Smartpass is one of the most cherished benefits received by older people in Northern Ireland. Its value is immeasurable.

For older people, it provides social, financial and health benefits. It also means older people are more mobile, spending their money in more places, which clearly benefits the economy. The Smartpass scheme provides stability for the public transport system. Without it, bus and rail services for everyone would suffer. Finally, more older people using public transport rather than their cars helps the environment and cuts down on traffic congestion.

In recent years, some have suggested means-testing the Smartpass or withdrawing it from certain age groups. These people fail to recognise the true value of the Smartpass. It's time to change that. Instead of talking about who deserves the Smartpass, or what money could be saved from cutting it, let's talk about what the Smartpass enables older people to do. These activities actually save money, help the economy and secure a better public transport system for everyone.

With an ageing population, many are concerned about the increasing cost of providing the Smartpass scheme. Since the Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament began four years' ago, the cost of the Smartpass scheme has increased by more than a quarter (28 per cent). However, journeys taken by older people during the same period have only increased by 6 per cent. These figures demonstrate that there are other factors which impact on the cost of the Smartpass scheme. In 2014/15 the average number of journeys per Smartpass in circulation was 42 journeys – less than one journey per week. Think about what these journeys are being used for; things like shopping, visiting friends or family, attending health appointments. Think about the benefits these journeys bring to the person's health and wellbeing and to the economy.

Last year, Age Sector Platform helped to launch the UK-wide 'Hands Off' campaign; defending the need for universal pensioner benefits. The Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament has formally supported the protection of the Smartpass for all older people regardless of income. This call will appear in the Pensioners Parliament Election Manifesto for the upcoming Northern Ireland Assembly election.

We must ensure that all political parties in Northern Ireland are fully aware of the benefits the Smartpass has for older people and wider society; and ensure that all parties commit to protecting the 60+ and Senior Smartpass schemes.

Michael Monaghan
Chair of Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament

Cost and usage based on information provided by NI Assembly Research and Information Service
(August 2015)

Executive Summary

- 99% of those surveyed who were eligible for a Smartpass had one.
- More than a third (35%) of those surveyed use their pass a couple of times a week, and almost one in five (19%) use it once a month. Fewer than one in ten (7%) use it every day, and 2% use it less than every six months.
- Three quarters (76%) of those surveyed use their pass for shopping. Slightly less (71%) use it to meet up with friends or family and for leisure activities. Almost half (47%) use their pass to attend health appointments.
- Three quarters (75%) of those surveyed said the Smartpass keeps them more mobile and active. More than two thirds (69%) said it helps them keep in touch with friends and family. More than half (56%) agreed that the Smartpass prevents them from feeling lonely / isolated.
- Three quarters (75%) of those surveyed said if they didn't have their Smartpass they would use public transport less, with more than two thirds (69%) saying they would rely more on a car or other transport.
- Despite the fact that rural areas generally have fewer and less frequent public transport services than urban areas, it appears that older people living in rural areas still value the Smartpass. 98% of rural older people surveyed who were eligible had a Smartpass; compared to 99% of urban older people surveyed.
- Rural older people do not use their Smartpass as frequently as those living in urban areas; with only 4% using it every day compared to 9% in urban areas.
- More than one in three (36%) have used their Smartpass for rural community transport.
- Nine out of ten (91%) do not agree with means-testing the Smartpass. If the Smartpass application process involved providing proof of income, less than half (49%) would still have applied.
- Almost half (45%) said they could not afford to do all of the things they do now if they didn't have their Smartpass.
- Of those aged 60 or over, 9% continue to work part-time or full-time. Almost two thirds (65%) of these people said they continued to work for 'financial reasons'.

Who completed the Smartpass Survey?

The survey collected 1,342 responses from older people (aged 50+) in Northern Ireland.

