

**Response to Commons Select Committee’s Transport Enquiry June 2013**

**Trains, Planes And Automobiles – Disabled Service Users Experiences**

Any wheelchair user in the UK today who needs a wheelchair accessible vehicle to facilitate their travel is at high risk of being disappointed, inadequately accommodated or not accommodated at all, or being put at risk of injury; either as a result of inadequate vehicle and/or infrastructure design or inadequate training and/or awareness of service providers. The limitations of inadequate and ineffective vehicle and infrastructure design impact on many disabled people with physical impairments, but also can have a highly debilitating effect on persons with sensory or cognitive impairment.

The following comments reflect on the personal experiences of members and staff of Gateshead Access Panel (GAP) as well as those of the author. Separately appended is a copy of GAP’s report outlining local concerns from consultation on the proposed Local Transport Plan “LTP3” for Tyne and Wear in 2011. The issues identifies at that time are generally still relevant today.

**Physical Access**

**Rail Travel**

The provisions on current main line trains for wheelchair users such as myself are wholly inadequate and result in my receiving a 3rd class service on today’s trains in use on the East Coast Route between Edinburgh, Newcastle, Durham and Kings Cross. The reason for this is that the carriages are designed to carry wheelchair using passengers with the expectation that the disabled person will travel in their wheelchair, with a space for the wheelchair and higher level table for the person seated in their wheelchair. Whilst this may be suitable for some wheelchair users who usually travel in either public or private transport seated in their wheelchair, it is wholly unsuitable for others who have the ability to transfer to seating designed to be safe and supportive inside the vehicle / carriage.

When travelling in a wheelchair accessible vehicle, my preference is to transfer to a standard seat to ensure I am adequately supported and more safely seated. This is particularly important for someone like myself with a spinal injury. Although my original spinal injury is in the lumbar region, I also experience discomfort in my neck and shoulders due to nearly 30 years of using a “lightweight” manual wheelchair. Travelling in my wheelchair in a vehicle or train compartment is uncomfortable due to the increased movement my head and upper body has to compensate for, with my centre of gravity being higher and having little or no support or physical restraint to accommodate this movement.

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It should also be recognised that the vast majority of wheelchairs in use today are not crash tested, or designed to restrain someone when travelling in a vehicle. Use of a “lightweight” manual wheelchair is also essential to enable many active disabled people.

As regards the train carriage designs that have apparently improved to be more accommodating to passengers including wheelchair users over the past 20 years, they have not improved to accommodate persons like myself who need to transfer to the comfort and support of the standard seating provided for other non-disabled passengers. As the aisle width between the rows of seats in the carriage is too narrow for my wheelchair, or likely any manual wheelchair, I find the only seating available to me is that provided for any carer / assistant accompanying the wheelchair user. Such seats are not to the same standard as the seating for other passengers, even though the current national and European (Interoperability) guidance suggests that such seating should be to the same standard.

During a recent day trip to London using East Coast Trains, for a meeting at DCLG, I found the journey most uncomfortable due mainly to the upright backrest on the “assistant/carer” seating located opposite my parked wheelchair. Although I had successfully argued for seating to be reserved in the next adjacent row, as I knew from past experience that assistance seating was not adequate, I was unable to position my wheelchair close enough alongside to transfer to the partially reclined and more supportive standard seating.

By the time I returned to the north east that day, I was in considerable discomfort from pain in my neck and shoulders, which I had experienced with increasing discomfort during the return journey. As a result of these inadequate facilities, I feel I am wholly discriminated against due to not having access to seating that other passengers have the choice and access to use, and I currently have no wish to repeat the experience. I also believe it is important to note that whilst I did pay for a second class ticket for myself and my support assistant, without any discount for being a disabled traveller, I was subjected to a third class service in respect of the rail carriage accommodation.

The issue of the increasing size and weight of powered wheelchairs when occupied also needs consideration in relation to the design of ramps for main line train and metro train access, as many such ramps are likely to be found underrated for safe loading use with such wheelchairs. Where portable ramps are used on stations, this is also an issue for the safety of station staff who have to manoeuvre such ramps into place. The design of on-train ramps also needs consideration for safe loading capacity.

Two of our colleagues, both powered wheelchair users were married last June (2012) and for their honeymoon travelled south by train, but seated in their

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wheelchairs in separate parts of the train; with the bride in First Class and the Groom in Second Class, because they could not be accommodated in the same carriage. Why cannot rail carriage design be more flexible to carry more than one person seated in a wheelchair in one carriage, and why only two wheelchair accessible carriages per train with one in first and one in second class?

