

Journey Planning Webinar

Summary report



Introduction

One of the outcomes of the Accessible Travel Framework is to strive to ensure that disabled people can make door-to-door journeys successfully whenever and however they wish. In order to do this, there needs to be access to accurate and timely information. The intention of this webinar was to discuss the information that disabled people need to plan an accessible journey, and to hear their experiences of using the Traveline Scotland website. Disability Equality Scotland worked in collaboration with Transport Scotland to present this discussion. The event took place digitally using the Zoom platform on 24 May 2021 in line with physical distancing guidelines for COVID-19.

There were 35 people in attendance. This report summarises the discussions at this event.

Background

In May 2021, Disability Equality Scotland asked a question about disabled peoples' experiences of planning an accessible journey, specifically using the Traveline Scotland website and app. This poll was on behalf of Transport Scotland's Digital Access Team and Traveline Scotland who wanted to hear feedback from disabled people about their experiences of using the website to plan a journey.

The findings highlighted that:

- 88% of respondents said that they did not think there was enough information and resources available to plan an accessible journey.
- And 96% felt that Traveline Scotland could improve its information to help disabled people plan an accessible journey.

Disability Equality Scotland then brought together its members with Transport Scotland and Traveline Scotland in a webinar discussion to explore:

- the types of information that disabled people need and in what format;
- how passenger assistance can be incorporated to better assist disabled passengers;
- the types of information available on Traveline Scotland and its functionality; and
- communication with disabled people going forward to ensure the design and development of Traveline Scotland meets their needs.

This paper summarises the discussions from five break-out groups on the day.

Panel discussion

Emma Scott, from Disability Equality Scotland set the context of the day and introduced the panelists:

- Juliet Bell, Smart Programme Manager, Transport Scotland
- Paul Cassidy, Senior Digital Smart Project Manager, Transport Scotland
- Andrew Mutch, Digital Project Manager, Transport Scotland
- Stuart McNeill, Manager, Traveline Scotland

Key discussion points

Journey Planning

It was striking from discussions just how much planning and preparation disabled people undertake in advance of making a journey, and how much this process relies on up-to-date data to inform journeys.

Disabled people reported using a combination of transport provider websites to gather information on journey times, but then also used sites like Google Maps to explore the surrounding infrastructure for information such as the width of pavements or the pavement gradient to check suitability for wheelchair use. Journey planning was not just as simple as timetables and routemaps.

“You have to plan to the ‘nth’ degree. If the information is not current, then it can end a journey before its begun and you have to just turn around and go home.”

“Having to plan your journey leaves no room for spontaneity.”

“I tend to do independent research; I use travel companies as well as checking weather reports and sites for roadworks or travel alerts.”

Disabled people

It was clear that disabled people are not only looking for up-to-date information, but detailed information. Transport providers have to understand that what is accessible for one person, is not accessible for another and the more information that can be given about a journey, the better. Importantly this also includes having information available on the layout of the bus or train carriage, such as where the wheelchair space is, its dimensions, are there handrails or poles in the way. This also extends to the information at bus stops and terminals, including details on the location of accessible toilets and nearby cafés. For some participants with visual impairments especially, this information is vital to help them make journeys with confidence.

“We need more information about buses on that route on the day of travel to know if someone in a powerchair can get on the bus, and once on, is there space for their chair?”

“I need up to date details that covers the minutiae.”

“Knowing what type of bus stop it is, like do I go left or right when I get off the bus, is it a floating bus stop? There are so many types.”

Disabled people

Often the information people needed to plan a journey is not apparent until they are in the moment, because of disruption or changes to the layout of stations and platforms. Participants with visual impairments reported 'learning' their journey in advance, so that they would know exactly where to find the bus stop, for example. But any changes due to roadworks, or more recently, via Spaces for People initiatives can lead to unexpected changes on the ground, making people feel lost and disorientated.

"I am completely blind and travel with my dog. I try to plan ahead and learn my journey ahead of time, but sometimes I get off (the bus) and I don't know where the bus stop is."

"Sometimes I didn't realise I needed the information until I'm there."

Disabled people

In order to plan (or re-plan) any journey, there was agreement that good information was critical. Data sources have to be up to date and in a format that is accessible. This includes real-time updates in different formats. Audio announcements are useful for some, while others need visual updates, perhaps via SMS text message. Discussions identified that passengers might need different information formats before they leave the house and while en-route. For example, at home we might have access to a larger screen, with screen reader but on our journeys, we might be using a smaller screen, or have no personal device on which to check for updates. Data available on websites also needs to be consistent in app format and any real time announcements over tannoy systems also need to be reflected in online data. The accessibility of the information was as important as the format the information is available in.