- 38% male
- 62% female

Responses by age group

Age group	%
50 - 59	3.3%
60 - 64	19.2%
65 - 69	33.7%
70 - 74	25.2%
75 - 79	12.1%
80 or over	6.5%

Responses by council area

Council	%
Antrim & Newtownabbey	8.3%
Ards & North Down	25.5%
Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon	8.3%
Belfast City	10.7%
Causeway Coast & Glens	8.0%
Derry City & Strabane	7.0%
Fermanagh & Omagh	8.9%
Lisburn & Castlereagh City	11.4%
Mid & East Antrim	4.5%
Mid Ulster	1.6%
Newry, Mourne & Down	5.7%

63% live in an urban area, 37% in a rural area

67% have a disability or long term health condition

90% do not work, 7% work part-time, 3% work full-time

Smartpass uptake and usage

99% of those surveyed who were eligible for a Smartpass had one. For those eligible (people aged 60 or over), the main reasons for not applying were:

1. Public transport in my area doesn't meet my needs (40%)
2. I have access to a car and prefer to use it (33%)
3. I have difficulty boarding buses and/or trains (27%)

More than a third (35%) of those surveyed use their pass a couple of times a week, and almost one in five (19%) use it once a month. Fewer than one in ten (7%) use it every day, and 2% use it less than every six months.

More than a third (36%) have used their Smartpass for rural community transport.

Three quarters (76%) of those surveyed use their pass for shopping. Slightly less (71%) use it to meet up with friends or family and for leisure activities. The next most popular activity was going on day trips around Northern Ireland and beyond, with two out of three (69%) using it for this reason. Finally, almost half (47%) use their pass to attend health appointments.

The Smartpass brightens my existence; helping me financially, keeping me fitter and more in touch with friends - hence happier and healthier.

It's the only good thing about getting old! If it were not for the Smartpass I would not do half the things I am doing at the moment.

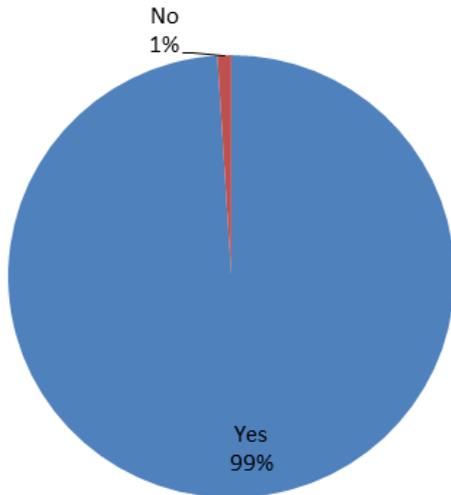
The Smartpass is a lifeline to me and my friends. Otherwise we would be confined to our local area.

I would be devastated if my Smartpass was to be taken away. I would miss seeing my friends and having days out with them.

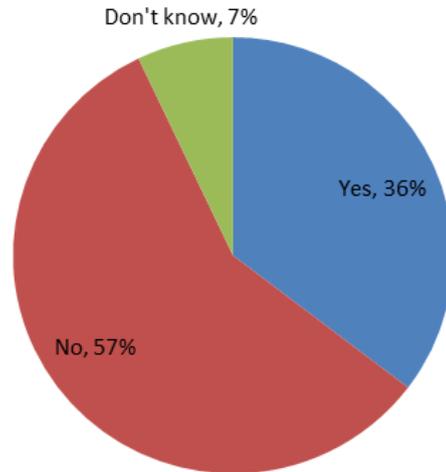
I am very grateful for the pass, it helped me when I had to attend hospital for treatment. It meant I didn't have to trouble my friends and family for lifts.

The Smartpass gets me to the doctor when I probably wouldn't bother otherwise.