**Taxis, Private Hire and WAVs (Wheelchair Accessible Vehicles)**

Travelling in the back of a London type black cabs is also a problem for people like myself who need to transfer to the vehicles bench seat, as there is inadequate space to accommodate the wheelchair clear of the legs and feet of myself and my support assistant / carer accompanying me. This makes for an uncomfortable trip, particularly as with every turn of the vehicle the wheelchair tips back and forward even with the brakes applied to the chairs wheels; so I am continually trying to restrain the wheelchair from injuring either my companion or myself.

Although access to low-floor buses with ramps has seen some improvement over recent years, access to Wheelchair Accessible road vehicles for private or public use are generally not accommodated by the existing infrastructure provisions in cities, towns, villages and urban areas across the UK. Such failings include: -

- Lack of provision of raised kerbs and landings to accommodate ramped access from side access vehicles onto the footway, designed to minimise the ramp gradient.
- Lack of taxi ranks and taxi waiting areas for loading / unloading designed for rear access vehicles, i.e. with no drop kerb from footway and no space for access to ramp / platform lift.
- Lack of accessible on-street pick-up / drop-off or parking bays for Wheelchair Accessible Vehicles (WAVs) with either side or rear access, to accommodate use of ramps, platform lifts or hoists, with suitable space for manoeuvring wheelchairs on and off the vehicle and drop kerb access between bay and footway.

The latter of the above points impacts on access to taxis, private hire vehicles and also impacts on the many disabled people who rely on their use of their own or families private transport, including the thousands of WAV vehicle users who are supplied vehicles via the Motability Leasing Scheme.

The issue of the increasing size and weight of powered wheelchairs when occupied also needs consideration in relation to the design of ramps for vehicle

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access, as many are likely to be found underrated for their maximum safe working load use with such wheelchairs.

Although we have a wide potential variety of vehicles adapted as wheelchair accessible taxis, there has been a natural tendency for drivers and taxi companies to purchase the cheapest options, which do not necessarily meet the needs of disabled people. In some areas as in Gateshead and other parts of the North East, the use of Fiat Doblo adapted vehicles have been very popular with drivers, but most use two part (split) ramps, which can be unsafe to use for many wheelchair users. However, its not only this model of vehicle that can cause problems, as many other adapted vehicles have draw backs that in some respects are general inadequacies of the vehicle design, including:

- Not being big enough to accommodate larger powered wheelchairs;
- Having a sloping floor that can be uncomfortable for the wheelchair user and can increase the risk of their wheelchair tipping backwards due to the vehicles motion;
- Wheelchair restraints being ineffective at restraining wheelchair movement, resulting in wheelchair tipping backwards with vehicle movement;
- Lack of handholds for wheelchair users to aid their lateral support and balance when travelling in their wheelchair.

**Buses and Tramcars**

The on-going concerns around the physical access to buses by wheelchair users and scooter users requires urgent attention to resolve issues of physical access, as well as driver and other passenger attitude towards respecting the need for wheelchair access to designated spaces.

Some progress appears to have been achieved where bus operators have signed up to the CPT Mobility Scooter Code, which also requires the scooter user to obtain a “permit to travel” following assessment and on-bus training by the bus operator. However, this does not address the issues of physical design limitations of the vehicles.

Any expectation that changes to wheelchair and scooter design can address the problems would be unrealistic, although consideration of how vehicle travel can be best accommodated should be a consideration in the design of such mobility aids. The variation in size and weight of these mobility aids and the physical characteristics and abilities of their users will always be a partly if not wholly undefined variable. This does not mean that designers cannot assess the requirements, as reference to past surveys of manual and powered wheelchair user and scooter users by such as DfT (Department of Transport) can provide

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valuable guidance even though some of this information may be a little dated. We also have to recognise the reality that for any new design guidance on public transport can take decades to become translated into provision especially where it relates to new vehicle design. It is therefore all the more important that we begin as soon as possible to address current design limitations, such as: -

- the location of vertical posts due to structural design at the entrance to buses, tramcars and metro trains;
- the design of the wheelchair space to better accommodate manoeuvring into and out of the space with the wheelchair or scooter;
- provision of seat belts and/or wheelchair securing points;
- the design of vehicle access ramps to promote safe and secure access.

