



PART TWO: PHYSICAL DISABILITY

The way we design transport is not equal

For the roughly one-in-five in the UK who are disabled, day-to-day travel is a greater challenge than for the able-bodied, reports **Laura Laker**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laura Laker is a freelance journalist with 10 years' experience writing on cycling, active travel and, more recently, micromobility for national and specialist titles. She is also working with the University of Westminster's Active Travel Academy – a new mobility think tank.

The UK Government's Inclusive Mobility Strategy sets out an ambition that people with disabilities have the same access to transport as everyone else, able to travel confidently, easily and without extra cost. It envisions a transport system with equal access for disabled people by 2030, with future transport technologies and services designed inclusively.

For Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson, British Paralympian, disability campaigner and House of Lords peer, it's the latest in a long line of unfulfilled promises. She says: "In the mid-1990s, I sat on the Disability Council for the Disability Discrimination Act. We were promised in 2020 [everything] would be accessible, and back then it seemed a long way off."

Although some progress has been made, for wheelchair users it is far too little. "We are nowhere near step free", says Grey-Thompson. "It's still way too complicated for disabled people to travel."

"Successive Governments have pushed it into the long grass."

In a legal and ethical analysis of transport for people with disabilities, report authors Heather Bradshaw-Martin and Catherine Easton say "lack of adequate independent transport excludes people from employment, social life, education and access to medical care", with "significant negative social, health and economic impacts, especially for older people".

They found transport problems the major reason disabled people were unable to gain employment, or keep a job.

Almost every element of our transport network is problematic, including how services are administered. Missing links in provision mean people don't take the trips they need to conduct a normal, fulfilling life. For people with disabilities, going to the shops, to work, getting on a bus, crossing a road are still fraught with stress and frustration and, in the worst cases, a risk of injury.

Government recognises the economic cost. The Inclusive Mobility Strategy sets out the aim that a million more disabled people are in work by 2027, citing the

already £249 billion spending power of households with a disabled person in them. In 2012, 46.3% of disabled people of working age were in employment compared with 76.4% of those without disabilities.

Disabilities are as unique as human beings themselves, and individuals may be impacted by similar conditions in different ways.

Kay Inckle, a disability researcher, says: "There are massive transport barriers for people with physical disabilities, including trains and buses which, although they are branded accessible, in practice they aren't. There is a lack of joined-up thinking in transport policy."

Inckle says perceptions of disabled people are often stereotyped and limited.

"Disabled people are also only ever considered in the same group as older people, never as commuters, parents, students etc. and this creates policy and infrastructure which excludes and limits disabled people and does not meet our needs."



► Infrastructure and policies created on the assumption disabled people are dependent on others, and don't travel alone, builds in dependence, campaigners say, resulting in infrastructure and equipment that cannot easily be used by a lone disabled traveller. This includes heavy wheelchairs, tactile paving that stops wheelchairs dead and meanwhile a lack of joined up thinking creates end-to-end journeys with missing links, meaning disabled people can't make trips, such as new accessible buses serving neighbourhoods without drop kerbs, or new accessible trains serving stations that aren't step free.

TRAINS

"A lot of my life is spent trying to book train journeys," Grey-Thompson says. "The alternative is turning up and having to beg to be let on a train."

As a wheelchair user, Grey-Thompson estimates wasting at least an additional two hours each week on train travel, including booking the mandatory 24 hours ahead, turning up an hour beforehand and waiting for assistance.

She doesn't drink for two hours before travelling, in case the disabled toilet is out of service. Even a former professional athlete, a person with considerable resilience, finds it exhausting.

Although there are "amazing" staff, service is highly

variable, with both her and Inckle reporting being left on trains at termini for tens of minutes, including late at night. Both have had to climb out of their wheelchairs on a train, push their chairs onto the platform and crawl out after them.

Hugh Huddy, of the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB), says a reduction in trained staff, and a rise in unmanned stations, is also a major issue for people with visual impairments, who struggle to get the assistance they need.

