

Response of Wheels for Wellbeing to the Transport Committee call for evidence on Buses Connecting Communities

Introduction

[Wheels for Wellbeing](#) are a Disabled people's organization (DPO) who campaign for equitable access to cycling, active travel and multi-modal journeys for Disabled people. We also provide access to cycling for Disabled people via specialist cycle sessions, led rides and (with partners) [loan schemes of non-standard cycles](#).

We work using the key principles of disability equity and mobility justice, in line with the [Equality Act \(2010\)](#) including the [Public Sector Equality Duty](#).

Our interest in buses centres on ensuring Disabled people have the option to use buses as part of multi-modal journeys:

[Data shows that Disabled people are less likely to have a driving licence and less likely to have access to a car than non-disabled people](#). This makes Disabled people more reliant on public transport.

At the same time, [research by Disabled Ramblers tells us that 90% of mobility impaired people don't have a mobility aid suitable for them to make a 1km journey](#), meaning many Disabled people are unable to get to bus stops to make journeys.

These factors mean many mobility impaired people cannot presently use buses, or can only use buses they are enabled to get to/from the nearest bus stop using mobility aids such as cycles or e-scooters, which are generally not permitted – or not consistently permitted – onto buses. Without facilities to enable use of a full range of mobility aids, buses are too often effectively 'off limits' for most mobility impaired people.

We are largely providing evidence on "How effectively bus services function as part of integrated multi-modal networks that improve mobility for people who live in areas with declining services."

We also have an interest in "The social and economic impacts of poor connectivity on access to education, healthcare, employment, and social inclusion in communities"

Integrated multi-modal networks

For bus services to effectively function as part of integrated multi-modal networks for Disabled people, Disabled people must be able to:

1. Get to and from the bus stop;
2. Take any mobility aid they need for the journey onto the bus.

Footways and crossings

The question of access to and from bus stops is massively overlooked. Too often, bus stops are provided in locations without any footway, or with a footway that is impassible for anybody using a wheeled mobility aid.

For bus use to be realised as part of integrated multi-modal networks, attention *must* be paid to the footways surrounding bus stops and crossings. A network of accessible footways requires not just suitable footway design in terms of surface types and quality, widths, gradients and appropriate provision of accessible crossings on desire lines; Accessible footway provision to enable use of public transport also requires ongoing maintenance, as well as enforcement against footway obstruction, including obstruction by parked vehicles, bins, seating and tables, advertising, temporary works, litter and waste, seasonal debris etc.

Bus stops need to be consistently accessible for people travelling in any direction. Too often, bus stops serving one or both directions in urban, peri-urban and rural areas have no associated footway, dropped kerbs or crossing points – meaning they are unusable by a high proportion of Disabled people. Poor maintenance and vegetation management renders many more bus stops inaccessible. The screenshot below shows a regular situation – a suburban bus stop in Derby on the main Derby to Ashbourne bus route which has no accessible means of crossing the 40mph A road it is on, no adjacent footway and no accessible connection to the road lined with houses behind it:



For most local authorities across the country, there are currently a large number of stops that are at least as inaccessible as this one.

It is our view that for Buses to Connect Communities without excluding Disabled people, there is a need for a national programme to improve accessibility to bus stops. Further, given the nature of mobility impairments, it is not acceptable to say “this stop isn’t accessible, but the next one is”, since very few mobility impaired people will be able to travel the additional distance on the footway.

Bus Stops

For bus use to be practical, there should be docking stations/corrals for micromobility devices and cycles located at bus stops. LTAs should include stringent requirements for docking stations/corrals at bus stops in hire micromobility and cycle franchising.

For many mobility impaired people, standing while waiting for a bus is significantly painful or excessively tiring. There is a need for a programme to increase provision of seating at bus stops. For preference this should be proper seating, rather than 'perching rails' which are inaccessible to many Disabled people. See [our guide on accessible seating](#). Seating also needs to be placed such that bus drivers can see seated passengers waiting, and waiting passengers can see the approaching bus: with infrequent buses and poor information about actual arrival times, Disabled people cannot reasonably be expected to stand waiting where they can be seen, just because the seat is not in a visible location.

Accessible information at bus stops is a further issue, which is being well highlighted by the [Campaign for Better Transport](#). Too often there is no information at all, nor any clue how to obtain it. Occasionally there are hard-to-read notices with printed information that is too high for wheelchair users, many children and adults of limited stature to read, which thereby is inaccessible. Sometimes there are QR codes, but even where there are, these aren't consistently at a height that can be accessed by Disabled people, and they don't consistently lead to information that is in formats with sufficient accessibility (for example for visually impaired people). There is a need for a national standard for provision of QR codes at bus stops, and for online accessible information that is obtained by scanning those QR codes.