The use of seat belts and/or wheelchair securing points should be seen as a facility that individual wheelchair users may initially be offered as an option to use for their own benefit, as the use of such items may not be appropriate in all cases, due in part to the variations in physical characteristics of the individual and their mobility aid. The provision of securing points should also be considered for passenger’s luggage and/or buggies.

The issue of the increasing size and weight of powered wheelchairs when occupied also needs consideration in relation to the design of ramps for bus and tram access, as many are likely to be found underrated for their maximum safe working load for use with such wheelchairs.

**Electric and Hybrid Vehicles**

The use of quiet vehicles on the highway including hybrid buses, electric trams, and other electric or hybrid vehicles remains a serious concern with no apparent urgency to redress the risk to pedestrians and cyclists, and especially high risk to persons with sensory impairments. It’s all very well to say that manufacturers and governments have been looking at this issue and working towards an answer, but the dangers are ever increasing with the move to cleaner and quieter road vehicles.

The provision of electric vehicle (EV) charging points to support and encourage the move to electric vehicles has also been done without adequate recognition of the needs of the disabled motorist. We have seen a large number of charging post installations on and off-street in the Tyneside area supported by the local authorities. However, this programme was commenced without any guidance on how to make such installations accessible for disabled drivers. In addition the charging equipment has been developed without consideration being given to accessibility and inclusive design principles. Although there are some variances

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between manufacturers of the charging equipment, the popular fast charge posts (charging a vehicle in around 3-4 hours) that are currently being installed around the UK require the service users to be able to reach to a height near to 1200mm above ground, which can be too high for some independent wheelchair users, and is made worse when such posts are located on a raised plinth or kerbed area. The rapid charge equipment is even less accessible and it is likely that such equipment will require assistance for disabled people to use due to the height and reach issues, including a stop button that cannot be reached from a wheelchair; as well as the physical weight of the connecting cable.

Gateshead Access Panel’s consultants have been working with Gateshead Council to find ways to address these issues, and as a result have developed guidance on accessibility and have advised some adjustments to location of charging point equipment prior to their installation. This has led to the first purpose designed accessible EV Changing Point currently being installed in an Accessible EV Charging Bay alongside a purpose designed WAV (Wheelchair Accessible Vehicle) parking bay at Saltwell Park.

**Air Travel**

Although we have seen some sign of improvements in services since the Right to Fly came into being, arrangements for flying are still a major concern for many disabled people, especially those who are dependent on wheelchairs for their mobility. I have had concerns expressed to me by a number of powered wheelchair users who report they are unable to fly because their wheelchair exceeds the maximum weight allowed by carriers, even when they can be split into two component parts. It’s a recognised fact that modern wheelchairs are getting bigger and heavier as they become more supportive and potentially safer for the occupant to use. I feel sure there are ways around this issue, but that requires willingness among the carriers and potentially wheelchair designers to look at this.

I was pleased to note that EasyJet now state “There is no size or weight limit on the wheelchairs that we carry”. Hopefully other carriers will follow suit. However, when checking their terms and conditions, it becomes less clear, as it states: -

“Wheelchairs and mobility aids that cannot be lifted manually into the aircraft hold will only be accepted for travel if both airports can provide the facilities to load / unload the device. Please note that some airports may not have sufficient equipment for lifting heavy wheelchairs and mobility aids. Notifying Us 48 hours prior to Your departure will enable Us to establish this and use reasonable efforts to accommodate Your needs.”

There is also a lack of recognition that many wheelchair users have no weight bearing capability, and as such cannot stand to allow another passenger to exit

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from an adjacent seat on the aircraft. This means that passengers, who may or may not be companions to the disabled person, have to literally clamber over the knees, legs and feet of the disabled passenger when they wish to either access on-board toilet facilities, overhead lockers, or to leave the aircraft ahead of the disabled person who usually has to wait till last to be transferred off the plane.

There appears to be no consideration or concession given to location of physically disabled passengers into seating with increased legroom, or to avoid their being subjected to the humiliating experience of being an obstruction that has to be climbed over by other passengers in adjacent seats.

## **Information**

### **On the Bus Information**

In regard to the provision of audible and visual information on buses, this provision appears to be gradually being addressed in some parts of the UK, but should be a required standard throughout the UK. This is required to support people with sensory impairments as well as helping many other passengers with or without a recognised impairment, and should be recognised as a priority if we are to encourage greater use of public transport.

