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Why Are We Waiting?

Disabled people's experiences of travelling by bus

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About this report

For many disabled passengers buses are a lifeline to independence, but accessing services can be a real challenge. This research explored the experiences of disabled passengers across England, Wales and Scotland when attempting to travel by bus. The aim was to better understand the lived experiences of a diverse range of disabled people beyond the existing focus on physical disability in policy-making and service design.

More specifically, this research set out to understand the main challenges faced by different groups of disabled passengers throughout their journeys; the needs of disabled people in using their local (and national) bus network; and what opportunities exist for service improvement to better meet the needs of a wide range of disabled passengers.

To achieve this, Revealing Reality used a mixed-method approach to get an in-depth and holistic understanding of the experiences of 32 disabled passengers. The methods involved observation of and interviews with participants and self-reporting, encouraging participants to capture their own reflections on their journeys and bus use.

The 32 disabled passengers were invited to:

1. complete a **two-week diary task** documenting their recent bus journeys sharing images, videos and reflections
2. participate in either:
    a. **Shadowed journey** - a researcher accompanied a disabled passenger on a journey of their choice, observing until they reached their destination, followed by a short interview about their reflections on the journey.
    b. **Remote interview** - a researcher conducted an in-depth remote interview (up to 2 hours) to understand passenger experiences using buses and other forms of transport, and to explore how bus provision and service design could better meet their needs.

Frontier Economics also conducted quantitative analysis based on existing data from the National Travel Survey and the Department for Transport's Bus Statistics. The aim of this quantitative analysis was to complement and provide context for the qualitative insights gathered.

This mixed approach recognised that passengers do not necessarily have an objective benchmark against which to measure their experiences of bus travel. Shadowing journeys, for example, can provide first-hand insight into the difficulties of accessing buses and the coping strategies used by disabled passengers.

Executive summary

While buses are critical in helping people lead full and active lives, they are currently not accessible to all.

- **Independence:** Buses played a significant role in enabling disabled passengers to be independent. They were vital to mobility, ensuring people could connect with, and contribute to the world around them.
- **Bus stops:** Many bus stops didn't have necessary facilities such as seating or shelter. Obstacles around the bus stop such as heightened kerbs, bins and bike stands, often made getting to the bus stop and boarding the bus difficult.
- **Bus design:** Many wheelchair users described the inconvenient placement of wheelchair spaces facing away from live information displays as adding discomfort and unnecessary difficulty. [1]
- **Information:** Timetables could be outdated or contradictory across apps and at bus stops and on-board audio and visual information could also be poor. In some cases drivers failed to provide disabled passengers with important information about their journey.[2]
- **Bus drivers:** The behaviour and attitude of drivers had a significant impact on a disabled person's journey and, in some cases, even on their ability to travel.

What can stakeholders do to help?

Improving transport accessibility requires collaboration between all stakeholders within the transport industry, local authorities, central government and local communities. Specifically, Bus Users UK would like to see:

- meaningful collaboration with disabled people in the design, planning and delivery of services
- clarity and proper enforcement of all regulations regarding passengers
- effective disability awareness and assistance training for all frontline staff
- regular audits of infrastructure and facilities to ensure proper compliance and maintenance
- improvements in the provision and accessibility of real-time information

1 Note: *Bus companies will have a legal responsibility to ensure that passengers have access to 'relevant information' about their journey under The Public Service Vehicles (Accessible Information) Regulations 2023 This will only cover the information on the bus itself, not at the stop.*

2 Note: *Bus companies will have a legal responsibility to ensure that passengers have access to 'relevant information' about their journey under The Public Service Vehicles (Accessible Information) Regulations 2023 (see previous note re this Reg only relating to on-bus info).*

Why Are We Waiting?

Why this research is needed

Buses can be a crucial source of independence for people with a range of accessibility issues. Convenient and affordable, a local bus service can be a lifeline, enabling disabled people to access education, work and healthcare, see family and friends and participate in leisure activities.

However, the realities of the bus services available often fall short of disabled people's expectations for reliable and accessible local transport. Existing evidence shows that some disabled people have serious concerns about bus travel. On average, disabled passengers had lower levels of satisfaction with bus stops compared with non-disabled passengers (at 78% and 83%). Likewise, disabled passengers had lower satisfaction than non-disabled passengers with ease of getting off the bus (at 87% and 91%).[3]

Some progress has been made. Disabled passengers' rights on bus and coach transport such as access to information or compensation if mobility equipment is damaged[4], are protected under UK regulations and enforced by legislation such as the Equality Act[5] and the Rights of Passengers in Bus and Coach Regulations (please see below for a concise overview). Since 2018, drivers have been required by law to be trained in disability awareness and in 2021, the Government's National Disability Strategy[6] highlighted the importance of improving the accessibility of buses, bus stations and bus stops, and made a number of commitments to address this. In 2020, the Public Service Vehicles Accessibility Regulations came fully into force and most recently, the Government announced the Accessible Information Regulations which will make on-board audio and visual information more accessible to all passengers.

3 *Transport Disability and Accessibility Statistics.*
4 Note: *compensation is only legally protected in very particular circumstances, e.g. an accident on a coach, not if the equipment is stolen or lost.*
5 *Equality Act (2010)* ***6*** *Government's National Disability Strategy*

Quantitative analysis

Analysis of data from the National Travel Survey[7] shows that bus travel is unique amongst public transport options in being more commonly used by disabled travellers (4% more trips amongst respondents with at least one self-declared long-term health condition or a disability relative to other respondents).

Complaints data collected by Bus Users UK over the last seven years shows that accessibility, or issues raised in relation to a disability are a persistent problem. A relatively consistent proportion of complaints are accounted for by these issues (4.2% of all complaints in 2016/17 and 4.5% of all complaints in 2022/23).

The Rights of Passengers in Bus and Coach Transport Regulation (2019)

While there are many things operators and local authorities can do to improve the journey for people with disabilities, the right to travel is protected by law.

The Rights of Passengers in Bus and Coach Transport Regulation 2019 makes it a requirement that no passenger can be refused, or charged extra for, travel as long as transporting them complies with UK safety standards. All drivers must receive disability awareness and assistance training and information on the journey, how to make a complaint and the rights of passengers must be available and accessible.

Full details are in the Bus Users UK Guide to the Rights of Passengers on the Rights & Accessibility section of its website **https://bususers.org/passengers/rights-accessibility/.**

7 *National Travel Survey*

Why Are We Waiting?

Research aims

Bus Users UK wanted to commission research that explored the diverse needs of disabled people. This research aims to fill the current gap in research by presenting the experiences, opportunities and challenges faced by differently abled passengers from England, Scotland and Wales.