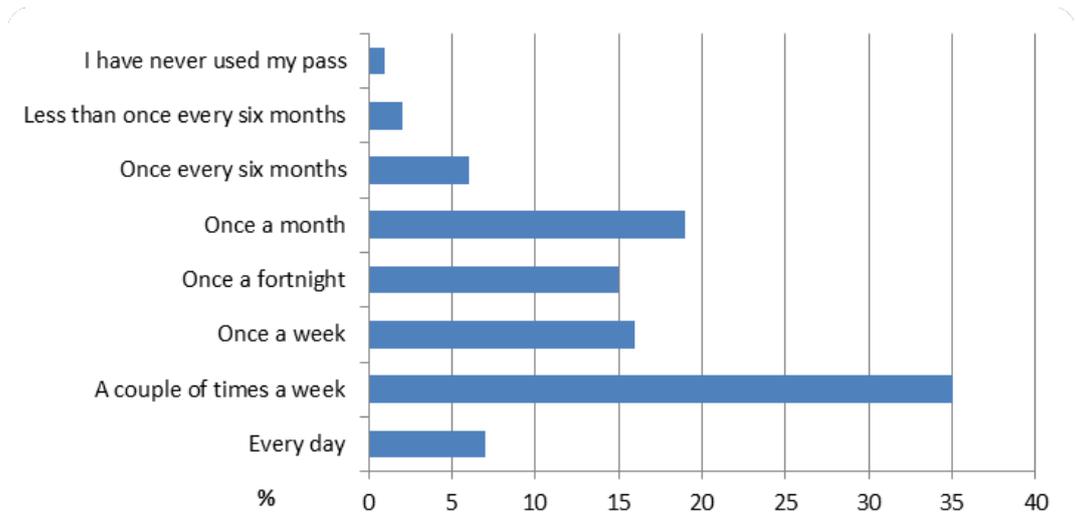
Do you currently have the 60+ or Senior Smartpass?



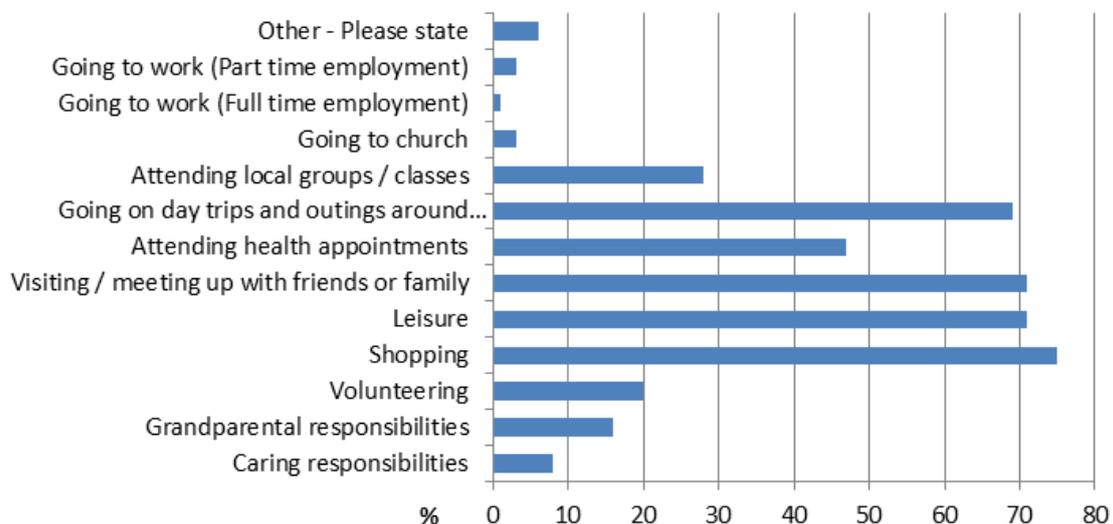
Have you ever used your Smartpass for rural community transport?



How often do you use your Smartpass?



What activities do you use your Smartpass for?



The impact of the Smartpass

Three quarters (75%) of those surveyed said the Smartpass keeps them more mobile and active. More than two thirds (69%) said it helps them keep in touch with friends and family. More than half (56%) agreed that the Smartpass prevents them from feeling lonely / isolated.