"If you aren't familiar with a station, there's no one to show which platform you need, where are the seats and ramps, where is the information point; none of that is addressed at an unmanned station," he says.

The variability of rolling stock means variation in height gaps between the train and platform and grab rail locations. Blind and partially sighted people have fallen into gaps between the train and platform, resulting

in personal injury claims and considerable distress.

Audible train announcements are inconsistent and, as with wheelchair users, blind people are required to book train assistance 24 hours in advance.

"Operators have tried to argue it is a resource-intensive issue and it's incumbent on the individual to plan 24 hours ahead," says Huddy. "Everyone in this country has always known there is a proportion of people who are blind and partially sighted, or have a disability. As we have stations open and everyone can turn up and travel any time, it is reasonable to expect 5% of people turning up with some need for assistance. They have a need to travel like everyone else."

"The (rail) companies argue that they move staff onto the booking floor. We haven't got any evidence of that working. Blind and partially sighted people don't feel they are getting a fair chance to buy tickets."

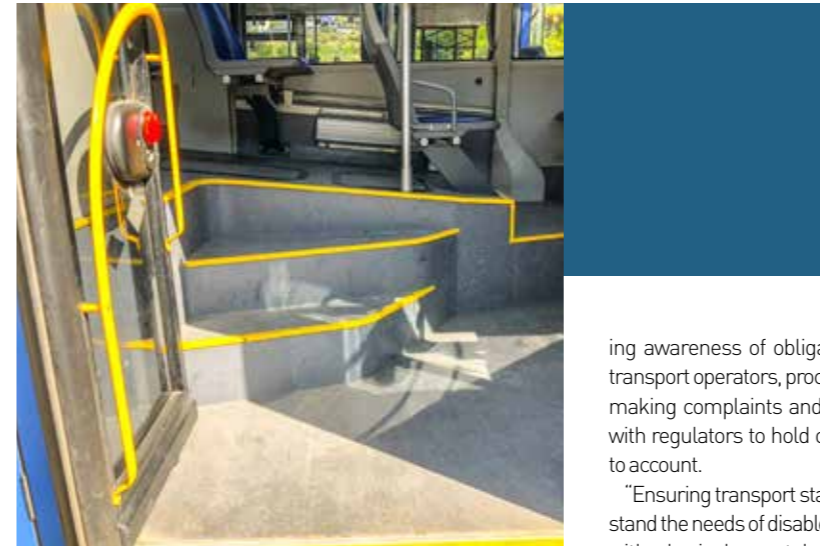
"Booking office staff would know where you can get off and take the (guide) dog for a wee halfway through your journey. Staff on the platform can't access that information."

Grey-Thompson sees "turn up and go" services as crucial in improving disabled people's experiences of travel; something Transport for London (TfL) introduced some years ago on its transport network. According to TfL "turn-up-and-go" is now established across the network, with staff on hand to help customers board trains, including using platform ramps, and meet them at interchange or destination stations, without the need to pre-book.

"If TfL can do it on the tube network [train operating companies] can do it on a three-hour journey", Grey-Thompson says. "In the past 18 months, among a lot of train companies and Network Rail, there has been a recognition that what has been delivered isn't good enough, but it's put into the 'too hard' box."

"I just want the same miserable experience of commuting as everyone else," she says. For deaf people, the issue is a lack of visible notifications at stations, an over-reliance on audible messages, or written messaging in wordy language when, for some deaf people, BSL is the first language, and English a second language. This can be stressful in the case of last-minute platform changes and worse in an emergency.

Daniel Clements, operations manager at the Royal Association for Deaf People, says: "We see a high percentage of deaf



people suffer with their mental health purely because there's barriers in place, where everything has a consequence, going somewhere, being anxious. Seeing stuff on the news, thinking, if I go into a situation and can't hear, how will I cope?"

