

Assistance Cards Webinar Summary report



Introduction

Central to the Accessible Travel Framework is a commitment to supporting disabled people to make independent journeys. Part of this commitment is raising awareness of tools and support measures in place to help disabled people travel. This webinar discussion focused on Assistance Cards and the difference they can make to independent travel.

Disability Equality Scotland worked in collaboration with Transport Scotland to present this discussion. The event took place digitally using the Zoom platform on 01 November 2021 in line with physical distancing guidelines for COVID-19.

There were 44 people in attendance. This report summarises the discussions at this event.

Background

In October 2021, Disability Equality Scotland asked its members whether assistance cards improved their ability to travel independently.

The findings highlighted that 82% of respondents said that cards did not improve their journey experience and had some specific examples of where cards had not been useful for them.

This then prompted Disability Equality Scotland, working with Transport Scotland to bring together its members with transport operators in a webinar discussion to hear about national cards and to explore these perceptions in more detail.

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:

- Karen Armstrong, Accessible Travel Team, Transport Scotland
- Keith Fiskien, Thistle Assistance Programme, Sustrans
- Steven Dickson, National Entitlement Card, Transport Scotland

Key points from presentations:

- Thistle Assistance cards can be obtained more easily online and via the app.
- It has been adapted to include a Face Covering Exemption sticker.
- Journey planning and wayfinding is something disabled people want more support with post-pandemic.
- Thistle VoyagAR has been developed as a new approach to journey planning. It uses 'Augmented Reality' to show images of maps, stations and pathways to help disabled people plan their journeys using different modes of transport.
- National Entitlement Card offers free and discounted travel for young people, disabled travellers, over 60s and ferry passengers.
- There are no day or time restrictions on national bus travel, but some local restrictions, such as in SPT area the over 60s card gives discounts on rail travel, but not between 4-6 in the evening for example.
- Depending on what Local Authority area you live in also provides access to local provisions, for example leisure centres, businesses like garden centres, where they will give you a discount if you have a National Entitlement Card.
- Currently around one third of people in Scotland qualify for a discount using the National Entitlement Card
- The cards have identifiers depicting whether the card allows a companion to travel and visually impaired people also have a specific card with a symbol depicting their impairment.

Key discussion points

Experience using assistance cards

National Entitlement Card

The webinar included attendees who had experience of using assistance cards. Attendees tended to be more familiar with the National Entitlement Card which allowed concessionary travel for disabled and older people. Most people used these on the bus network and felt it made a significant positive difference to their ability to travel at reduced or no cost.

However disabled users of the National Entitlement Card had to renew their card every three years, which involved an assessment of eligibility by medical staff. For those disabled participants with progressive or life-long conditions, there was a call for the Entitlement card to be a lifelong card as it is for those over 60.

“When you have a disabled card, you have to go back to your doctors to get a note every three years to say you are still disabled.”

Feedback suggested that recently, during the pandemic, there had been a delay to the renewal process. While this was understandable in the circumstances; there appears to have been inconsistency across Scotland with the arrangement to use an expired NEC (some local authorities accepting outdated cards, while others did not). Some attendees suggested that a wait of 6-8 weeks was much longer than the advertised timescale, and while understandable during COVID-19, highlights that a workaround solution should have been in place to ensure disabled people could continue to travel.

There was agreement from group members on the need for all local authorities to send out reminder letters or emails so that card users have plenty notice to renew their NEC. This was not just for common courtesy; reminders will also be beneficial for disabled people, for example, memory disorders such as vascular Dementia.

The other key concern around the National Entitlement Card was the restrictions of use at night. Concessionary travel is in place on buses for day-time services but not, for example, on any services between Glasgow and Edinburgh operating after midnight.

“I heard that a National Entitlement Card didn’t work on the buses after midnight. It seems disabled people aren’t meant to go out after dark.”