The research objectives were to:

- understand the main challenges faced by different groups of disabled passengers throughout multi-modal journeys
- understand the needs of disabled people in using their local and national bus networks
- highlight the opportunities that exist for service improvement to better meet the needs of a wide range of disabled passengers
- understand and show what bus use looks and feels like for passengers with a range of accessibility needs

Findings are based on what participants have told researchers during fieldwork and submitted in their diary tasks. Where possible, these have been triangulated with research observations and background data provided by Bus Users UK.

Taking a holistic approach to understanding disabled people's experiences using buses

Methodology

Part 1: Diary task
Everyone who participated in the research was asked to keep a travel diary for two weeks which captured their habits, experiences of getting the bus and any challenges they faced. They were asked to record the details of one journey from end to end and what it was like to travel in their local area, as well as some details about themselves. They could share written reports, vlogs, photos and audio recordings.

Part 2: Follow-up interviews
The second stage of fieldwork consisted of:

- remote interviews
- in-person ethnographies
- shadowed journeys

During the interviews, researchers explored some of the main barriers and/or challenges participants had talked about in their diary tasks and asked participants to reflect on the impact of bus travel on their wider lives.
The shadowed journeys required researchers to accompany a participant on a bus journey. This included planned familiar and unfamiliar journeys, weighted towards familiar journeys, allowing researchers to capture the experience of disabled passengers across multiple stages of a bus journey in real-time. The shadowed journeys also allowed researchers to explore any new questions that emerged over the course of the bus journey.

Part 3: Stakeholder interviews
To gain a more holistic understanding of what is being done to improve transport accessibility shorter, remote interviews were organised with four stakeholders working in a variety of roles within the bus industry with responsibility for accessibility. These interviews provided an opportunity to gauge the industry's awareness of challenges and needs encountered by disabled passengers, as identified during the initial stages of fieldwork. The interviews also enabled researchers to gather perspectives on the extent of the progress being made for service improvement for disabled passengers.

Part 4: Quantitative analysis
Frontier Economics conducted quantitative analysis using data from the National Travel Survey, examining trips and miles by mode of transport and disability status in England. This survey, involving approximately 16,000 individuals in 7,000 households annually, and the information derived from this survey, is designated as a National Statistic. Additionally, analysis was carried out using the Department for Transport's Bus Statistics. The aim of this quantitative analysis was to complement the qualitative insights gathered earlier, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of, and challenges for, disabled passengers when using bus services.

Why Are We Waiting?

Who took part in the research?

Bus Users UK advertised the research to its networks in England, Scotland and Wales. Revealing Reality got in touch with people who put themselves forward to take part in the research.

The 32 people who took part in the research had a range of disabilities, including:

- visible and non-visible including physical disability (e.g. mobility impairment)
- sensory disability (e.g. visual impairment)
- neurodiversity (e.g. autism, learning disability)
- psychological (e.g. mental health)

The research participants were not a representative sample of the population but were selected so that they included people with a range of disabilities, a range of experiences and a range of backgrounds. All of them used the bus at least once a month.

MEET THE PARTICIPANTS

Peter, 76, Lancaster – Peter is retired and lives in Lancaster with his wife. He tends to avoid wearing his hearing aids, despite his deafness, as he finds them quite tiresome to wear and feels confident travelling on his regular bus journey into town without them.

Oliver, 53, Scotland – Oliver is retired and lives on his own in a rural part of Scotland. He is autistic and has mental health issues including anxiety and depression. He does not drive and uses the bus regularly to go to his local shops.

Anika, 64, Scotland – Anika has two daughters and lives with her husband and retired guide dog. She lost her sight 18 years ago after being diagnosed with cone dystrophy. She works part-time at a disability charity and runs a restaurant with her husband.

Miles, 54, Kent – Miles lives with his wife and daughter in Kent. He suffered brain damage from a motorcycle accident seven years ago, which has affected his memory and mobility. Due to the injury he had to retire from being an accountant and now walks with a cane.

Katherine, 26, Manchester – Katherine is a student living with her younger sister. She has cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair all the time.

Gabby, 43, Edinburgh – Gabby moved to Scotland from France 13 years ago and lives with her husband and chihuahua. She developed muscular dystrophy five years ago and has worked in many roles from waitressing to media assistant.

Dan, 75, Cardiff – Dan has muscular dystrophy and has been living alone since his wife died eight years ago. He lives across the street from his daughter and her two children. He sees them all regularly and often takes the bus with his grandchildren.

Jason, 35, London – Jason works part-time as a manager at a garage in London and is a big Manchester United fan. He used to be a bus driver but after a major road accident which resulted in breaks to his arm and both legs, he is now a wheelchair user.

Jeremy, 45, Scotland – Jeremy lives in Scotland with his wife, teenage daughter and dog. Prior to being diagnosed with myotic dystrophy and becoming a wheelchair user, Jeremy worked as an outdoor activities leader.

Maria, 31, South Wales – Maria lives with her partner, two-year-old daughter and guide dog in rural Wales, north of Cardiff. She has limited vision due to a genetic eye disease.

James, 76, Isle of Wight – James lives with his wife in the north of the Isle of Wight. Having suffered two severe strokes in his 50s, he has limited mobility and a severe speech impediment.

Asha, 20, Sussex – Asha is a history student at a London university. She has chronic fatigue syndrome, is hard of hearing and uses a wheelchair to travel and socialise. She also has dyslexia and ADHD.

Clara, 39, Durham – Clara lives in Stockton-on-Tees with her family and has chronic fatigue syndrome and Crohn's disease. She often gets the bus with her ten-year-old son when her husband can't drive them into town.

Annie, 61, London – Annie lives in London with her three sons. She used to work in advertising but had to retire after the progression of her multiple sclerosis (which was diagnosed in her twenties) became too severe.

Katya, 48, Southport – Katya lives in Southport with her partner. She has been in a powered wheelchair since the age of five because of a neuromuscular disease which affects her lower limbs. After 23 years as a primary school teacher, she began a new role at an online learning resources company.

Bella, 64, York – Bella lives in rural York with a housemate. She works remotely as a counsellor and has been a wheelchair user since becoming paralysed in her early twenties.

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Marley, 28, Southampton – Marley grew up in Dorset and moved to Southampton. They regularly attend a community workshop and are studying computing with electronic engineering through the Open University. They are a full-time wheelchair user and have chronic pain. They describe themselves as neurodivergent.

Angela, 39, Edinburgh – Angela lives by herself in Edinburgh and is unemployed. She has a genetic condition that results in consistent respiratory infections which her body struggles to fight off.