Clements says visible trained staff helps – and existing infrastructure can be tweaked, such as digital billboards programmed to provide pre-recorded messaging by BSL interpreters, as well as things like flashing beacons on fire alarms.

"Those staff who are there to help need to stand out so we know who to go to. We're not saying they need to walk around with a plaque, saying 'come to me if you're disabled', that's not attractive at all, but it's about encouraging that message, saying if there are people out there (to help), make it clear and obvious. If there isn't, what are you as an industry doing about it?"

"It's actually not categorising disabled groups into areas of disability, more about what can be done to support people in general, what are the reasonable adjustments, which countries are doing it well?"

TfL used hologram people on escalators, speaking to customers. "If they can do that, why not with someone signing?" asks Clements.

According to the Government's Inclusive Transport Strategy, it is working with rail industry and consumer groups to support the introduction of a rail ombudsman which, it says, "will be a significant benefit for consumers and will improve service quality".

"We want to see this model developed to cover all transport modes, giving confidence to disabled consumers that should they face poor quality service, or exclusion, on any part of their journey, their dispute will be sorted quickly and the likelihood of it happening again in future reduced," it says.

The strategy's five themes include rais-

ing awareness of obligations on transport operators, processes for making complaints and working with regulators to hold operators to account.

"Ensuring transport staff understand the needs of disabled people with physical, mental, cognitive or sensory impairments and can provide better assistance" is part of that, as well as improving information, in all formats, before and during a journey.

Improving physical infrastructure, and ensuring technological advances and new business models provide opportunities for all, and that disabled people are involved from the outset in their design, is also mentioned.

Grey-Thompson believes such conditions should be written into procurement documents. She recognises cheap, easy solutions are few but says disabled people are tired of waiting.

"I will be dead before we have inclusive transport. A lot of businesses have improved and there's more accessible taxis but seriously, do we have to wait another 10 years?"

BUSES

People with hearing and sight impairments need audio-visual information on all bus routes, if they are to travel independently without undue stress – with crucial information such as the next stop, the bus number and destination.

Driver training has improved the experience of disabled passengers on London's bus network along with network-wide on-board audible and visual information. Now, according to TfL, 95% of London's bus stops are accessible. While the Government is increasing on-board audio-visual (AV)

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information on bus services across Britain, with £2m for AV equipment on buses, this is unlikely to yield nationwide provision.

"If you don't have it, it makes using buses very difficult if you are visually impaired," says Huddy. If multiple buses serve a single bus stop, without audible notifications it can make identifying the right bus impossible.

As part of its Inclusive Transport Strategy, the Government is also introducing a framework to ensure bus operators implement mandatory driver training.

Driver anti-assault screens can hamper passenger communication. London bus drivers swapped places with blind people, who sat in the cab of stationary buses, to improve driver empathy. Huddy believes the cumulative effect of driver training over almost a decade has improved service across the network.

The problem, Huddy says, is "it's quite soft influencing, and doesn't substantially change anything. If [a driver] can't be bothered and they hate their job there's not much you can do".

Other issues include bus services being cut, stopping before termini, being redirected without appropriate warning, or serving station without obvious kerbs, where blind people can inadvertently walk into the carriageway.

This can be frightening for people with hearing impairments or deafness, when everyone gets off a bus, or the bus stops, without knowing why.

Clements says if a bus doesn't turn up, it's hard for deaf people to get the information they need, and they can't simply phone a cab firm instead.

The Equality Act requires service providers to make reasonable adjustments for people with different needs, but what that constitutes isn't always clear, ►





► and too few service providers succeed. Clements says it's more a case of "turn up, see who's working on the day and see what their attitudes are towards disability". Regardless of how confident someone is in demanding their rights, he says, "accessibility should be accessible for all".

Clements believes there are innovative solutions to communicating with all customers in an easier-to-access format, such as repurposing digital display boards with BSL interpreters or simplified English – it just takes a bit of thought and innovation – and talking to experts in organisations that specialise in different user needs.