### **Air Travel Booking Information**

I was recently faced with having to open up my suitcase in front of the airline operator's check-in desk and other passengers queuing to check-in, to remove items to reduce the weight in the case, as it was around 5kg over the baggage allowance. When I asked about the additional allowance for disabled travellers, I was informed that this only applied to medical supplies and equipment and required a doctor's letter to confirm this requirement. I have never had this experience before in nearly 30 years of air travel. When I protested, as an obvious wheelchair user, that the majority of the weight inside the case was due to my medical supplies and that I had never before been asked for such a letter. I was informed the requirement was stated in the carrier's terms and conditions. Although I travel with this carrier regularly at least 2 or 3 times, I was unaware of this requirement. As I had no wish to encounter further charges for carriage, I was forced to relocate some items to my hand luggage, which was a considerable inconvenience due to the additional weight that I and at times my companion had to carry.

On checking, the carrier's information for disabled passengers, it currently states:

"We will also carry free of charge any medical equipment that you need to have with you. This can include medication, food and specialist devices such as dialysis machines. You must pack these items separately from any other luggage that you

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want to check in and you must provide a doctor's certificate confirming that you need these items for the duration of your time away from home."

I feel it is degrading to have to ask my doctor for what is in effect permission to fly, although I recognise for some people's conditions this may be required at least for their own knowledge and benefit. The carrier had prior knowledge of my being a wheelchair user and need for assistance. This should have been enough to enable them to recognise my potential need to carry medical supplies. However, this may be an advantage for some people, as packing such medical items separately with doctors certification of need, it would appear to not affect their standard baggage allowance.

As regards changes to a carrier's terms and conditions, which obviously happen from time to time, I do try and check each year during the bookings procedure for any changes that may impact on my travel. I had obviously not spotted the requirement regarding a doctor's letter for carriage of medical supplies for personal use. Whilst I object to the application of this policy, I believe it would be helpful if changes to such terms and conditions could be highlighted, so that attention can be drawn to such changes for regular travellers as well as those persons who travel infrequently.

Another problem I find is that there is variance in statements on different on-line pages for the same carrier. For instance, on its "information for disabled passengers" pages, EasyJet provides the previously mentioned statement relating to medical equipment and also separately states on the same page that:

"easyJet will carry 2 wheelchairs (manual or powered) or other pieces of personal mobility equipment free of charge."

Reference to this carrier's Terms and Conditions Article 10 "Passengers with Specific Requirements - Disability, Medical and Health" refers passengers to another page on "Specific Requirements" where it states:

"Passengers will be permitted to carry medical equipment and/or up to 2 pieces of mobility equipment as either Hand or Hold Baggage, subject to that medical equipment or mobility equipment being of a shape and size that is suitable for carriage in the aircraft cabin."

This appears to be a contradictory statement by virtue of the "and/or", making it less clear of what is permitted. In addition the need to refer to different pages and sections of text to get the full picture from just one individual carrier seems wholly unreasonable, especially when disabled travellers have far more preparation requirements in regard to travel and accommodation arrangements from the outset before they can consider whether they can travel or be accommodated.

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The question also remains, which statements are accurate and which are binding, if challenged later?

## **Staff Assistance**

### **Bus Drivers**

The issues around driver and other passenger attitudes, towards respecting the needs of wheelchair users and their access to transport and use of spaces designated for their use, needs to be reinforced by training of staff and a public information campaign. Such action is required to address the continuing discrimination and exclusion of many disabled people, who in some cases can be emotionally scared to the extent they will not attempt to use public transport again.

### **Taxi and Private Hire Drivers**

During my day in London I needed to use taxis to get to my meeting location and return to Kings Cross. The awareness of the taxi driver in each case as regards boarding me in my wheelchair was considerable different. On my journey to my meeting, the driver wheeled me inside his black cab up the one-piece ramp, which allowed me to transfer to a seat once inside the vehicle. On arriving at my destination I thought the obvious that, after transferring back into my wheelchair, the driver would wheel me out of his cab. However, as I had my back to the door, I was unaware that the driver did not have a hold of my wheelchair, and on releasing my brakes, my chair rolled back down the ramp uncontrolled with me in it; apparently as the driver stood back and watched. Fortunately for me, my support assistant stepped forward and caught hold on the handles on the back of my chair only just in time; as it was about to tip off the side of the ramp.

We are also aware of instances from other wheelchair users experience where they have had drivers attempt to board them with unsuitable or incorrectly fitted ramps, risking injury to the wheelchair user and damage to their mobility aid. The use of split ramps with 2 separate ramped channels should be banned, as these are unsuitable and unsafe for use with many manual and powered wheelchairs.

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