Ruth, 68, Somerset – Ruth, who has peripheral neuropathy, lives in a one-bedroom bungalow within a close-knit community with supportive neighbours. She has friends from a library group and from craft sessions, and is reliant on her sister-in-law to drive her into town.

Jerry, 50, Wales – Jerry lives in West Wales and used to work as a coordinator for rail replacement buses. He has a club foot and high dysphonia which affects the amount of time he can spend outside. He also has ADHD and a learning disability.

Jackie, 20, London – Jackie lives at home with her parents and younger brother. She has lived in London her whole life and works for a disability charity which matches carers with disabled people. She has hereditary spastic paraplegia and is a full-time wheelchair user.

Laura, 28, Bristol – Laura lives with her three housemates and partner and works part-time for a disability advocacy group. She has depression, anxiety, ADHD and chronic fatigue syndrome. In her spare-time she volunteers at a local arts group as a set and costume designer.

Martha, 24, Birmingham – Martha lives in Birmingham with her wife and works in IT. She has been a wheelchair user for over five years after an accident paralysed her lower limbs. She plays wheelchair tennis and basketball and coaches youth teams.

Susan, 31, South Wales – Susan lives in the rural Welsh valleys with her mother. She volunteers regularly in the local area, assisting other blind and visually impaired people to use technology in their lives and travels to Cardiff for her weekly drama classes.

Noor, 36, Leeds – Noor lives in Leeds, is visually impaired and has a learning disability. They travel a lot in their freelance role as a disability activist. They have anxiety and depression and say they can suffer from social overload due to their neurodivergence.

Gary, 46, Bristol – Gary is in academic research. He developed multiple sclerosis in his early 20s and uses a powered wheelchair to get around. He enjoys going to gigs and attends a monthly book club.

Samantha, 46, Manchester – Samantha lives in Manchester with her husband and young children. She has chronic fatigue syndrome and multiple musculoskeletal, neurologic, respiratory and mental health conditions, including depression. She regularly attends wheelchair dancing classes and arts sessions.

Hasan, 46, Manchester – Hasan is living with his partner and carer. He is a kidney transplant patient and is on long-term medication which affects his energy levels and mobility. Hasan volunteers as a football coach for disabled children and adults and likes going to the cinema. He has a learning disability and communication disorder.

Grant, 70, Cardiff – Grant is registered as partially sighted and has had the same level of eyesight since birth. He is a semi-retired accountant and loves to travel with his children.

Stuart, 82, Lancaster – Stuart lives in Lancaster with his wife. He is partially deaf and has had his mobility restricted by arthritis in his hip and a long-term injury from an old fall. Stuart swims regularly and used to volunteer at his local Scout group.

Stan, 56, London – Stan used to work as a disability consultant for a London university, after moving to the UK from the Netherlands in 2010. He is deaf and has a hearing dog. He is currently writing a book on his experiences as a deaf person.

Samira, 36, London* – Samira is a housewife, content creator and carer who balances her daily responsibilities with caring for her two children, including her youngest Sunil who has Duchenne muscular dystrophy.

**Samira is not disabled and was included in the sample to share her perspective on the some of the experiences and challenges that she and her disabled son, Sunil, have encountered on the bus.*

Why Are We Waiting?

The importance of bus travel in people’s lives

Dan, 75, Cardiff

Dan has lived in Cardiff all his life. He appreciates the strong sense of community in the city and feels deeply connected to his local area.

At 40, Dan was diagnosed with muscular dystrophy and his central vision began to deteriorate. At first he railed against his condition, but grew to accept it with support from his family and friends. As his condition worsened, he was forced to retire. To cope with the adjustment, he took up gardening with the help of his wife and found comfort in keeping himself busy around the house.

When his wife of over 30 years died, Dan once again had to adapt to a new way of life. For the past eight years he has lived alone, making it his mission to be independent and to continue to do the things he loves.

Without his wife, who used to drive them wherever they needed to go, buses have become a more important part of Dan’s life. He takes a bus to the shops, uses it to get to the local charity for blind people where he volunteers, and goes by bus to pick up his eight-year-old grandson Tommy from school.

Tommy is “absolutely barmy about buses and trains”, Dan says, and he loves spending whole days with him taking the bus all over town, through the city centre and sometimes up to Caerphilly Mountain.

On leisurely trips like these, Dan says the bus is a joy. Generally, Dan feels confident using the bus. He sometimes finds it difficult to read the digital information board and see which buses are due with his monocular, but he is happy to ask the bus drivers for help when they stop.

However, for fixed appointments, such as when he has to go to the hospital, Dan won’t risk taking the bus and calls a taxi instead.

“I had to go to hospital and realised getting there by bus could take a while. You don’t know which one might be delayed. So, planning something like that, I just give up and say I’ll get an Uber.”

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Annie, 61, London

Annie, a proud Londoner, was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in her twenties, not long after she'd married George. For the next decade or so, Annie's MS didn't affect her too much, and Annie enjoyed her busy life working in an advertising job she loved, while she and George raised their three growing sons.

As her MS progressed, Annie became less able to walk long distances and when her sons were teenagers, she started to use a cane and then a wheelchair.

In 2020, George tragically died in an accident and Annie found herself without her "rock and biggest supporter". While grieving for him, her condition – and her mobility – deteriorated rapidly. She is now partially paralysed from the waist down and uses a wheelchair all the time. She is reliant on others to do nearly all of her day-to-day tasks.

Her life at home has been confined to the living room downstairs. The sofas have been pushed against the walls to make way for a bed, and she has multiple telephones scattered around the house in case she needs to call her sons upstairs for help.

Annie is visited each day by carers who help her to get out of bed and go to the bathroom, as well as to prepare food and run errands. As she can no longer safely use the kettle, Annie's carers leave out a row of cups of tea on the kitchen counter which she can microwave when she wants one, before her next carer arrives a few hours later.

It is hard for Annie to get out of the house. She worries that, if she takes even a short trip and something goes wrong, she won't be home in time for her next carer's visit. She longs to go to the nearby rose garden that she and George used to visit together, but she's not been able to get there since he died.

Like many Londoners Annie used to rely on public transport but, after a few bad experiences, she has lost her confidence. This included nearly falling backwards on the wheelchair ramp and bus drivers not letting her know they've arrived at her stop despite agreeing to tell her. Annie's not sure how to regain her confidence or her independence as a disabled passenger.