On-bus provision

Often Disabled people will find it essential to take our mobility aids on the bus with us. Recent changes have meant that buses that cannot take wheelchairs have been phased out, which is massive progress. Nevertheless, even for wheelchair users, refusals to carry are still common (the experience of Baroness Grey-Thompson matches our experience in recent months).

However, since 90% of mobility impaired people don't have a mobility aid suitable for them to make a 1km journey, the ability to carry wheelchairs can only help less than 10% of mobility impaired people. When legislation is changed so e-Scooters are allowed on the highway, legal e-Scooters should *always* be allowed on buses (unless post-purchase modification or damage is evident). It is important for Disabled people that bus regulation mandates carriage of private eScooters used as mobility aids when these devices are made legal to use on the highway. Where something falls within the legal definition of an "invalid carriage" or mobility aid, it should always be permitted, unless there is good reason to believe the particular individual device is dangerous and provided it is within national standards of carriage including weight, length and width.

Provision for people using mobility aids on buses is still insufficient: Far more flexible travel space is needed, to allow for the fact that Disabled people and others from minoritised backgrounds are most likely to be reliant on public transport. At present, many are excluded from making journeys by the impossibility of travelling in the [accompanied groups](#) they want and need to: It is unacceptable that two family members or friends who are both wheelchair or mobility scooter users cannot travel together on the same bus – especially in areas

where buses are infrequent. It is equally unacceptable that a wheelchair-using parent or carer will struggle to bring their own wheelchair and a buggy or similar for a small child onto the same bus, unless they are fortunate that nobody else with a buggy or wheelchair is already travelling and the bus driver is in a good mood. Brighton and Hove buses are showing that it is practical to have more than one wheelchair space on standard buses. This should become the standard nationally.

We are also concerned about conflicts between Disabled people and others using the wheelchair space(s). There needs to be an obligation on *bus drivers* to *enforce* the priority use of the space by Disabled people. While it is undesirable for a non-disabled parent to have to fold up a pram or push-chair, it is a more practical option for them than for a full-time wheelchair user to transfer to a seat that wasn't designed to enable transfer and fold a wheelchair that isn't designed to fold. A message that the bus will not move until the priority is respected is effective in persuading people to vacate the space needed by a Disabled person. Bus operators should be mandated to support such an approach by their drivers, and support for such an approach should be part of franchising requirements.

Because of the proportion of mobility impaired people who do not have something that looks like a normal mobility aid, making provision for the carriage of cycles on buses will significantly help the mobility of the many Disabled people who use cycles as mobility aids. We call for buses to, by default, be equipped for the carriage of standard cycles (including by non-disabled passengers), and only depart from that where local conditions require a departure from that standard (for example within particular urban areas, at the peak times applicable to that area, where the loading and unloading of cycles would cause disproportionate delay). Where a non-standard cycle is being used as a mobility aid by a Disabled person, carriage of the non-standard cycle should be permitted, provided it can fit within the dimensions of the wheelchair space.

Bus movement prioritisation

We are aware that increasing congestion and its impact on bus reliability is a significant factor decreasing viability of bus routes and levels of bus travel in many areas: The requirements to follow set routes and to adhere to timetables prevent buses from using alternative routes to avoid congestion and require providers to timetable in large amounts of extra time in case of heavy congestion. This means bus passengers end up waiting unnecessarily in layovers even when there is not congestion, so the bus does not get ahead of schedule.

Bus prioritisation on the highway is therefore essential to make public transport a viable option: Bus passenger journeys must not be excessively impacted by congestion caused by private vehicles.

Measures to reduce the impact of private vehicle use on bus viability include installing bus and cycle only carriageway modal filters (which may or may not have Blue Badge holder exemptions, as appropriate), bus lanes, and minimising use of layby-style bus stops in favour of in-lane bus stops except where longer layover options are required, so that buses retain effective priority for re-starting movement after stops where lanes are shared with private motor traffic.

Active travel accessibility and prioritisation measures will also increase bus viability, by increasing the potential pool of passengers and by decreasing private vehicle use.

Bus frequency and routes

Across too much of the UK, there has been a spiral of decline in bus provision over the past decades, where insufficient passenger numbers for financial viability have been followed by reductions in frequency of buses, reductions in days and hours of provision and reduction in routes. These reductions further reduce the usability of public transport for many people, forcing those who are able to use private vehicles and excluding others from journey-making altogether.

Connecting communities with public transport requires regular, safe, accessible, reasonably-priced, reliable and convenient public transport. In most cases, public transport journeys should not take markedly longer to complete than private vehicle journeys – since again, this will exacerbate the spiral of decline in public transport provision as those who can use private vehicles will choose to do so.