Attendees representing the British Deaf Association stressed the importance of ensuring journey planning information is available in formats that are accessible for Deaf people. This includes having information in British Sign Language (BSL) through the creation of a dedicated BSL Traveline Scotland App, as well as BSL videos integrated on the Traveline

Scotland website. As an example, one attendee highlighted the Food Standard Scotland website, which includes a dedicated page featuring the information on the website in BSL:

<https://www.foodstandards.gov.scot/accessibility/british-sign-language>

This was particularly true when things change on a journey through delays or disruption. Disabled people reported that they need support to help re-plan a journey. This might be as simple as information in an accessible format, or support to re-plan and find their new platform or change point safely. It is also important to make it clear on who to contact if there is a problem with the journey. In such circumstances, it is useful to have information on the location of help points, which are available at various transport hubs across different modes of transport.

“If I don’t make a successful connection and have to wait, what do I do? Where do I go in order to feel safe?”

“If something goes wrong in the journey, who can you contact for help – we need greater awareness of help points.”

Disabled people

Passenger Assistance

For some participants, journey planning was important to negate the need for passenger assistance. Disabled people wanted to make independent journeys as far as possible and wanted the information to allow them to do this without assistance. For some, this was also because their experience of passenger assistance was described as ‘pot-luck’ in terms of the staffs’ attitude, behaviour and experience of dealing with disabled people. Some participants had not had good experience with passenger assistance, and therefore tried to avoid using it, if possible.

“Relying on passenger assistance can make the journey more complicated. I try to do a lot of research in advance so as not to rely on them.”

“I try to do it on my own, but I always book assistance on the trains.”

Disabled people rely on service providers to be able to meet their accessibility needs. This includes having staff with adequate training to support a disabled person; both in terms of an awareness of their needs and the practical training in how best to support them. Some participants had negative experiences of passenger assistance and reported it was the poor attitude and behaviour of the staff that made the encounter challenging.

One suggestion was for Traveline Scotland to also host information on passenger assistance to allow disabled people to book these simultaneously. It was suggested that when planning a journey, disabled passengers should be able to specify whether they require assistance, the type of assistance they need and at what point on their journey.

“There needs to be an option to specify what kind and level of assistance you need to get on and off a bus or train or to move from one mode of transport to another.”

Disabled person

User Interface/Use of the Website

There were mixed views among respondents on their perception of Traveline Scotland. Some had used it and struggled to get the information they needed. Some wheelchair users were frustrated that there was no option to indicate they were a wheelchair user and therefore all the information presented to them referred to ‘walking distances’ rather than ‘wheeling distances’.

“There’s no drop-down to say you’re a wheelchair user so you don’t know if (the information relates to) a low floor, or dropped kerbs, there’s no information on gradients so I end up using the transport provider websites.”

Disabled person

A number of participants said they tended to go directly to the transport operator for information when planning a journey. For some this was because accessibility information was perceived to be more readily available, while others felt this data was likely to be more up to date – particularly when referring to social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook. There was a perception that there was a time-lag with travel updates appearing on Traveline Scotland, whereas the operator sites were likely to be more up-to-date.

“We go to transport operator Twitter feeds as they have the most up to date information on changes and announcements.”

Disabled person

In addition to the previously cited example of the Food Standard Scotland website, which includes a dedicated page featuring the information on the website in BSL, another example of a good website and interface was the ‘moovit Scotland’ app www.moovitaoo.com/scotland which participants had used to plan an accessible journey. This was favoured as, for example, it showed more information about the journey of the bus including each of the calling points. Also mentioned was the Google walking app which gave detailed directions and was favoured by those with visual impairments.

Improvements

Participants suggested improvements that they would like to see added to the Traveline Scotland website. These included:

- Information about stations, including layout, accessibility features and whether they are staffed stations
- Information on the layouts of the mode of transport to familiarise in advance, including how many coaches/carriages and where the accessible seats are.
- Ensure real-time information for all modes of transport, including information on taxis

- Ensuring real time information extends to rural areas.
- Potential for having a telephone call/helpline for better access to local knowledge, including diversions, roadworks, etc. This was especially requested in rural areas where digital connectivity could be intermittent.
- Integrate the passenger assistance information
- Creating a dedicated Traveline Scotland British Sign Language (BSL) App and integrate BSL information videos on the website.
- Include information with images to accompany the text, to support those with learning disabilities or having voice-activated software.

Communications

Discussions asked participants to consider how best Traveline Scotland could engage with disabled people to improve its accessibility. It was clear that disabled people appreciate being involved in discussions and would like to continue to be consulted by Traveline Scotland. Equally, disabled people feel they should be involved in the design of the website and would suggest that the designers and decision-makers think about the end-user and test the site from a disability perspective; perhaps attempting to plan a journey or book assistance using a screen reader or other accessibility features.

This could include Traveline Scotland staff accompanying disabled people on journeys to better understand the types of information they need while travelling. There are also opportunities for disabled people to share their experiences of travelling by public transport through the Accessible Travel Hub (www.accessibletravel.scot) which can highlight best practice, as well as to identify areas for improvement for providers across various modes of transport. Likewise, transport providers can use the Hub as a platform to showcase the measures they are introducing to make journeys more accessible and inclusive for disabled passengers.

“Shadow journeys, allowing staff to physically see what happens when things break down. It’s the only way they (staff/web designers) would understand.”

Disabled person

Disability Equality Scotland May 2021