

Weekly Poll – Travel Assistance Cards and Apps

Each week Disability Equality Scotland send out a poll question to our members on a topical issue. For the week beginning 18 October 2021, we asked a question about Travel Assistance Cards and Apps.

Results

Question. Do assistance cards improve your ability to travel independently?

- YES – 18% (34 respondents)
- NO – 82% (154 respondents)

Comments

We provide verbatim comments where appropriate to illustrate strength of feeling or personal experience.

National Entitlement Card

The National Entitlement Card (NEC) is a smartcard scheme for travel concessions. The card gives elderly and disabled people free bus travel in Scotland. Respondents recognised the importance of concessionary travel for making public transport affordable and enabling disabled people to travel independently. However, some respondents questioned the reliability of bus services, and the accessibility of bus stops and the surrounding infrastructure.

“I have only used the National Entitlement card and have found this to be invaluable for going to clinic appointments.”

“The NEC card gives me confidence that I can go many more places around Scotland that I could do without it. I have a car but cannot drive for more than 20 minutes due to pain, so don’t get very far. Having the card offers me an alternative I wouldn’t normally be able to carry out or afford. It keeps me mobile, and it really cheers me up. With a little planning I can have days out with my mother or friend to assist me. It also gives me confidence that I can travel with another in case of complications.”

“The bus pass is good but that’s the only card that makes a difference.”

“The bus pass is good if the bus comes, but that’s the only one that’s useful and only sometimes. Buses are very unreliable.”

“No point on a bus pass when there are few buses, and the bus stop is too far away with very bad pavements to get there.”

Some respondents believed that the National Entitlement Card should be extended beyond free travel on buses, to other modes of transport, including trains and community transport.

“The concessionary travel card should be able to be used on trains and community transport.”

“I only use my card on buses as it is still quite expensive to use on train's so I am limited to where I can travel.”

“The best way that disabled people can be supported to travel is to allow free rail travel to those who already get disabled persons bus passes. The toilets on the buses are useless but the toilets on ScotRail trains are great. The buses from Fort William to Glasgow have toilets that are not accessible. But the buses between Fort William and Glasgow are okay

(when they are not on strike), but the trains are unaffordable, so we need free rail travel as well as free bus travel.”

Thistle Assistance

The Thistle Assistance card or app can be personalised and shown to transport staff to indicate what additional assistance is required.

Respondents reflected on their experiences of using Thistle Assistance and questioned its effectiveness. In some cases, drivers and transport staff failed to recognise the card and offer appropriate support.

“I have a Thistle Assistance card and tried using it on a local bus. As I walk with a rollator, I need the step on and off lowered or put into a ramp. I was told the hydraulics were broken and had to depend on other passengers for help as the driver refused to assist.”

“Sadly, even though I have the Thistle card showing that I need some help, as I use crutches, when travelling on a holiday to visit my hometown, it was a passenger who helped me. I showed the driver my card, and it was extremely obvious I would probably like some help, but none was offered, even when I tried to ask, so I ended up just trying to do everything myself, as I was embarrassed about it. But on the other hand, in my hometown, the bus drivers told me to wait until they lowered the bus step, and to take my time, there was no hurry, and this really made a difference. But as I said, sadly the coach driver let me down. I would probably try to go on a coach again, and hopefully it will then be a better experience.”

“It states that the Thistle Assistance card can help people feel safe and more comfortable using public transport. How? I have tried using the card and it doesn’t make any difference. Bus drivers and train staff don’t know what it is.”

“I have used the Thistle app, but I found it caused more questions, despite it saying clearly I had really high anxiety levels, as many drivers either wouldn't read it or just didn't understand it. When there is a queue behind you it's cumbersome to explain.”

“I have a Thistle card but what's the point when a buggy is in the wheelchair space and the driver won't ask them to move, so you can't get on the bus?”

“One of my gripes with the Thistle card is that it has less options for assistance stickers than the First Bus extra help card and the lack of graphics makes it difficult for certain cognitive issues.”