"It can't be a tick box exercise...it's more about putting into practice if you're compassionate towards individuals; it's communication skills, that's what it comes down to."

"How are you sending that message to the disabled communities that you are a welcoming and accessible place, because everyone gets that assumption wherever they go it's not welcoming and accessible because it never has been."

Buses often have one space for a wheelchair and if that space is taken up, it is a case of waiting for the next bus.

In the case of a court appeal involving a wheelchair-using bus passenger turned away because a parent with a pram wouldn't vacate the wheelchair space, Lady Justice Arden suggested three potential solutions. Those were that Parliament could strengthen powers of bus drivers to require people to vacate wheelchair spaces, "or create new duties on other passengers, or to campaign for a different design of buses".

As Clements put it: "Lots of disabled charities are there with open arms, willing to provide information and support."

ACTIVE TRAVEL

Most day-to-day trips are short, local journeys that can be done in an active way, including for many disabled people.

In an analysis of seven years of National Travel Survey data, University of Westminster's Reader in Transport, Dr Rachel Aldred, found disabled pedestrians were five times more likely to be injured by a motor vehicle, per mile walked, than non-disabled pedestrians. Aldred said any



efforts to reduce motor vehicle-pedestrian interactions and mitigate the impacts of those interactions, such as "school street" style closures (where cars are prevented from going up to the school gates at drop off and pick up times), should particularly benefit disabled pedestrians.

Isabelle Clement, director of disabled cycling charity, Wheels for Wellbeing, says: "Non-disabled people use their walking time to think about their day, plan. Disabled people can't do that, we have to concentrate. "Moving yourself around is a permanent stress. It involves a lot of planning. That's disabling in itself. The result is you have to have such a lot of emotional and physical energy just to get out of the door."

"I'm never as stressed as when I don't have my car or bike and am having to use pavements."

Clement relied on taxis and a car, until she discovered she could convert her wheelchair to a hand cycle. The British love for paving slabs is a particular issue for wheelchair users on pavements, for whom any

gap of more than a centimetre can stop them dead, or tip them from their chair. Drop kerbs can exponentially increase the effort required and the risk of tipping. The large bumps on the UK's tactile paving are hard to surmount in a wheelchair. With a converted handcycle, Clement says, it's far easier to navigate uneven surfaces – only steep cambers on roads can then tip a three-wheeled cycle sideways.

Inkle, like Clement, would like to see more recognition that many disabled people can cycle. She says: "Public Health England's Active Travel Strategy largely excludes disabled people and they are only ever considered in terms of walking and never cycling, even though cycling is much easier than walking or wheelchair propulsion for most people with physical disabilities."

Clement says often planners don't consult with disabled people, and Wheels for Wellbeing now offers training for those planning and building street infrastructure to give them first-hand experience of using a variety of cycles, as well as training to understand the experiences of disabled road users.

Sheffield City Region's Active Travel Commissioner (and Britain's most decorated Paralympian), Dame Sarah Storey, has been doing just that. "When we're talking about people going for a walk, we're talking about people utilising their wheelchair, too," she says.

Disabled people can't live anywhere they choose, with many new developments lacking accessible pavements, or access other than by car. "We need to have active travel much higher up the agenda in the first place so that if you're building a new housing estate or you're providing access to a new business park, then everything needs to be accessible from the very start."

Sheffield, she says, is designing cycle routes to accommodate non-standard cycles, as well as people with sensory impairments. On one route, in Bennetthorpe in Doncaster, Storey said they "up-designed" plans for a new cycle route following consultation with a nearby Deaf School and Blind and Partially Sighted Society, including kerb height and build materials. For deaf cyclists, protected cycling space means they are not surprised by drivers overtaking too close, or beeping them.

Storey adds: "We need to find out whether it is what's the best thing for the people who are the most likely to use (a piece of infrastructure) and how best to support them to learn a new layout of a junction, and the features of that junction that protect them and their fellow vulnerable road users."