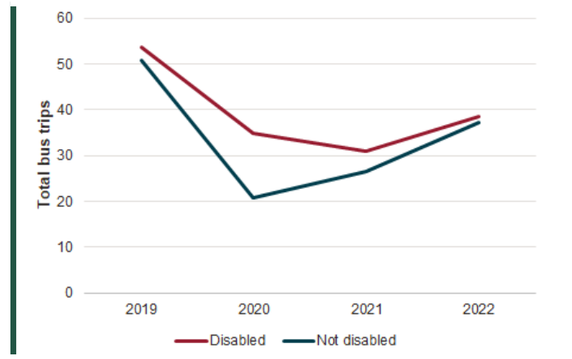


Figure 1: Graph provided by Frontier Economics showing the average number of total bus trips for disabled respondents versus non-disabled respondents

Dan and Annie's contrasting experiences demonstrate the extent to which people's independence and enjoyment of life can be affected by how confident they feel using the bus. Stories like these - and those of the 30 other disabled people featured in this report – highlight how vital bus travel can be in enabling people to lead full and rewarding lives.

Analysis of the most recent National Travel Survey shows that respondents with at least one self-declared long-term health condition or disability took slightly more bus trips on average than other respondents (39 vs. 37 trips per year).

Of the people who took part in the research, many preferred to use buses over other modes of transport. For some, like Angela, buses were familiar spaces that made them feel safe. Others, like Susan, liked buses because they were more reliable and cheaper than taxis.

Buses were often the linchpin holding people's daily lives together. Without the bus, Martha would have struggled to get to work and Asha to university while Hasan depended on them to access volunteering opportunities and Peter to do a weekly shop.

Buses enabled people to remain socially connected to friends, family and the wider community. Noor, who is visually impaired, took the bus and coach from Leeds to Bradford to visit family and Miles enjoyed exploring different bus routes around his area and is now on first-name terms with some of the drivers.

For Laura, who has agoraphobia, anxiety and depression, buses were one of the few places where she interacted with people she did not know. Similarly Jerry, whose mobility has been severely limited because of his club foot and throat dysarthria, used buses and coaches to see friends, explore new destinations and meet new people.

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Buses also enabled independence. James, who experienced two severe strokes leading to speech and mobility loss, was dependent on his motorised wheelchair. Unable to drive, his local bus service gave him the opportunity to go to places he could otherwise not go, like his local beach.

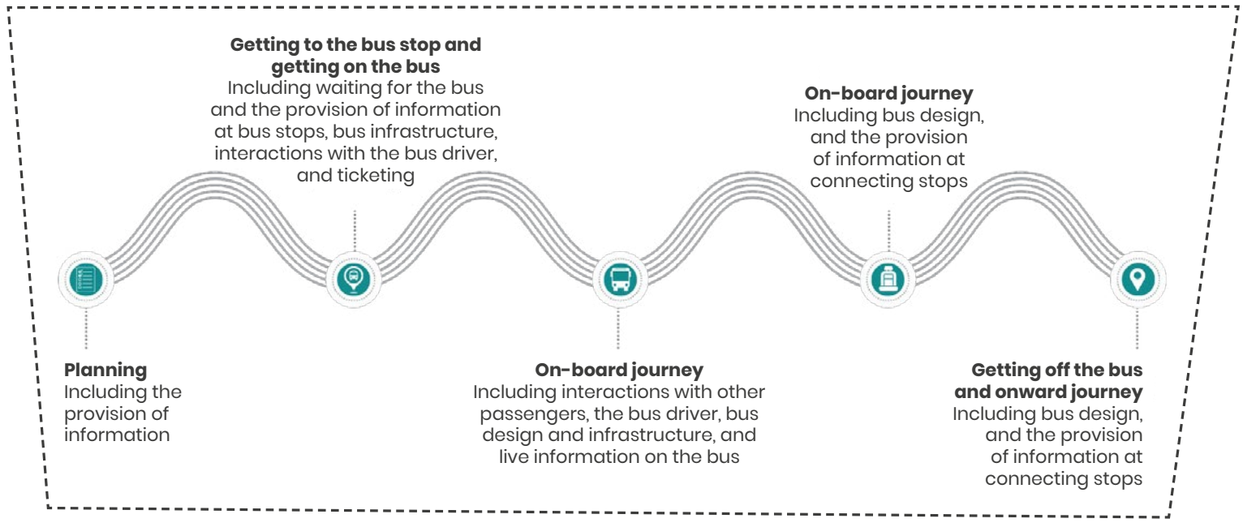
For many participants, buses were a relatively easy, cheap and convenient option. However, they also played a pivotal role in building confidence and independence, highlighting the importance of improvements in accessibility for disabled passengers.

Understanding and addressing the challenges people face when accessing bus services isn't just about improving transport; it's about enhancing the well-being and confidence of disabled people and ensuring they can play an active role in society.

This report highlights the enormous and vital role that buses play across all areas of people's lives.

From freedom to frustration: barriers facing disabled passengers

Throughout the research, participants shared a variety of experiences with bus services ranging from positive interactions to significant challenges. The following section summarises some of these experiences and highlights the barriers that emerged at different stages in a journey.



Planning a journey and information

The quality and accuracy of information when planning bus travel was particularly challenging for disabled passengers. People often had to plan their journeys far in advance to ensure they could get to where they needed to be. Even with substantial planning, this did not mitigate the possibility of buses not arriving on time. Unreliable travel information had an even greater impact on people who were taking multiple journeys and using different modes of transport.

The added stress that came with planning journeys put some people off taking the bus regularly and they would, instead, opt for more convenient and less taxing options, such as getting lifts from friends or booking a taxi.

It also prevented individuals from engaging in spontaneous travel.

Gabby, for example, said that she would always add an “extra half an hour” to her journey, despite what her travel planner app told her, to make sure she would not miss the bus.

Ruth, who has peripheral neuropathy and struggles to walk, said that the unreliability of buses meant she could no longer rely on them to get her to important events such as hospital appointments. The result was she spent much more money than she would have wanted on taxis.

Many people reported that the information available at their local bus stops was not always correct. Often, physical timetables were outdated and the information on ‘live’ displays was inaccurate, causing confusion and frustration. Some bus stops in rural areas had no information at all. Oliver, who is autistic and has depression, lives in a remote part of Scotland with minimal transport links and does not drive. He said that the absence of information at bus stops exacerbates his anxiety and makes travelling to unfamiliar areas even more daunting.

Unreliable information was a major issue for those disabled passengers who struggled to wait outside for extended periods of time.

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Laura 28, Bristol

Laura lives in the city with her partner and friend. Since she was a child, she has had a passion for the arts and musical theatre and dedicates her free time to designing and creating theatrical props. She recently started a theatre collective with her friends and is hoping that, one day, this will become her full-time career.