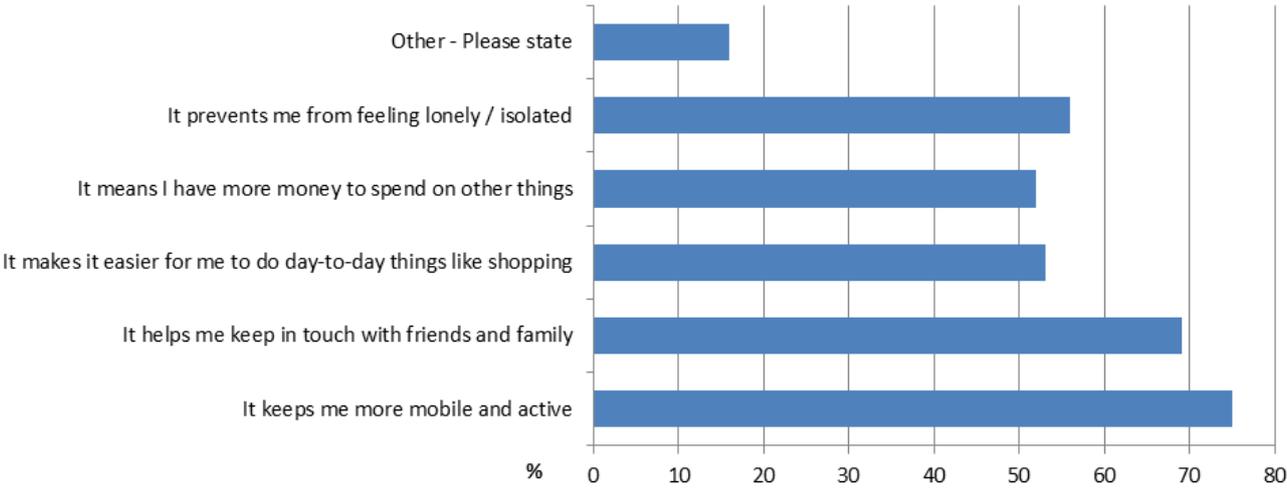
Comments emphasised the value of the Smartpass in maintaining an active lifestyle, with many highlighting the significance of this is preventing physical and mental ill-health.

In relation to visiting friends/family, many of those surveyed spoke of the freedom the Smartpass allows them in meeting up with their peers and seeing their children/grandchildren - providing important social, societal and health benefits.

Numerous comments illustrated the value of the Smartpass in tackling isolation and loneliness, with many highlighting the negative impact it would have on their physical and mental wellbeing if they were unable to 'get out and about'.

Finally, many of those selecting 'other' discussed their lack of confidence in driving and the way in which the Smartpass allows them to avoid stressful traffic and parking situations.

What impact does the Smartpass have on your life?



I lost my husband a short time ago and feel very isolated. The Smartpass helps me to get out and about.

Without the Smartpass, people would be sitting on their own in their homes getting depressed creating a bigger burden on the NHS for treatment.

The Smartpass is my key to being active. I walk miles every day and have greatly enhanced my general health. I use my pass to get home when I have reached my limit.

I would hate to think how my life would be without my Smartpass. I am able to visit my son in Dublin and my daughter in Bangor. After my husband died 5 years ago I was lonely and depressed.

There are times when I feel lonely and I just get on a bus or train and have a nice day out and about.

I think I would be housebound if I didn't have my Smartpass.

I have sat beside some older people in public transport and I often hear that if it wasn't for the Smartpass they would not see their grandchildren so frequently and their grandchildren are their lifeline!

I think it is an absolutely amazing scheme. I have met so many people, had so much interaction, so much fun and it has added such a quality of life to many of us.

