

Development Department Research Programme

Transport Provision for Disabled People in Scotland Progress since 1998

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In 1998, Reid Howie Associates was commissioned by the Scottish Office to undertake research into transport provision for disabled people in Scotland. This follow up research was commissioned by the Scottish Executive in 2003 to identify and assess progress made by policy makers and transport operators since 1998 in providing accessible transport for disabled people in Scotland.

Main Findings

- There has been progress on many issues since 1998 but there are still areas of Scotland where there is little public transport which can be used by many disabled people.
- One of the key difficulties facing disabled people is uncertainty, for example relating to whether low floor buses or accessible trains will be available for all sectors of a journey, whether an accessible taxi can be guaranteed for return journeys, and whether assistance promised (or booked) is made available. This is a cause of stress, and a significant disincentive to travel.
- Key developments in relation to policy include the establishment of the Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland (MACS), and the progressive implementation of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995, although the pace of change is frustratingly slow for many disabled people.
- It is clear that the development and implementation of access standards (whether mandatory or voluntary) are having a significant positive impact on the accessibility of transport vehicles. The approach of the rail industry, which is implementing systematic access auditing, appears to be a useful model of good practice to support the process of developing standards.
- There have been many improvements in the accessibility of public transport vehicles and infrastructure since 1998, including the introduction of further low floor buses (supported in some areas by bus station and boarding point improvements), more accessible trains on many routes, accessible ferries (with new terminal buildings at some ports) and further improvements to Scotland's airports. The number of accessible taxis is increasing, although very few areas have 100% accessible fleets (and some areas have virtually none).
- The cost of public transport remains a significant barrier for many disabled people. The cost of taxis is high in all areas, and is exacerbated in areas where no concessionary fare scheme operates. It is not clear that recent changes (April 2003) to concessionary fares for bus passengers are benefiting disabled people directly, and may, as a consequence of higher passenger numbers, be acting as a disincentive to travel.

Methodology

The research involved a range of research methods. A review of literature was carried out, focusing on policy and other developments since 1998. A review was also undertaken of 33 local transport strategies developed and published in 1999 / 2000.

A number of surveys were undertaken as part of the research. A survey was undertaken of 31 local authorities to identify policy and practice in relation to taxi licensing and concessionary fare schemes. Surveys were also undertaken of a range of transport operators in order to identify current accessibility issues, developments since 1998 and future plans.

With the assistance of a number of organisations, a postal survey was circulated to both individuals and organisations representing disabled people across Scotland. Around 150 responses were received. Over two thirds of these were from individuals, with the remainder being from organisations.

With the assistance of a range of local organisations, focus groups were held in Aberdeen, Shetland, Dumfries and Paisley. Individual interviews were undertaken in each of these areas, as well as in Fife, Edinburgh and Highland. In addition, both Fife Council and Edinburgh City Council made available reports of focus groups undertaken in their areas.

Main Findings

Overall, it is clear that there has been much progress since 1998, but this is patchy. The picture is one of inconsistency and some frustration for disabled people. Many areas still have public transport which is effectively inaccessible to large numbers of disabled people. This encompasses both transport vehicles and infrastructure.

The 1998 Transport White Paper was the first to tackle the accessibility of public transport in a structured way. Since then, however, there has been relatively little focus on this in terms of national transport policy (with the exception of the UK government 10 Year Plan, which made links between funding for wider transport improvements and access improvements).

The guidance to local authorities and Strathclyde Passenger Transport (SPT) on the development of local transport strategies also suggested that the accessibility of public transport should be a key consideration. Despite this, it is

clear from an assessment of the original round of strategies that the approach to this was patchy, with some areas clearly viewing this as a higher priority than others.

It is clear that the timetable for implementing the transport-related provisions of the DDA is a matter of much frustration to many disabled people. Although progress is being made in many areas, much of Scotland remains without low floor buses, fully accessible trains and stations or, in many cases, any wheelchair accessible taxis at all. Considerable progress has been made in some areas, most notably, perhaps, in relation to ferries (which are, paradoxically, outwith the scope of the DDA).

One of the key remaining areas of difficulty is in adequately defining what constitutes "accessible" in terms of public transport vehicles. Low floor buses are more accessible than high floor, and have no steps, but they still cannot be used by many disabled people, and are disliked by many older people. Black cabs are more accessible than saloons, but are not universally liked by disabled people. Some improvements, for example the installation of longer, flatter access ramps, have made matters better for some disabled people, but, arguably, worse for others (where fire regulations prevent the provision of seating to allow people with limited mobility to rest). What is clear is that standards will continue to evolve, and there is a need for changing standards to be discussed with disabled people, and communicated clearly to operators involved.