Laura struggles a lot with anxiety and has chronic fatigue syndrome which can leave her housebound for days at a time. She feels most safe when she is at home and around people that know her best. Because of this, taking public transport can exacerbate her anxiety, but she finds that using fidget toys helps with this.

Waiting at the bus stop is the point of the journey that Laura finds most challenging. She worries the bus may not arrive when it is supposed to. Commonly referred to as 'ghost buses', these buses show on the live display, or on travel apps with an arrival time, but do not arrive at the bus stop.

Because of her anxiety and chronic fatigue, Laura aims to limit the amount of time she spends outdoors. On one occasion when waiting for the bus, she had to stand outside for an hour which resulted in her calling her partner to pick her up before it got dark as she was too exhausted to walk home.

"In the daytime it's frustrating and then in the nighttime it can be quite scary because then you end up being out later than you wanted to be […] Even if it's just late by a few minutes, [it] takes more energy away. So, if I need to be on form because I'm going to work, then I will tend to avoid the bus."

There were also problems with the on-board information, which did not always work or was not accessible to disabled passengers. Many people said when audio announcements and visual displays were available on buses, they tended to be ineffective due to malfunctions, displaying wrong information or were in a position that was hard to view for people in the priority and wheelchair seated areas.

Stan, a deaf bus user, said he was very dissatisfied by the limited availability of working audio loops on London buses and found it frustrating that they were solely linked to automated announcements. This prevented him from getting information from the bus driver about sudden delays and disruptions which were not covered by the standard automated audio messages. He instead has to communicate directly with the bus driver if there is an issue which he finds challenging, especially if the driver is in a hurry.

Information around ticketing and bus fares for disabled passengers was unclear and not consistent across journeys. While most people had a disabled person's pass for bus travel, some said they were unsure about when and where they could use their pass and whether, for example, this included peak times. People with non-visible disabilities, such as autism, said they were sometimes anxious about their concessionary passes being challenged or not accepted when getting the bus.

Samantha, a manual wheelchair user from Manchester, recalled a journey where the bus driver refused to let her pay for her trip. She was grateful at the time, but is now unsure about what ticket she needs when she gets the bus into town, especially if some drivers ask her to pay and others don't.

> **"Neither bus driver would accept me paying the fare for the journey yesterday. And you might think that's a good thing, but it actually just makes me really nervous. I told my husband when I got back and he's like, 'What if there was a ticket inspector?'"**
>
> **Samantha, 44**

However, Samantha was not aware that she was eligible for free travel under the English National Concessionary Travel Scheme.[8]

Some people were able to overcome challenges with inconsistent or incorrect information by using a range of digital tools.

- **Martha** – Google Maps: Martha always double-checks her travel the night before on Google Maps and uses the wheelchair option to check that she is dropped off at a location which is suitable for her wheelchair.
- **Asha** - CityMapper, Sociability, Access Able: Asha uses a range of apps to help plan her journeys and make sure that she is aware of accessible entrances and exits.
- **Susan** – Lazarillo, Google Maps: Susan travels to Cardiff on the bus and uses the GPS app Lazarillo to read out street names and landmarks. This allows her to know how far along they are on her journey and coordinate with family and friends to arrange a suitable pick-up destination and time.
- **Stan** – Bus Times London, Google Maps: Stan is able to find the nearest bus stop and get a list of times for the next bus on his mobile phone. He likes the fact that he doesn't have to rely on the bus driver to tell him when to get off, as the app provides a live counter and vibrating alerts.

Not everyone had the confidence to use these apps or believed they had sufficient training to use them. Others were worried about getting out and using their phones in public. In addition, these apps were not always accessible to all. For instance, Susan did not find the Stagecoach app to be accessible with Talkback and, as a result, prefers to use Google Maps for planning journeys.

***8** At the end of the interview, the researcher gave Samantha information that explained her eligibility, should she wish to apply.*

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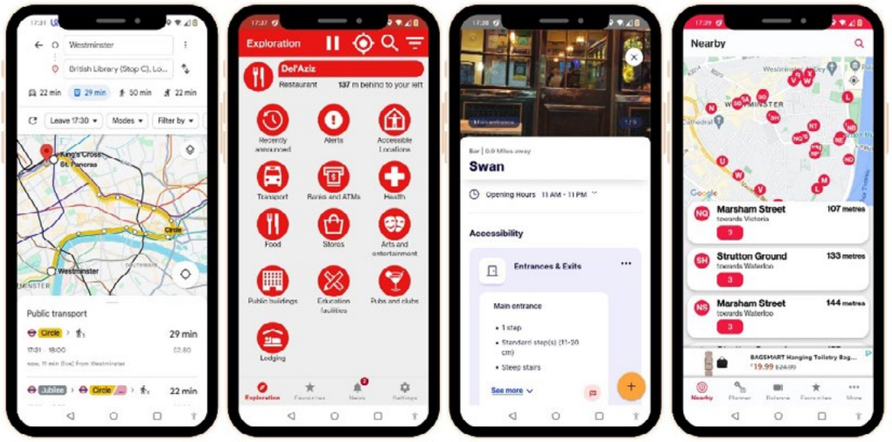


Figure 2- Apps used by passengers (from left) - Google Maps, Lazarillo, Sociability and Bus Times London

Getting to the bus stop

Many participants had difficulties getting to their local bus stop.

Gabby, a wheelchair user in Edinburgh with a degenerative muscular condition, described the huge effort needed to push herself uphill to her nearest bus stop. She relied on her husband helping her but wanted a way to travel without needing extra support. Yet the location of the bus stop was so inaccessible that Gabby felt she had no other option but to drive into town, which brought its own stress and inconvenience.

> **"Every time I decide to take the bus, I cannot do it by myself. This is why I need to drive, because otherwise I'm not independent. So, either he [Gabby's husband] is here and we're going somewhere together [...] or I drive which is a nightmare."**
>
> **Gabby, 43**

Uneven terrain surrounding bus stops also caused problems for disabled passengers like Susan, who is blind. Susan described how she was unable to reach her bus stop unaided as it was too dangerous to go on the pavement by herself.

> **"My nearest bus stop, if you can call it a bus stop, doesn't have a shelter and is literally a spot. My rehabilitation officer can't teach me the route because legally you can't sign it off as being safe since it's a risk when there's a part with no pavement".**
>
> **Susan, 31**

Bins, bikes and cars were also common obstacles on the journey to bus stops. This was particularly challenging for wheelchair users living in busy urban environments such as Jackie in London who said she often had to take different routes to get to her bus stop. On a shadowed journey, Annie also found it difficult to get on the bus because a bike stand next to the bus stop blocked her route to the ramp. Annie found this frustrating but reflected that unfortunately, this was a common challenge for many wheelchair users.