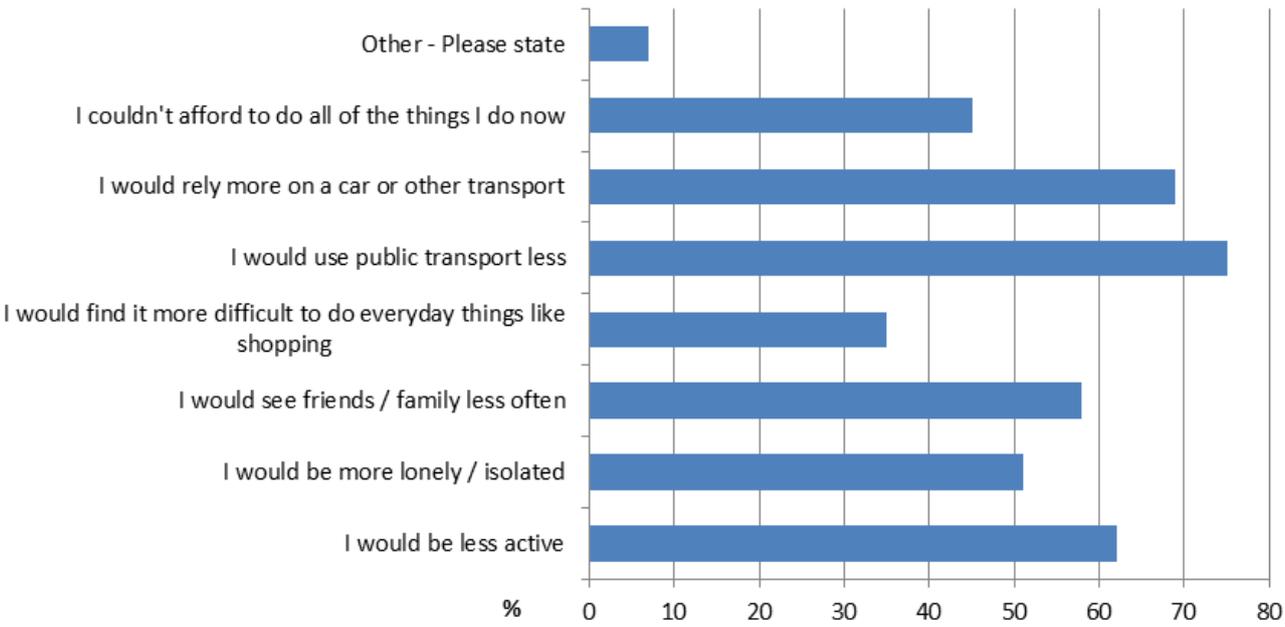
Getting out and about is a lifestyle which helps keep mind and body alert. The Smartpass makes this possible.

The Smartpass allows me to go further afield, without the worry of driving and parking.

Three quarters (75%) of those surveyed said if they didn't have their Smartpass they would use public transport less, with more than two thirds (69%) saying they would rely more on a car or other transport. Aside from the impact on older people, clearly this move away from public transport would have a negative impact on the environment and traffic congestion.

Echoing the responses to the previous question, almost two thirds (62%) said they would be less active if they didn't have their Smartpass, with more than half agreeing that they would see family/friends less often (58%) and would be more lonely/isolated (51%).

What would be the impact if you did not have your Smartpass?



Just think what the traffic would be like if everyone who now uses a Smartpass used cars instead.

My husband has a Smartpass. We have started using the train more often. This benefits the environment as it is one less car on our roads.

The Smartpass encourages the use of public transport reducing the pressure on the roads.

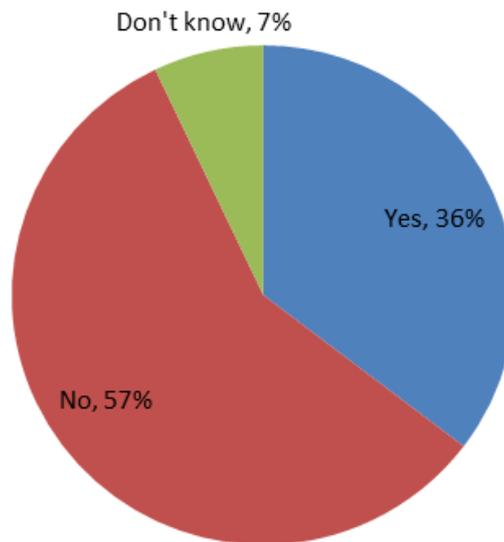
Rural use of the Smartpass

Despite the fact that rural areas generally have fewer and less frequent public transport services than urban areas, it appears that older people living in rural areas still value the Smartpass. 98% of rural older people surveyed who were eligible had a Smartpass; compared to 99% of urban older people surveyed.

Unsurprisingly, rural older people do not use their Smartpass as frequently as those living in urban areas; with only 4% using it every day compared to 9% in urban areas. Both rural and urban older people are, however, most likely to use their pass a couple of times a week - almost a third (31%) of those in rural areas compared to 38% of their urban peers.

