

Return to Public Transport Webinar

Summary report



Introduction

Over the past few months, many people have not accessed public transport in line with Scottish Government guidelines. The intention of this webinar was to discuss a return to public transport and what would give disabled people confidence to do so. There was a particular focus on those with sensory impairments. The webinar heard from a panel consisting transport providers as well as those with lived experience. Disability Equality Scotland worked in collaboration with transport providers and disability organisations representing those with sensory impairments to present this discussion. The event took place digitally using the Zoom platform on 29 October 2020 in line with physical distancing guidelines for COVID-19.

There were 48 people in attendance. This report summarises the discussions at this event.

Background

In September 2020, Disability Equality Scotland asked a question about disabled peoples' experiences of using public transport during the COVID-19 pandemic. This poll was on behalf of Transport Scotland's Accessibility Team who wanted to hear feedback from disabled people about their experiences of using public transport during the pandemic, and their general concerns about returning. Transport Scotland were particularly keen to hear from those with sensory impairments, and so the webinar discussion was keen to explore views from these groups.

We wanted to explore some of the ways that transport providers are ensuring their services meet all safety guidelines and hear feedback from disabled people about their experiences. This paper summarises the discussion.

Panel discussion

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

- Paul White, Director from Confederation of Passenger Transport, (representing the bus and coach industry)
- Demi Wylie, Accessibility and Planning Manager, CalMac Ferries
- Mark O'Mailey, Customer Experience Strategy Manager, ScotRail
- Hussein Patwa and Michael Tornow both from the Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland
- Karen Armstrong, Acting Head of Accessible Travel Policy, Transport Scotland
- Nicola Wilson, Head of Transport Policy Integration

Key discussion points

Challenges for disabled people

There were a number of challenges for disabled people that were identified and these will be discussed in more detail below. Central to this was the importance of being able to return to transport in order to maintain a sense of independence.

“I’m trying to use the most of my sight and trying to keep my remaining vision and the longer I go without doing the things I did before, the more uncertain I become about doing them in the future. So, its about keeping up that independence and going out and about.”

Disabled person

Information

Disabled people with sensory impairments indicated that their main challenge is getting timely and up to date information about the new processes in place for boarding public transport. Questions related to whether is there a new queuing system in place; how to go about purchasing a ticket from the driver and how to identify which seats are restricted and which are available.

“From visual impairment perspective you are focused on environment and where you are going and also the COVID restrictions and on top of that the new challenges to bear in mind. Other people also confused or unsure on the way to go and it creates for an anxious environment all round.”

Disabled person

In addition, it is vital for important travel and safety information to be communicated with passengers during the journey. One attendee with a visual impairment stated that they had recently travelled by train and there were no audio announcements and a limited onboard staff presence.

“I have had the experience of travelling on a high-speed train to Dundee during lockdown and there were no automated announcements on the train and no staff about, which was a bit disconcerting.”

Disabled person

Transport providers indicated that they are doing what they can to share timely information with passengers. For example, ScotRail has been working to create tv advertising campaigns to reinforce the need for face coverings and while BSL was available for these online; it was not on the television version, so this will be resolved. CalMac have been promoting contactless payments and online bookings.

“We are clear on our website to say to customers to check your journey in advance and check facilities.”

ScotRail

The important thing for disabled people is to have information on changes to services, regardless of how unimportant it might seem as this can help disabled people prepare for travel. Transport providers agreed to take feedback away from this discussion to improve their communications.

“Being reassured on issues where we might think we don’t need to reassure people it’s obvious. If you need help, ask for it, but we are in a time where things are no longer obvious.”

Passenger Assistance

One of the key concerns identified in the weekly poll was the issue of passenger assistance and whether this service would still be on offer to help disabled passengers make journeys. The poll indicated that 63% of respondents with sensory impairments said that the availability of passenger assistance was their main concern about using public transport again.

“It does seem to be a lot less in the way of visible staffing both in train stations but also on-board trains that is particularly noticeable and less of a staff presence. I think that has made me concerned a bit but should I need assistance there won't be anyone about to provide it.”

Disabled person

CalMac explained that their staff continue to offer support to passengers and that staff are prepared to spend more time with passengers explaining changes to the on-board environment, such as one-way systems and physical distancing measures.

ScotRail confirmed that while staff have been removed from revenue collection at stations, they have been clear that passenger assistance duties had to be maintained and so they have worked closely with trade unions to make sure appropriate procedures are in place, with appropriate PPE. This has allowed ScotRail to offer the passenger assistance service in roughly the same way and to the same timescales as pre COVID.

“We have reallocated available station staff resources to areas where we know they can be of more value.”

ScotRail

Disabled people indicated that messaging around passenger assistance still being available would help to increase their confidence to travel.

Face coverings and exemptions

Disabled people felt that the messaging around face covering exemptions was increasing but could be reinforced a bit more. Attendees indicated that there were still anxieties around not wearing a covering and being approached or challenged. In some cases, disabled people have been subject to abuse and instances of hate crime. Transport providers confirmed there was around 80% compliance rate with wearing a covering but that transport staff are trained to recognise various exemption cards.

“We encourage the use of masks and we’re seeing about 80% compliance. We know that around 20% of the population could have a valid reason for exemption.”

CPT

“We joined in your campaign to raise awareness about hate crime and we posted it in our internal sites for staff.”

CalMac Ferries

Transport staff are aware that some passengers rely on lip reading and if possible, a secondary visor can be used to allow the removal of a face covering. ScotRail staff can also use the Interpreter Now App which creates a relationship with a third-party interpreter on a smartphone which translates between staff member and the customer using British Sign Language.

Infrastructure changes

Disabled people talked about the impact that changes to the physical environment have on their confidence to travel. The Spaces for People initiative has been introduced to try and make outdoor spaces more user friendly during the pandemic, and involves projects which have closed roads to increase space for walking, wheeling and cycling as well as widening pavements and removing parking spaces. In some cases, this has encouraged the use of ‘floating bus stops’ which often require a passenger to cross a cycle lane to get to the bus stop. This causes great anxiety among visually impaired people.

“So many changes made to local town environments - streets have changed and one-way systems. In Aberdeen they have floating bus stops and bus lane is extension to pavement and it's frightening for me and you are in the middle of an open street and not knowing how that all works has prevented me from using buses.”

Disabled person

“In Glasgow and elsewhere there are lots of adaptations made and in some places it means you have to walk across a cycle lane to get to the bus stop and it's a further aspect that would put me off trying to travel by bus as I can't see or hear the cyclists.”

Disabled person

One positive is that the Transport Scotland directorate responsible for accessible and active travel are also responsible for bus. This means that any measures going forward for the bus industry will take account of improvements for walking and cycling and general accessibility.

Challenges for transport providers

Transport providers identified some of their own challenges in the previous six months. These included:

- Reacting to travel restrictions and short notice changes to how services can run.
- Staff shortages – staff absenteeism through COVID-19 or isolation and the need for reallocation of staff to the busiest transport hubs.
- Evaluating and risk assessing the use of hand sanitizer on board. Risk assessments showed that the use of a dispenser on board created a bottle-neck, increased boarding times and was a fire risk.
- Driver training on the use of face coverings and exemptions.

Reassurances

The transport providers on the panel were asked what reassurances they would like to pass onto disabled passengers. This included messages that although things are still far from normal and the situation is ever-evolving, transport providers are here to support passengers as best they can. Channels of communication are open for those who need help.

Disabled people reiterated that they would be reassured by continued information and communication; even if providers are updating on things they cannot currently offer, this would help disabled people plan their journeys.

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