In some cases, the inconvenience caused by uneven pavements and physical obstacles around bus stops discouraged people from using the bus.

> **"It's good that [the bus] is there as an option, but it's very much going to not be my first choice for anything until the pavements are improved [...] because it's not worth what it costs me in terms of energy and pain and so on, and risk to do that, compared to being able to drive my car and park in the car park for the supermarket and be like a stone's throw from the door."**
>
> **Samantha, 44**

The hassle of getting to a bus stop added not only extra time to a journey, it also increased mental fatigue as people felt they needed to be constantly alert to potential hazards.

Why Are We Waiting?

Waiting for the bus

Many people felt bus stops lacked essential facilities such as seating or shelter. For participants like Clara, who has Crohn's disease and chronic fatigue syndrome, having somewhere to sit while waiting was essential. Clara described how standing for periods longer than five minutes meant she may feel too tired to complete the rest of her journey:

> **"If there's a seat at that stop, I'd probably sit down and stay - if the next one was due in 10 minutes, I'd wait [....] But if there was no seat and it wasn't due quite quickly, I'm going home and that's it, I'm done. I'm either cancelling whatever I was going for if I'm going for an appointment, I'm cancelling it. If I was due somewhere, I'll send my apologies. I'm not very reliable."**
>
> **Clara, 39**

The physical design of buses also posed potential physical dangers to some disabled passengers.

Grant, from Wales, said he was worried about the 'floating' bus stops that have been recently introduced in his local area. He is visually impaired and said that the design – which places a cycle lane between the bus stop and the pavement – puts people at risk of colliding with cyclists when they get off the bus.

Many participants with mobility issues reported problems with their local bus stops not having a raised kerb. For example Bella, a wheelchair user, described how she was reliant on the driver and other passengers to push her onto the bus because the gradient for the ramp was too steep for her to manage without one.

Anika, 64, Glasgow

Anika left London in the 1990s and moved to Glasgow with her husband to start a business together. They own and manage a restaurant in the city and have two daughters and a retired guide dog called Bubbles.

Anika lost her eyesight 18 years ago after being diagnosed with cone dystrophy but it has not stopped her living the life she wants. She is an avid walker and loves listening to music and going to concerts with friends.

Anika values independence in all areas of her life, especially travel. She uses the bus at least weekly, making trips to the local shops or the botanic gardens. Anika uses a white cane and has a personal assistant who accompanies her and helps her on her journeys, if needed.

The design and location of Anika's local bus stop sometimes makes her feel unsafe. The bus shelter has glass panels that do not extend all the way down to the pavement. This gap is big enough for Anika's cane to fit underneath so she is unable to detect the glass panel. This makes the bus stop hazardous, as she could walk into the glass panels and injure herself.

Because the bus stop is located by a busy main road, Anika finds it hard to hear buses approaching and worries that she has to stand right by the edge of the road to make herself visible.

"What is a bit unsettling for me is that I never know when the bus is approaching the stop. Only when the bus comes up to the kerb do I know if the bus is going to stop or not, and then the doors just swing open!"

Why Are We Waiting?

Being on the bus

Wheelchair users also faced challenges on the bus. A common source of frustration was the layout of the designated wheelchair space, where the instructions on the bus required wheelchair users to align the back of their wheelchairs against the 'ironing board'. This meant that many wheelchair users were facing the back of the bus and were often not able to see the on-screen information.

Depending on the size of the wheelchair, pressing the stop button was not always feasible or comfortable in this position.

> **"I can't see what stop we're at [...] I have already complained to TfL about not being able to press the buttons to stop the bus if you follow the instructions to sit facing the rear of the bus, and had absolutely no joy whatsoever."**
>
> **Annie, 61**

Marley, a wheelchair user from Southampton, said they often found automatic ramps unreliable. Ramps often failed to lower correctly on uneven terrain and, when this happened, they described needing to push themself onto the bus with some force, which could cause damage to their chair.

Likewise Katherine, a wheelchair user from Manchester, said that she has been "stuck" on buses where the bus driver had been unable to get the ramp working:

> **"Sometimes you'll get on a bus and the driver will tell you 'Oh, the ramp is a bit dodgy'. Then I'm kind of like, 'Should I get on? I'd rather wait if you think it's going to break.'"**
>
> **Katherine, 61**

Maria, 31, Wales

Maria has a genetic eye disease that she has had since birth, as do both her parents and her two-year-old daughter. Over time, her vision has gradually diminished to the point where she is almost completely blind. Jack, her husband, is also sight impaired. They both work from home – Maria supports families with disabled children finding events, support and information relevant to them and their situation. In her spare time, she likes to attend a drama group in Cardiff.

In their rural home in South Wales where she grew up, Maria relies heavily on public transport, travelling with the help of her guide dog. However, she tends to avoid buses due to previous bad experiences. Most local buses lack working audio announcements, making it difficult for her to know when to get off without assistance from the bus driver.

The most memorable experience for Maria was when she missed her stop and ended up stranded in an unfamiliar area with both her daughter and guide dog. Taxis are hard to come by in rural Wales and, without any family members who can drive, she had no idea how to get home. Being responsible for her child and dog added an extra layer of panic to the already stressful situation, and since then Maria has not wanted to get the bus again.

"Before, I could see out of the window, whereas now I can't. I'm completely dependent on those announcements if I'm on my own, but now I'm rarely on my own [on the bus] because I don't trust it. I'm too scared."

Why Are We Waiting?

Interacting with other passengers

The general public's awareness of, and attitudes towards disabled people could make or break a journey for a disabled passenger. Experiences ranged from mostly positive, to leaving the disabled passenger feeling tired and uncomfortable. This also affected how some disabled passengers viewed and planned their journeys.

Crowded buses were a common challenge faced by disabled passengers, especially for people using mobility aids who had a harder time boarding and moving to a safe position.

Jackie, a wheelchair user from London, described how large groups of school children on the bus had prevented her from accessing the wheelchair support rest cushion. For Martha, from Birmingham, this had resulted in her wheelchair actually tipping over on one occasion when she had been unable to secure herself against the rest.