Key developments since 1998

One of the key developments since 1998 has been the establishment of MACS. It is clear that MACS is now being consulted by public transport operators and disability organisations.

The national concession for visually impaired travellers was identified by many people throughout this research as an aspect of good practice, although there appears to be no specific reason why this should be restricted to one group of disabled people.

There has been a progressive increase in the number of low floor buses in service, although there are few areas where all buses are low floor. There has been substantial investment in some areas in the infrastructure necessary to support the use of low floor buses. New bus stations, such as Edinburgh and Stirling, include a wide range of good practice features to assist accessibility.

The Disabled Persons' Protection Policy process, started in 1995/6, has brought about a substantial increase in the amount of information available on the accessibility of rail services. The DPPP process has, perhaps less directly, brought about a significant rise in the amount of training undertaken by train operating companies. There have been key advances in the accessibility of trains since 1998. New trains are much more accessible than previous trains, and the refurbishment of much of GNER's rolling stock will also deliver improvements in relation to, for example, toilet provision. The carrying of ramps on services also appears to have had a positive effect.

The main access improvements in relation to air travel are largely within airports, rather than aircraft, with new airport terminals at Stornoway and Kirkwall, and incremental improvements elsewhere. The assistance provided to air passengers appears to be working effectively and to be seamless in operation.

Ferries represent one of the main areas of improvement since 1998, with a range of new vessels with much improved access. The value of the development of an accessible standard for large passenger ships is clear, and has clearly brought about a substantial increase in accessibility. There have also been improvements to terminal facilities in the north of Scotland, and some incremental improvements elsewhere.

There has been a progressive increase in the number of accessible taxis since 1998. A number of local authorities have implemented "100%" accessible taxi policies, although these are not popular with the trade. A number of operators have introduced computerised booking systems which record the needs of disabled people. It is also worth noting that a number of areas have introduced mandatory training for drivers.

There has been incremental improvement in most areas, with new vehicles and improvements to the accessibility of existing fleets. The pilot "demand responsive" services in some areas represent a new model of local transport for disabled people, and should be carefully evaluated with a view to disseminating good practice lessons.

Remaining gaps

The main problem facing many disabled people is the simple lack of transport capable of meeting their needs. One of the key concerns is that travelling is uncertain and stressful. Many passengers have had poor experiences with, for example, the failure to deliver assistance. Rail passengers in rural areas often have little confidence that their train will return to an accessible platform. Many disabled people will not travel by taxis as they are unable to be guaranteed that an accessible vehicle will be available for the return journey.

Concessionary fares remain a clear and outstanding issue, particularly given the fact that many disabled people have lower than average levels of income. As in 1998, there are a range of inconsistencies in terms of eligibility, coverage and the extent to which travel is either free or subsidised. A clear majority of local authorities do not have a taxi card concession scheme. Even where taxi cards exist, the level of benefit is very variable, both in terms of the number of journeys supported and the level of subsidy offered.

The recent introduction of free local off-peak bus travel for those over 60 appears to have had little or no impact on the very large number of disabled people who live in areas where there is little accessible public transport, who cannot use public transport, or who live some distance from services, and who are, therefore, reliant on personal transport.

It is clear that the availability of dial-a-ride schemes is patchy, and, even where these exist, availability is quite limited.

There is now substantially more public transport information from a huge range of sources, either internet or telephone-based. It is clear that, for most providers, the delivery of service and fare information has been a priority, with access-related issues rarely covered, except where these form part of the conditions of carriage.

Progress in the introduction of low floor buses remains patchy. It is clear that the market is not an effective driver for the introduction of accessible buses in many areas, and it must be assumed that it will be at least another 10 years before the DDA deadlines bring about accessible networks in some areas.

The accessibility of current low floor buses is a matter of concern to many disabled people. A large number of wheelchair users cannot use current low floor buses, and it is clear that the layout represents a disincentive to a significant number of older and disabled people. A key difficulty for drivers of low floor buses is poor parking at bus stops, which can prevent the bus being able to stop adjacent to the pavement.

One of the main frustrations for disabled people is the fact that accessibility improvements are not always used by staff. Many visually impaired people, for example, identified the failure of Scotrail staff to use the public address system as a matter of concern to them. A very large number of Scotland's stations are inaccessible and some hold no prospect of ever being made accessible. One of the frustrations for users of rural stations is that trains can be diverted without warning to inaccessible platforms.

Most aircraft are functionally inaccessible to significant numbers of disabled people, and to change this would require radical remodelling of aircraft interiors. Many disabled people remain concerned about the boarding process, with worries about the safety of mechanical lifts, and about the degree of manual handling required (although staff are generally very highly regarded). The cost of air travel within Scotland, and the fact that there are few concessions, is a particular concern to many disabled people.