The final point in relation to National Entitlement Cards was the use for rail travel. Currently some card issuing local authorities will offer other discounts on rail, tram or subway travel for their card holders, but at their discretion. Attendees reported that in some areas to be able to use the NEC on the train, they had to be in receipt of a Disabled Person’s Railcard. A Disabled Person’s Railcard can be purchased (on production of a valid PIP, DLA, or equivalent medical certificate). The card then offers discounted rail fares. There was a call for an equivalent service on other modes that can be expected on the bus network.

Thistle Assistance card

Equally the Thistle Assistance Card was recognised for being a discreet way of alerting transport staff of additional needs. It was praised by those who did use it for being customisable with lots of options to indicate different needs as well as the ability to add or write your own needs on the card. It was also available in App format.

The presentation from Thistle Assistance indicated developments in the capabilities of the card with the VoyagAR programme. This intends to include a way of communicating the needs of individuals via their phone to the driver cab computer as they step onto the bus, so there is no need for conversation or interaction. This could be particularly useful for those with hidden disabilities or neurodivergent conditions. This was viewed as a positive by those who stated they were too anxious to disclose their needs to a member of travel staff.

However, users of the Thistle Assistance card indicated that in situations where there is a need for multiple stickers to convey complex needs, it can

be overwhelming for both staff and passengers. Deaf attendees indicated that they did not feel the Thistle card which was helpful for conveying the needs of hearing-impaired people.

Staff knowledge and awareness

Attendees noted that there were inconsistencies among transport operators and staff in their ability to recognise and understand the different assistance cards they could be presented with. In turn, this meant that disabled people experienced inconsistent service and varying degrees of support when traveling on public transport.

“Disclosing disabilities to staff members is all well and good, but the staff members need to know what they mean and how they then alter their communication or know what help to offer.”

“I say ‘I’m deaf, I can’t hear you’ and they (transport staff) say it again. I am not less deaf the second time. If someone says something to me, and I say ‘I am deaf’ I need them to have more skills (to know what to do).”

There were examples given by attendees with hidden disabilities who had experience of being challenged or questioned by transport staff when they presented assistance cards indicating their need of support. Declarations of hidden disabilities were often questioned by transport staff, creating anxious and potentially confrontational situations for disabled people.

“I have a hidden disability and I quite often get asked why I have a NEC card as I look normal even though it is hard to have a hidden disability.”

It was mentioned that drivers are often under pressure to stick to timetables, which appears to have a knock-on effect on their attitude and level of assistance that is offered. The suggestion was that when in a hurry, or under pressure to stick to a timetable, the level of support diminishes.

Passenger awareness

The breakout discussions also highlighted that some disabled people did not feel aware of the range of assistance cards and tools to help them travel. This was especially true of remote, rural and island communities. There was a general feeling among disabled people that the various rights and entitlements associated with cards were poorly understood by the public and by transport operators and so it was difficult for disabled people to use them with confidence.

Staff training

Comments relating to the need for improved staff training came across strongly in the discussions and from our advanced poll. There was a clear message from disabled people that assistance cards are worthless unless the transport staff recognise, acknowledge and understand what the cards mean and are in a position to offer suitable support to the disabled passenger.

Transport providers in attendance noted the training that is delivered to their staff. For example, some operators ensure that all staff undertake disability awareness training every twelve months, while others employ a 'Just Ask' policy that involves staff having confidence to ask, 'how would you like me to help?'

This leads Disability Equality Scotland to recommend that all transport staff undertake regular training, covering disability awareness, access, inclusion and equalities, ideally designed and delivered in co-production with disabled people and those with lived experience.

"We need better disability awareness training not more assistance cards or lanyards that don't make any difference other than singling you out."

There was a suggestion put forward that Assistance Cards put the onus on the disabled person to 'explain themselves' and that a more favourable position would be for transport staff to offer an equal service to everyone.

“The onus is being put on the disabled individual to explain why they need someone to treat them nicely, but if the training was there, and they (transport staff) are able to adapt person by person, this might take away the need for the ‘declaring card’.”