Martha also reflected how she generally found it difficult to confront other passengers, but felt resigned and accepted this was just part of using public transport:

> **"In September, I do a lot of battling with push chairs. […] it's two minutes of asking someone to move, which is really awkward and horrific."[9]**
>
> **Martha, 24**

9 *Bus drivers have a legal duty to ask passengers to make space for wheelchair users.*

Ruth, 68, Somerset

Ruth was diagnosed with cancer in 2009. This brought a huge change to her busy working life, causing her to leave her office job and move to the West Country to rest and recover. The chemotherapy treatment was very painful for Ruth and caused an allergic reaction, leading her to develop peripheral neuropathy (numbness and pain in the hands and feet).

Now retired, Ruth still lives in the countryside and enjoys walking through her small town and joining in at craft sessions in the library. However, she is unable to walk without her walking stick and, due to the heavy medication she takes, she has 'foggy periods' where she can appear drunk to people due to her slightly slurred speech and swayed movement.

Whilst travelling on the bus, she has received comments about being a 'wino' which she says has made her feel anxious about going on journeys with lots of other passengers. She also described some of the challenges she faces in relying on the public to be considerate of her needs:

"They're not concerned if a passenger is wobbly or whatever. If I have to ask for a seat, excuse me, I'm going to fall over if I don't have a seat. Okay, they do give me the seat, but it's always begrudgingly and then when we get to a bus station, I get run over because I can't get away fast enough."

Most of the people who had travelled by bus using a wheelchair described having been in situations where people with pushchairs or buggies would not willingly give up the space on the bus for them, something the bus driver is legally responsible to assist with.

For other participants, the public could be a source of support and they were appreciative of their assistance and understanding when things did go wrong.

Susan, who is blind and from South Wales, said that members of the public would often assist her with hailing and getting onto the bus. They would also ask if she needed help so she did not have to ask, and some people would keep her company while she waited for her bus so she was not alone.

Stuart, from Lancaster, also spoke of the assistance he had received from others. He said he would ask other passengers to repeat information because he found it challenging to hear audio announcements or messages through the driver's loudspeaker due to his impaired hearing.

For Samira, travelling on the London buses during the school rush hour with her children was quite challenging. Samira's son has Duchenne muscular dystrophy and requires a special, slightly larger pram to transport him. She said that members of the public would often help her get her son's buggy onto the bus and make sure to provide extra space for them.

Why Are We Waiting?

Getting support from bus drivers

Many participants recalled having negative experiences with bus drivers during different stages of their journeys. These moments often occurred when they felt they needed support the most but didn't get it or couldn't rely on getting it from the driver. However, when participants did receive the support they needed, it often compensated for other issues faced on their journey, highlighting the profound impact that a driver's behaviour can have on the overall travel experience.

Many participants described struggling to communicate with bus drivers on their journeys. Gary, a wheelchair user from Bristol, said he found it difficult to attract the attention of drivers, especially when it required them to intervene and speak to other passengers, such as asking passengers with buggies or large bags to give way. Other wheelchair users also reported being left on the side of the road as drivers would not stop at the bus stop to explain it was full, instead driving past and leaving them stranded.

Passengers with visual impairments or who were nonverbal found it even more difficult to communicate with the driver. These participants were often concerned that bus drivers would not stop at their destination.

James, who has limited mobility and verbal communication after a stroke, was unable to tell the driver to stop and the stop button was sometimes out of reach. Instead, he had to rely on gesturing to fellow passengers to alert the driver to stop the bus. This method was unreliable, especially in instances where there were only a few passengers on board.

Maria, who is registered blind, relied on the driver to announce when the bus reached her destination. When boarding, she would ask them to call out as they reached her stop, as the audio announcements often weren't on. When this did not happen, Maria would end up in the wrong place, faced with a new challenge of getting to the right destination from somewhere unfamiliar to her.

These examples show how a negative experience with a bus driver can undermine the confidence of a disabled passenger. Not knowing if the service and support they need will be available to them adds a layer of emotional stress to the practical challenges already faced.

Jason, 35, London

Jason's perception of bus drivers has changed dramatically since he became a wheelchair user.

While working as a truck driver in 2020, Jason was involved in a serious road accident in which he broke both his legs. Recovery has been difficult for him and he has found it hard to accept that he can no longer be the main provider for his family. He has also struggled with how he believes his family and friends have viewed him since the accident. Before, he felt he was looked up to as the elder sibling who financially supported his brother through university, but now he feels like an 'object of sympathy'.

This, in part, was why Jason initially limited bus travel after his accident, describing his interactions with bus drivers as frustrating:

"The bus driver has to get off from driving and push you inside and everything. It's a kind gesture, but I hate that I have to stress him out just to leave his work, just to come and help me."

However, Jason later reflected on the positive impact small actions can have on passengers.

"Even though, personally, I do not appreciate being pushed [by the drivers] I guess it's really helpful for me and others like me, when we really need help [...] That can be really massive."

In the past year, Jason has become even more appreciative of the support bus drivers can provide. Jason spoke of how he was previously abused by three school children whilst travelling on the bus. The driver intervened by stopping the vehicle and, with the assistance of fellow passengers, was able to force them off the bus, something Jason was grateful for.

Why Are We Waiting?

Several of the participants reported that when bus drivers were rude or obstructive, it could knock their confidence and, in some cases, make them hesitant to travel by bus altogether. Katya, from Southport, described how she regularly tried to take the bus but stopped because the drivers she encountered would make excuses for refusing to let her board in her powered chair.

> **“They'd say that I had to have insurance to be in a wheelchair and that I had to be on the road […] They would say their ramp wasn't working. They would say there was a pram in the space so I couldn't get on, all of that. And it just became that you couldn't go anywhere. You couldn't book a table reservation and know that you could get the bus, because you might have to wait for three or four buses”.**
>
> **Katya, 48**

Others were also reluctant to ask for help, emphasising the importance of independence to them.

While the interviews and shadowed journeys with participants revealed the challenges bus drivers’ behaviour could create, they also showed how instrumental bus drivers could be in helping disabled passengers overcome some of the difficulties they faced on their journeys.

A proactive bus driver, capable of identifying and offering the necessary support to disabled passengers during their journeys, could benefit those who were less able or willing to speak up.

And when bus drivers were helpful and supportive, their actions made passengers feel seen and heard.

> **“Some [drivers] are very keen and as soon as they see you, [they] jump out and get the ramp down and make sure you are comfortable and make sure nobody else gets in the way.”**
>
> **Jeremy, 45**

Disabled passengers reflected that many of the challenges they experienced could be alleviated if bus drivers were more understanding and more aware of their needs. This would help disabled passengers to build confidence around travelling more generally.

Stakeholder Perspectives

Many bus service providers recognise the challenges disabled passengers faced when it comes to the design and infrastructure of buses and have dedicated staff responsible for improving the accessibility of bus travel. However, they acknowledge that they could do more to meet the needs of disabled passengers.

