

Translink Response to Belfast City Council Consultation on the Extension of Sunday Shopping Hours – April 2026

Introduction

Translink welcomes the opportunity to respond to Belfast City Council's consultation on proposals to extend Sunday trading hours in the city.

As Northern Ireland's principal public transport provider, Translink delivers approximately 13,000 bus and rail services each day and recorded over 84 million passenger journeys in 2024/25. Around 600,000 of these journeys are undertaken on a weekly basis within Belfast.

As a public body sponsored by the Department for Infrastructure (DfI), Translink is committed to providing safe, accessible and sustainable public transport, supporting economic development and connecting people to employment, education, services and social opportunities.

Public transport is a key enabler of economic activity and plays a central role in urban development and connectivity, ensuring that people within and beyond the city boundary can access Belfast city centre. Reliable and effective public transport connections are essential for those who work, shop, and socialise in the city, supporting placemaking and contributing to a vibrant and prosperous urban core.

The wider economic value of public transport is well established. Research undertaken by Grant Thornton in 2019 indicated that every £1 invested in public transport returns approximately £4 in wider economic value. That research also found that Translink contributed £185 million to the local economy in 2019, equivalent to approximately £245 million in 2026 when adjusted for inflation.

Significant recent and ongoing investment further demonstrates the contribution of public transport to Belfast's growth and regeneration. This includes the delivery of Belfast Grand Central Station as Ireland's largest multi-modal transport hub, the new York Street Station (acting as a key connection point for Ulster University and the Cathedral Quarter), the roll-out of a zero-emission Metro fleet, the introduction of an hourly cross-border Enterprise service between Belfast and Dublin, the continued success of the Glider service, and progress towards the much-needed Phase 2 expansion.

In addition, the introduction of late-night services at weekends has played an important role in supporting Belfast's night-time economy.

Context

Translink services are integral to everyday life in Belfast and across Northern Ireland, supporting economic growth, social inclusion and environmental wellbeing, and contributing directly to the delivery of the Executive's Programme for Government.

However, a longstanding and well- documented challenge for public transport in Northern Ireland is funding. Public transport has been underfunded for a number of years, placing sustained pressure on Translink's ability to maintain and develop Public Service Obligation (PSO) services. Many of these services are not commercially profitable but are socially essential, supporting access to employment, education, and services for a wide range of communities.

This funding context is directly relevant to Translink's response to the proposal to extend Sunday shopping hours. While Translink takes no position on the policy proposal itself and broadly recognises the potential economic benefits of measures that support Belfast's city centre, we must emphasise that, within the current financial settlement, there is no funding provision to extend public transport services on Sundays.

This applies across the network, including Metro and Glider services, as well as Ulsterbus, Goldliner, and NI Railways. Any extension of operating hours or increase in service frequency would require additional dedicated funding.

This position is consistent with the approach taken to late- night services, which currently operate on Friday and Saturday nights only. These services operate on a pilot basis and are supported through specific funding arrangements, including contributions linked to supporting the city's night- time economy. They are not funded to operate on additional days or during extended trading hours on Sundays or other public holidays.

Translink recognises that there is demand for enhanced Sunday service provision, particularly along certain corridors, and draft plans exist to introduce improvements across the network over time. However, given the current funding pressures, Translink would not be in a position to extend or enhance Sunday bus or rail services in line with any earlier opening or extended trading hours.

Conclusion

With appropriate and sustainable funding, public transport delivers wide- ranging benefits across Northern Ireland, including urban revitalisation, reduced congestion, improved air quality, progress towards climate targets, and improved access to health, education and employment.

While Translink does not take a position on the proposed extension of Sunday shopping hours, we acknowledge the ambition behind the consultation and the range of issues raised by stakeholders.

From a public transport perspective, however, and in light of the significant and ongoing funding challenges currently faced by Translink, there is no capacity at this time to extend or enhance Sunday public transport services.