More than one in three (36%) have used their Smartpass for rural community transport.

Have you ever used your Smartpass for rural community transport?



My Smartpass is a seriously vital part of my life, especially living in a country area. It is essential for keeping in contact with friends and family.

I use my Smartpass for community transport to a luncheon club each week.

Living in a rural area means that I have to travel to shop, work, see people, volunteer and get to medical appointments. I have dyspraxia which means I can't drive so I am dependent on public transport.

Should the Smartpass be means-tested?

Of those surveyed, nine out of ten (91%) do not agree with means-testing the Smartpass. If the Smartpass application process involved providing proof of income, less than half (49%) would still have applied.

Almost half (45%) said they could not afford to do all of the things they do now if they didn't have their Smartpass. Of those aged 60 or over, 9% continue to work part-time or full-time. Almost two thirds (65%) of these people said they continued to work for 'financial reasons'.

Many of those surveyed did not believe wealthy older people would use public transport and challenged the cost of administering a means-tested system. Comments also highlighted the difficulty in making ends meet within a limited pension, and many of those surveyed conveyed a sense of entitlement after years of working hard and paying their way.

People who have a good income do not use public transport, therefore they do not use their Smartpass, therefore it is not costing any money.

Those who don't need it don't use it. Means testing might deter people from applying who need a Smartpass through reason of health, mobility or rural isolation.

After working for a number of years - paying tax and insurance, the SmartPass is a real help. I would not welcome after all this time to have my private affairs delved into.

I worked for over 52 years paying taxes for all that time and never having been a drain on public expenditure. I believe that my Smartpass has been paid for many times over!

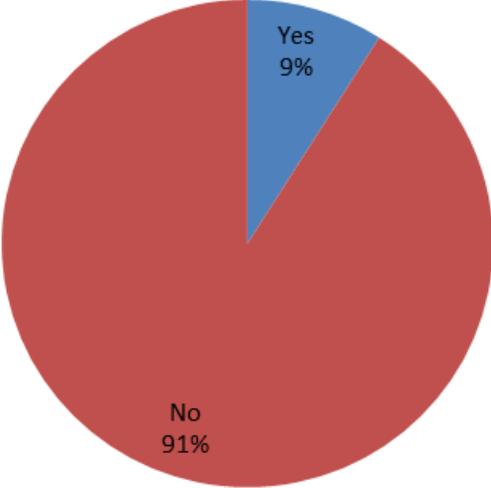
The basic essentials of food and heat are expensive and it is a relief to know that the cost of travel is not another burden, especially after working and paying taxes for 40 years.

If I had to pay for public transport everywhere I had to go, my life on a pension would be very limited.

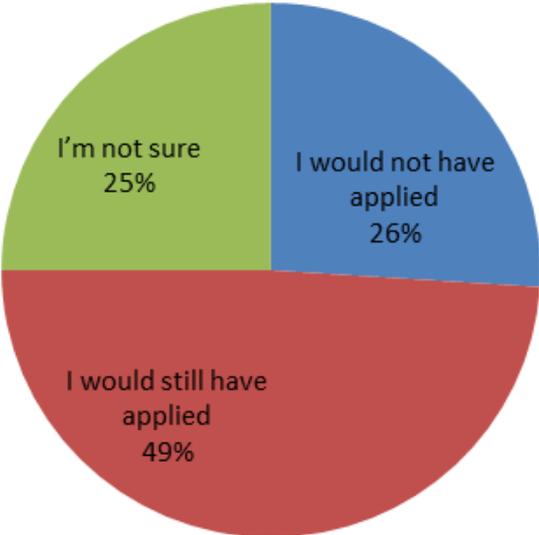
Means testing would create a hierarchy among pensioners. Most pensioners are very private people and might not apply for the pass even though they really would need it.

It's the only state aid I receive and without it I would have a much poorer quality of life.

Do you think the Smartpass should be means-tested (i.e. provided to those on lower incomes only)?



If the Smartpass application process involved means-testing (providing information and proof of your income), how would that have affected your willingness to apply?



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