Jacob, Stakeholder

Jacob works in the customer resolutions team at a large bus provider. With over 10 years’ experience, his job involves dealing with customer complaints once they've been escalated.

Jacob felt that the role of staff on buses and around bus terminals has become less significant than it once was - no longer are bus conductors in service, meaning that bus drivers have to cover both roles.

In Jacob’s experience, ***“Bus drivers aren’t hired for their customer service skills”.***

Disembarking the bus and switching between modes of transport can be a challenge for disabled passengers and Jacob believes that trains and train stations with ‘Passenger Assist’ in place could be an effective model for buses.

"I think an element of something similar to rail would be good. Even if it's just to make sure people are able to get on and off the bus at that terminus would be a big help."

Victoria, Stakeholder

Victoria works as an Accessibility and Communities Manager at a bus provider in the Southeast of England. Victoria moved into this role due to her personal experience of disability following a traumatic brain injury. Her job involves working with various disability groups and passengers to identify solutions to existing barriers in transport.

Victoria explained that while the company’s buses are considered accessible compared to other operators, there is always room for improvement. She highlighted ongoing efforts to improve accessibility by implementing features such as double wheelchair bays, dementia-friendly flooring, next-stop announcements and driver assistance.

However, Victoria emphasised the need for industry-wide collaboration and standardisation:

"The effectiveness and existing support for disabled people using bus travel varies greatly – there needs to be basic structures, guidance and regulations to ensure consistent accessibility and support across different bus providers."

How the experiences of passengers can be improved

Bus Users UK recommendations for stakeholders

Significant progress has been made in recent years to improve access to transport much of which is in the process of, or has already become, law. But coach and bus services are far from fully accessible and many of the things that disabled people need most from transport are things that will benefit everyone.

This research and others, such as the recent 'Are we there yet?' report from Transport for All, offers valuable insight into what those needs are and the challenges disabled people face when it comes to accessing services.

The key areas for improvement highlighted in this report include:

- reliability and frequency of services
- design of vehicles, infrastructure and stops
- quality and availability of information
- staff awareness and training
- the awareness and understanding of other passengers

What follows is a comprehensive set of recommendations aimed at all those involved in the planning, design and delivery of services from operators and local authorities, to Government and the general public.

Framework for the future

Efforts to improve accessibility and inclusion have had to balance the needs of passengers with the demands on operators to deliver commercially viable services.

The result for disabled passengers has been inconsistent, unpredictable and sometimes inaccessible services as operators and local authorities have at times had to make the difficult decision to run sub-standard services over no service at all. This needs to change.

What is needed from the Government

- Higher minimum legal requirements, for example extending the Accessible Information Regulation to bus stops and stations
- Greater clarity and guidance around legislation and the handling of issues such as access to wheelchair space
- Removing all restrictions on the disabled person's concessionary bus pass and associated companion passes
- Collaboration with disabled people and using studies like this one, based on lived experience to identify barriers and find effective legal solutions
- Work with independent partners to provide ongoing monitoring to ensure services are fully compliant
- A commitment to providing long-term, ring-fenced funding to improve service frequency and reliability, and ensure passengers can expect more consistent access to services
- It should be a legal requirement for local authorities to provide socially necessary transport services

What is needed from local authorities

- Effective bus priority measures to improve punctuality and reliability
- Bus stops and stations that are safe and, wherever feasible, offer access to seating, shelter, toilets and staff
- A zero-tolerance approach to anything that restricts access to buses such as bad parking and pavement clutter
- Meaningful and ongoing consultation with disabled people in the planning and design of services and infrastructure such as stops and shelters
- Improved transport integration to ensure disabled passengers are able to transition between modes

What is needed from operators

- Active engagement with local communities, ensuring that disabled people, particularly those currently unable to access bus services, are fully represented
- Collaboration with people with a range of disabilities on the design of vehicles, apps, infrastructure and services
- Ongoing training of all frontline staff in both Disability Awareness and Disability Assistance
- Clear policies stating the driver's responsibilities to disabled passengers, such as pulling into every stop, deploying the ramp whenever needed and ensuring disabled passengers have priority access to wheelchair spaces and priority seating
- Partnership working with local authorities and independent bodies to ensure services and infrastructure are monitored and fully compliant
- Visible signs encouraging passengers to be kind, patient and to give each other space

For these recommendations to succeed they require commitment, collaboration and funding. The cost to society of not improving access to transport is far greater.

Why Are We Waiting?

Acknowledgements

The purpose of this report is to bring the experiences of passengers with a range of accessibility issues to life.

Everyone who took part in this project gave their informed consent to take part. Their data has been anonymised and the names used in the report are all pseudonyms.

The findings of this report are based on qualitative research in the form of self-report and observational data.

Where signposted, qualitative data has been triangulated with quantitative research from Frontier Economics who carried out light touch quantitative analysis during this project.

This analysis aimed to support the nuanced qualitative findings by providing additional national context on usage of buses by disabled people. They drew on a number of national data sources and official statistics as well as complaints data held by Bus Users UK. No personal data was included in any part of the analysis.

The Motability Foundation

This project was funded by the Motability Foundation who fund, support, research and innovate so that all disabled people can make the journeys that they choose. For more information on the Motability Foundation please visit **www.motabilityfoundation.org.uk**

Bus Users UK

Bus Users UK champions the rights of passengers and campaigns for inclusive, accessible transport. Their work with local communities, transport bodies and government at all levels is helping to improve services for everyone.

The only approved Alternative Dispute Resolution Body for the bus and coach industry, they are also the designated body for handling complaints under the Passenger Rights in Bus and Coach Legislation and part of the Sustainable Transport Alliance, a group dedicated to promoting the benefits of public, shared and active travel. **www.bususers.org**

Revealing Reality

Revealing Reality is an independent social research agency committed to making a tangible difference in people's lives. Partnering with local authorities, government departments, and charities, we dive deep into the heart of societal issues affecting every corner of our communities. Our approach is personal and immersive – we spend time with individuals in their homes and communities, listening to their stories and understanding their needs firsthand.

Our work speaks for itself – from collaborating with Transport for London to improve public transport accessibility to innovative projects exploring digital inclusion in travel. We're not just about data – we're about making a positive impact, informing policies and services to create a more inclusive society for everyone.

Frontier Economics

Now one of the largest economic consultancies in Europe, Frontier Economics started in 1999 with the goal of doing things differently. Frontier Economics helps companies with their biggest challenges – market strategies, regulatory reviews and competition inquiries, and helps governments design innovative policies and regulatory systems.

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