

Bus Users Accessibility Audit 2023

Dawn Badminton-Capps, Bus Users UK Director for England, discusses the findings of the charity's most recent accessibility survey

Improving access to transport reduces loneliness and isolation, takes the pressure off health and social care budgets and improves lives. And if you're a bus or coach operator, it's also good for business.

According to Scope, the number of disabled people in the UK is around 16 million, which includes 11% of children, 23% of working age adults and 45% of pension age adults. As the population ages, that number will continue to grow and, with an estimated spending power of £274 billion a year, it represents a significant number of potential new passengers.

As Bus Users UK prepared to release the findings of our 2023 Accessibility Audit, the Government finally announced that on-board audio-visual announcements are to become mandatory. This news was widely anticipated, of course, and has clearly influenced much of the work being done by operators to improve access to transport. However operators have also been acting on the recommendations made in last year's Accessibility Audit and have increasingly been collaborating with disabled passengers, charities and local groups to identify and remove barriers to transport.

Unsurprisingly, it was audio-visual announcements that topped the list of features introduced to improve accessibility this year. Apps and websites also ranked high, but it was clear from their responses in other areas that operators are taking steps to mitigate against digital exclusion. Other, welcome on-board improvements included additional wheelchair space, room to manoeuvre a wheelchair or mobility scooter and more leg room, with 62% of operators reporting that 50% or more of their fleet had these features, almost double that of last year.

For the first year we asked operators what proportion of their fleet is PSVAR compliant with 100% reporting 50% or over, and 81% of these 100% compliant. The number of drivers required to deploy the ramp when asked remained firm at 100% while, disappointingly, drivers are now less likely to pull in to every stop regardless of



whether a passenger is signalling, and just 78% of drivers are required to wait for passengers to be seated before pulling away.

Communication

Technology still represents the most popular method of communicating with disabled passengers. However with operators now recognising the impact of digital exclusion, printed materials and meetings, both virtual and face-to-face are on the rise. There has also been a rise in the number of operators actively involving passengers in the design and delivery of services, and while social media was top of the list, operators are also working alongside local groups, running events and consultations, and engaging passengers directly through BSIPs (Bus Service Improvement Plans).

More operators are now training staff to recognise and respond to a customer in distress, particularly their customer service staff, and more staff are receiving disability awareness/assistance training, with a few operators including it as a standard part of induction/training. Far more staff are Dementia Friends than in last year's survey and 93% of operators reported providing mental health first aid training.

On-board training for Guide Dog puppies was another first for the survey with 58% of operators actively involved, and there was an increase in the range of card and lanyard assistance schemes available to passengers. When asked what else they were currently doing or planning to do to improve accessibility, operators responded with a host of initiatives including improved vehicle design, closer collaboration with community groups and charities, and a number of projects to allow groups and individuals to familiarise themselves with buses in order to improve travel confidence.

Meeting legal minimums

While it was clear from the responses that most operators are going above and beyond the basic legal requirements, some operators are still failing to meet their legal duties to passengers. While the number is falling, just 89% of responders in this year's survey train their drivers in disability awareness/assistance training, a number that should be 100%. It was also disappointing to see a fall in the number of buses required to pull into every stop regardless of whether a waiting passenger is signalling. Although this can add time to a journey it's just one example of a simple, low-cost and effective way to improve access and ensure no passenger is left behind.

Of course these findings need to be seen in the context of the operators responding, most of whom are clearly aware of the importance of accessibility and are therefore committed to improving it. So it was heartening to see an increase in the number of operators taking part, and the number of regions covered. The year-on-year comparison also provided real insight into developments in this work, particularly collaborations, partnerships, consultations and meaningful engagement with local communities, a key recommendation of last year's survey.

Improving accessibility needs to be seen by operators as enlightened self-interest. As well as improving people's lives and ensuring everyone can participate in society, it's about getting more people on board so these vital services are protected for the future. //