Although there have been considerable advances in ferry design in the last 5 years, there remain a large number of ferries where access is difficult. These issues are only likely to be addressed by the purchase of new vessels. Some ferry terminal buildings are not currently accessible (and may lack facilities suitable for disabled customers), although the DDA will require that improvements are made before October 2004. As with airports, there are a range of issues with the interchange with other modes of transport, particularly buses and taxis, but also coaches.

Although there has been some increase in the number of accessible taxis, this remains patchy, and there are large areas of Scotland where only saloon cars operate. Cost is clearly the primary barrier in areas where local authorities

have not imposed a "100%" accessible policy. In areas with such a policy, operators have had to invest or leave the industry, but this is very unlikely to happen in other areas simply due to market forces.

The main issue relating to personal, community and demand-responsive transport is that availability is, inevitably, limited, either in terms of geography or eligibility. Many operators face considerable cost pressures, and are reliant on insecure funding streams.

Key priorities identified by disabled people

The key priorities identified by those who took part in this research can be summarised as the need for:

- Public transport to be consistent and dependable, with reasonable guarantees that services described as accessible will be so, and that assistance offered will be provided.
- More accessible transport vehicles, particularly buses and taxis.
- Transport facilities to be more accessible.
- The attitudes and approach of transport staff to be appropriate and positive.
- The attitudes and approach of other passengers to be appropriate and positive.
- The wider built environment to be accessible, for example, shops, offices and other places of work, health centres, leisure centres and public buildings.
- Public transport to be affordable, particularly taxis in most areas, but also flights and ferries in island areas.
- Better enforcement of a wide range of issues, such as poor parking, designated spaces, as well as maintaining spaces on buses and trains.

Recommendations

A range of recommendations were made, and it was suggested that:

- There is a need for a reassessment of the concept and definition of “accessible” transport.
- The Scottish Executive considers commissioning exploratory research to assess current information on the travel patterns of disabled people with a view to recommending whether primary research may be required.
- The Scottish Executive, working with MACS and the main disability and older persons’ organisations, undertakes further systematic research into the factors which prevent many older and disabled people from travelling, and explores the measures which may be required to enable this.
- The Scottish Executive reviews the impact of concessionary fares, in order to identify those initiatives which can be demonstrated to have most impact on the social and economic inclusion of disabled people.
- The Scottish Executive carries out a review of the extent to which Local Transport Strategies address accessible transport issues, with a view both to highlighting gaps and disseminating potential good practice.
- MACS, working with the Scottish Executive and major transport federations (such as CPT and ATCO), as well as with local authorities, develops a good practice guide in consulting with disabled people about transport provision.
- The Scottish Executive, working with MACS, seeks to encourage public transport operators to include access information on their websites, and make this available to telephone helpline staff.
- Although accessibility audits were recommended in the 1998 report, with the notable exception of rail, these remain patchy and lack a systematic basis. Recent work done on behalf of the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee (DPTAC) presents the opportunity for the Scottish Executive and MACS to develop good practice guidance on undertaking accessibility audits, and the development of action plans to address any shortcomings identified.
- MACS and the Scottish Executive could undertake wider promotion of the need for, and benefits of, undertaking disability equality training on the basis set out in the MACS guidance.
- The lack of knowledge of accessible services among many older and disabled people is an issue which could be addressed by MACS and larger national voluntary organisations.
- The Scottish Executive, working with local authorities, major voluntary organisations and transport providers could consider putting in place a campaign to address poor attitudes and behaviours among both transport staff and other passengers, and hence improve the travel experiences of many disabled people.
- The Department for Transport considers whether it would be possible to require the lowering of suitably equipped buses at every stop. It should be made clear to bus operators, and to drivers, that ramps must be deployed where these are required by a passenger.
- The current Public Service Vehicle Accessibility Regulations should be reviewed to identify whether changes in the specification may make buses easier to use for some groups of older and disabled people.
- The Scottish Executive discusses with police forces whether the enforcement of parking measures at bus stops can be improved.
- Train operating companies and Network Rail should put in place a system which gives priority to trains carrying disabled people with mobility needs when trains have to be re-routed to inaccessible platforms for operational reasons.
- The Scottish Executive considers commissioning an evaluation of various pilot ring and ride schemes (for example those in Angus, Fife and the SPT area) in order to establish whether these do make a significant impact in allowing older and disabled people who currently do not travel to do so on a more regular basis.
- The Scottish Executive considers research to review the current funding and other issues facing community transport providers given the expected increase in use due to improvements in community care.
- The Scottish Executive, working with CoSLA and the CPT, considers reviewing the actual and potential impact of the specification of low floor buses on subsidised routes.
- The Scottish Executive considers whether bringing forward its proposed guidelines on taxi licensing might help to improve access in the many areas with few, or no accessible taxis.

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