
January 2013

Parliamentary Transport Committee inquiry

Effectiveness of legislation relating to transport for disabled people



Bus Users

Working for passengers

Bus Users UK's response

The effectiveness of legislation relating to transport for disabled people: is it working? Is it sufficiently comprehensive? How effectively is it enforced?

There is little doubt that where buses are concerned provision for disabled people has improved significantly over the last 15 years or so. It is still by no means perfect but the practicality of buses being able to accommodate people in wheelchairs has transformed the ability for people in wheelchairs and people with other disabilities to use bus services in a way which would not have seemed possible 20 years ago.

Public transport always involves an element of compromise, and there are constraints of vehicle design which will always limit the practicality of being able to accommodate everyone who wishes to travel. Design has improved, with low-floor buses, access ramps, contrasting colours for handrails to help people with visual impairment etc. This has been enshrined within the PSV Access Regulations (PSVAR).

It is noted that PSVAR has time limits by which all buses on the road have to meet the regulations. These were pragmatic, placing a duty on bus companies to renew their fleets with accessible buses within a reasonable timescale. Progress towards meeting these time limits has for the most part been impressive. However some bus companies have been slower than others to prioritise fleet renewal, and we have heard suggestions that some bus companies may request extensions to these time limits. Should this be the case we consider that bus companies have had fair notice of these requirements. Moreover those that have not moved sufficiently quickly to renew their fleets have had a cost advantage over other operators which have ensured they will be compliant with PSVAR and we would seek assurance that no extension will be granted to the time limits for ensuring fleets are accessible.

There are improvements that could be made in ensuring that bus services are effective in being able to meet the need of disabled passengers. Of primary importance is the ability of buses to access kerbs at bus stops, and we would wish to see more rigorous enforcement of parking restrictions at all bus stops. Ramps are only effective if they can be deployed at a kerb, and often the angle of approach is too steep for wheelchair users if the ramp has to be deployed at road level rather than kerb level. To be effectively accessible, for wheelchair users and for ambulant disabled or mobility impaired people alike, buses need unimpeded access to the kerb. Parking at bus stops needs to be universally illegal and enforcement needs to be rigorous and effective.

Whilst the complaints we receive from bus users regarding accessibility in general are a small minority of the issues with which we deal, the most common complaint we receive regards the conflict between wheelchair users and parents with pushchairs. We have been made aware of instances where wheelchair users have been denied access to the bus because the wheelchair space is occupied by pushchairs. Drivers are not empowered to require people with pushchairs to make space for a wheelchair user, as their employers tend to consider it is unreasonable of them to put the driver in a position of potential conflict. This is an issue which may be clarified by the present legal challenge in Darlington against Arriva on this matter, and certainly needs clarification. Whilst it is clearly unacceptable for parents with pushchairs to be required to leave the bus to make space, there needs to be an onus on them to enable a wheelchair user to access the designated space. As this does not seem to be happening universally by any voluntary means, it seems, regrettably, that some sort of enforcement by regulation is necessary.

Bus Users UK is concerned that a derogation is to be applied for by UK Government to the requirement in the EU Passenger Rights legislation due to take effect in March this year for all drivers to be trained in

disability awareness. Drivers are of course required to undertake 35 hours of training between each licence renewal, which is a welcome development. However there is no set curriculum for this training, and drivers are free to 'mix and match' from a variety of seven-hour courses. It would seem a very obvious step for a module on disability awareness to be made a compulsory requirement for the driver CPC. It is accepted that a majority of drivers do receive this training, but there are still too many instances of this training not being given or of drivers not demonstrating an understanding of people's issues.

The training needs to cover as broad a range of issues as possible, including an awareness of disabilities which may not be as overt as others. Requiring these issues to be covered by the CPC would ensure that as an absolute minimum all drivers would receive seven hours' training every five years. As drivers need to undertake training anyway, there is no additional burden being placed on the industry and we can see absolutely no justification for derogation from the requirement in the Passenger Rights Regulations.

One of the provisions of PSVAR is colour-contrasting handrails to aid people with partial sight. We have noted recently a trend towards more muted colours for handrails, and while this may technically prove a contrast for instance to brightly-coloured seat coverings, this has negated the benefit to partially-sighted people intended by the regulations.

The accessibility of information: including the provision of information about routes, connections, timetables, delays and service alterations, and fares

While we accept that there are specific issues regarding information for people with disabilities, these are issues which apply to all bus users (and often would-be users who give up trying to find out the information they require). Access to information is often difficult in any case. We would note that the Government's own website, Transport Direct, is a helpful and impartial starting point for information but does not seem to have been given the promotion that was promised when it was launched. It is a powerful site which was expensive to build, and is poorly known.

Receiving information about delays and alterations is often very difficult. Many bus companies now use Facebook and Twitter to alert people to problems, though these are not always staffed at all times when buses are out on the road, they rely on people being comfortable with these media, especially through mobile devices, and on having an adequate internet signal. Older and disabled bus users are less likely to be comfortable with such technology, especially using mobile devices, and those using bus services because their financial circumstances prevent them using any other mode are unlikely to be able to access such technology. It seems however that bus companies are keen to push their customers in that direction. It is becoming apparent that even younger users who may be more conversant with such technology do not always trust the information provided via smartphones and prefer to confirm the information with a 'real' person: very often the only person bus users encounter is the driver who may or may not have that information and if a service is badly disrupted the issue is likely to be that the bus hasn't turned up at all. Although real-time systems contain the facility for information about delays/cancellations diversions etc to be relayed to bus stops so equipped, in practice this seldom seems to happen.

Real-time information systems have been available for many years now, and the technology available to drive such systems is now commonplace and inexpensive. Yet real-time systems are by no means universal and often fail to work. The latter is sometimes due to the way systems are made up, whereby the overall system may be provided by the top-tier local authority (which may well be different from the next local authority's system), using equipment on the bus fitted by the bus company and relayed to signs on shelters for which responsibility is the district/borough council and will probably be subcontracted to a private-sector company. The result is that it is difficult to trace the source of problems when the system fails, and no one party to the system takes overall ownership. Some local authorities have elected to turn off real-time systems rather than cut services as a means to balancing budget reductions. But real-time information has the ability to help all bus users, especially when allied to next-stop information systems on buses with

audio/visual announcements to help both blind/partially-sighted and deaf people. Such systems are commonplace on other forms of public transport but still rare on bus services outside London. London has a system wide publicly funded system whereas other parts of the country rely largely on bus companies seeing the commercial benefits of such systems and are still the exception rather than the rule.

Real time systems are often accessible by text message, which is more accessible for many than net-based smartphone technology but details of how to access information is often not clear at bus stops. London bus stops have a plate affixed to the bus stop pole with the stop reference and text number, but this is not replicated in other places. Some local authorities are better than others at ensuring this information is supplied and clearly visible.

Fares information is often impossible to obtain prior to boarding the bus, and many local authorities will not allow fares information to be posted on bus stops as it is considered to be promoting the commercial interest of the bus company.

Accessibility on bus company websites seems to be variable and inconsistent; both First and Arriva had an accessibility tab which takes you to information about how to use their sites in an accessible manner: in both cases the text is small but can be enlarged: the tool to do so on Arriva's site is limited, though text can be enlarged further through browser tools. There appears to be no accessibility tag on the Stagecoach site. Reaching timetable information is quite an involved process on all of these sites.

There is still a long way to go in making bus service information accessible for users in general.

The provision of assistance by public transport staff and staff awareness of the needs of people with different disabilities

This is covered in the first section of our response.

What can be learnt from transport provision during the Paralympics and how can we build on its successes?

We do not have specific expertise in this area.