Huddy says: "In a nutshell, people who are blind and partially sighted need to be able to tell where things are. That includes... where there are kerbs and tactile paving. When we have that sensory impairment, we need to get that information to navigate around and avoid obstacles through a combination of things, such as touch and hearing."

"Decluttering" streets and the removal of kerbs is problematic, as are "courtesy crossings"; the latter involves a negotiation between drivers and pedestrians, which breaks down when one party is unable to communicate visually.

Government recommends local authorities pause construction of "shared spaces" with vehicles and pedestrians, which incorporate a level surface, pending a review on the impact on disabled people – and Sheffield is following that guidance. Action on Hearing Loss says deaf people, especially those who lose hearing in later life, need a space where they can safely walk without the threat of vehicles.

Similarly, pavement parking impacts people with sight and hearing loss, as well as with physical disabilities, by introducing moving vehicles to a pedestrian "safe space", sometimes blocking the footpath and forcing pedestrians into the road.

The Government released a consultation in March to legislate for a nationwide ban on pavement parking in England and to introduce a new offence of obstructive pavement



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**ISABELLE CLEMENT,
WHEELS FOR WELLBEING**

parking.

Electric vehicles are hard for blind and partially sighted people to detect. As a result, EU regulations requires all electric vehicles built from 2021 to carry a sound, known as an audible vehicle alert system, or AVAS. However, according to Huddy, more than 200,000 vehicles have slipped through the net already, and that figure will rise before legislation comes into force.

AUTONOMOUS VEHICLES

Some see autonomous vehicles as a solution to unequal access to transport, including as a potentially cheaper alternative to taxis.

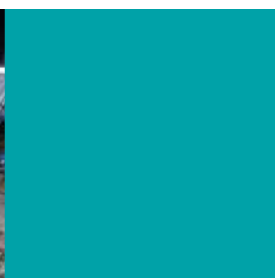
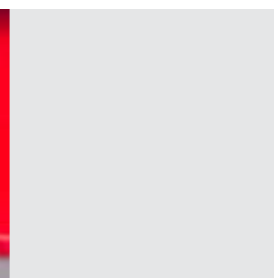
In response to a consultation by the Law Commission on Automated Vehicles [1], Hannah Bradshaw-Martin said of AV "one of the most significant ethical reasons for their development is the extension of the mobility benefits of the private car to those persons living with disabilities that interfere with their ability to drive".

However, for those with sight loss to benefit, Bradshaw-Martin argues the technology must be able to operate without a human who is capable of driving in the vehi-

SOURCES

[1] tinyurl.com/y7x957kd

[2] tinyurl.com/y9nsvpkl



cle, which would require changes to international definitions of "driver" to potentially include the car itself, which comes with its own problems.

The devil is, as ever, in the detail and while Bradshaw-Martin says computing has lagged behind in provision for disabled people, care is needed to ensure AV technology doesn't follow the same path.

The Government plans to establish a new stakeholder advisory group "involving local government, transport operators, disabled people's organisations and charities", as well as prioritising easier wins like staff training.

An All Party Parliamentary Group on disability is being set up involving Grey-Thompson, and an inter-ministerial Group on Disability and Society was set up in 2018 "to tackle the barriers disabled people face to realising their full participation in society" [2].

The Government's office for disability issues is seeking to encourage the social model of disability, implementing the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

A DfT spokesperson says: "We've made good progress to deliver our ambitious Inclusive Transport Strategy, but realise that there's still a long way to go."

"Our 'it's everyone's journey' campaign demonstrates we've all got a role to play in improving public transport for disabled passengers."

"We're also increasing the number of step-free rail travel and the availability of audible and visible information on-board buses – is helping more people travel with confidence." [ST](#)

Part three of this series on inclusive travel will look at age and will be published in the August issue.

**TURN OVER
FOR THE PEER
REVIEWS**