“The overarching question; is there a need for these cards? Should the responsibility be placed on disabled people to disclose their needs, or should access be readily available for all?”

However, there were other attendees who said their preference is to have no verbal communication with transport staff, and showing a card allows them to indicate their needs without interaction. This even more heavily relies on the transport staff recognising and responding accordingly. This is something the Thistle Assistance programme is developing with their new VoyagAR technology, which would alert transport staff to your needs.

One group indicated the need for disabled people to report any negative incidents experienced on public transport via the provider’s complaints policy. This would help to identify specific areas of training for providers to focus on.

Single Assistance Card

Attendees discussed the use of different Assistance Cards. Commonly used among attendees were the Sunflower lanyard for hidden disabilities, a card from Lupus UK, an ‘Urgency Card’ to signify bowel and bladder incontinence, a ‘Headway card’ to indicate brain injury and is specific about the extent of issues the individual might experience when travelling and the National Face Covering Exemption Card. This is in addition to those using the NEC for concessionary travel.

There was an agreement that there are lots of assistance cards available and this can be confusing for both transport staff and disabled passengers who want to have the card most suited to their needs, but also one that is clearly recognisable by staff. Disabled people did not want to have to explain what the card is for or why they need one to staff.

With that in mind, attendees were asked to consider whether having one, nationally recognised Assistance Card would be beneficial? There was some general agreement to this question. Disabled people commented on the realities of juggling several cards for different needs and how one card would make the logistics of travel easier.

“If you need a mask, and bus pass and you have (mobility aids) it becomes too much to juggle and in some ways that is where the sunflower lanyard is good but it is less discreet than assistance cards.”

“To travel through Scotland I would need a NEC card, a Thistle card, a FirstBus card. I also carry an autism card, a hidden disabilities card and lanyard for non-travel related issues. It is great that companies want to provide help but I’d like to have some room in my wallet for my debit card.”

Supporting this idea came with the strong caveat that testing the feasibility of a single assistance card would require ongoing input from disabled people, with various needs and disabilities as well as from transport operators representing different modes. It is also important to consider the format of a single assistance card, by ensuring that any digital solutions meet accessibility standards, and that a physical card is also available for people who are unable to access a mobile device.

“Consultation is key to taking forward any single card. There would be a need for real engagement with the transport industry and disabled people.”

This is especially true when considering whether any single card would be used and recognised cross-border, as transport remains a devolved issue, but with the rail network, for example, owned by Network Rail, a UK wide brand.

Attendees discussed whether the concessionary facility of the NEC could be combined with the assistance elements of the Thistle Assistance card. The NEC was recognised as important for making bus travel more

affordable for disabled people and it has been suggested that the card should be extended to other modes of transport. In addition, the Thistle Assistance Card can be customised to represent a variety of different disabilities and needs.

On one hand, disabled people agreed with the principle of having one card but queried how cards such as NEC and Thistle could be combined, as the two cards serve different purposes (concessionary and assistance) and by combining these could be confusing.

“A single card is an opportunity to push a joined up, strategic approach to transport in Scotland.”

What's next?

Assistance cards, in principle support disabled people to travel independently, however as discussed during this session; assistance cards only work when the people providing that assistance (transport staff) recognize the cards, understand what they mean and how this translates into support. Ultimately training for transport staff is what is required as well as ongoing consultation with people who have lived experience to ensure cards (whether one single card or several) provide the support that disabled people need.

Short term solutions

- Summary paper from Transport Scotland summarising the different cards that can be used on public transport, for what purpose and where to get them.

Longer term aims

- A training scheme for all transport staff covering access, inclusion and disability awareness. Disability Equality Scotland are working with Police Scotland and partners to produce training on awareness and disability hate crime, specifically for transport providers. This will be available for free to those pledging their support to the Hate Crime Charter.

- Consideration of taking forward detailed consultation with disabled people and transport operators on the logistics, practicalities, benefits and challenges of a single-use assistance card.

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