Attitudes and Behaviours of Transport Staff

Respondents shared specific comments about the attitudes and behaviours of transport staff when presented with an assistance card. In some cases, the lack of an appropriate response from the driver had discouraged disabled people from travelling via public transport.

“I use the Thistle App on the bus to show I can't wear a mask, but the driver screamed at me while at the stop before seeing this app meaning I was stopped from showing it until I calmed enough at the end of the journey to be able to counter him. I've not travelled by bus since as I'm too afraid of repeats, the public humiliation and excruciating fear his reaction induced.”

“I got on a bus, told the driver which stop I wanted. I have hand arthritis (and in my other joints, which are very sore at the moment - back, hips and knees). My hands were cold so pushing the button was difficult. I therefore got up well before the stop, luckily traffic lights were in my favour. The driver was sighing and shaking his head and said "do you want to get off here?". I asked if there was a problem and said, yes, I told you that 5

minutes ago when I got on. I was quite able to challenge his behaviour, but what if I wasn't? There was absolutely no need for the attitude, and that would have been quite upsetting for some passengers (disabled and non-disabled).”

“Bus drivers are rude and don’t stop unless you get up in advance of the stop, meaning a long walk back from the next stop despite the company guidelines saying remain seated.”

“I use my concession bus pass regularly; however, I have found drivers question my use of the card as I'm a healthy-looking adult, not a pensioner or wheelchair user.”

Disability Awareness Training

To ensure that suitable passenger assistance is provided, it is important for transport staff to receive training for equality, diversity and disability awareness. This must also be closely monitored to guarantee that the training being provided is effective and results in disabled people being able to travel in a safe and inclusive environment.

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

“Bus drivers need more training in equality and diversity.”

“Transport operators need to stop looking at gimmicks and invest in staff training. An assistance card is no substitute for knowledge and good people skills.”

“A more visible sign is obviously needed, and staff trained to access variation with validation.”

“Some drivers are helpful, some not so much probably due to tight timetables. Better disability training would be better than a card they know nothing about.”

Range of Assistance Cards and Apps

In addition to Thistle Assistance and the National Entitlement Card, some transport providers have produced their own assistance cards and apps. For example, First Bus have an ‘Extra Help to Travel card’, which can be shown to the driver as a way of discretely asking for assistance. Respondents believed that there are too many different assistance cards and apps available, with a range of different purposes. This can result in disabled people using multiple assistance cards when using public transport. The range of assistance cards may also make it challenging for transport staff to recognise and understand the differences. As a solution, a number of respondents suggested having a universally recognised travel assistance card and app, which is supported across all modes of transport and locations across Scotland.

“Too many different options out there and how will transport staff be able to recognise all the variations?”

“There are so many assistance cards out there for different organisations and uses that it is difficult to keep up. It would be good to have one card, that is verified as accurate to use. I have started using the Access Card (www.accesscard.org.uk) but it isn’t widely recognised. I like the idea that the assistance types are verified which to me shows it’s genuine request and carries more of a need.”

“The only card I use is a disabled NEC card which allows me to travel with another person for free, so it isn't quite independent travel. I wasn't aware of any assistance cards. However, with respect to the other cards can we

please, please have a standard for all of Scotland? To travel through Scotland, I would need a NEC card, a Thistle card, a First Bus 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.”

“If it isn't possible to have one app for all operators then an uber-app that links to the other apps would be useful to find appropriate apps when in different regions of Scotland. Combining all of these individual ideas into one app and allowing for a printed card to be produced would really help in making travel easy. It should also be possible to extend this into non-travel uses in a similar fashion to hidden disabilities to allow more flexibility.”

Transport Accessibility

A portion of respondents believed that travel assistance cards and apps can be of little help to travel independently, when physical barriers remain in place across different modes of transport. This includes the accessibility of the mode of transport and surrounding infrastructure. In addition, disabled people stated that some transport providers have reduced the frequency of services.

“Cards only support making a service accessible, where the staff have been trained, but take away focus on where accessibility really matters - for example entrances to stations, and the destination itself.”

“We need to invest in more accessible bus stops, buses and better disability awareness training. Not pointless cards. Tell me how a card benefits me when there are only two buses a day where I live and one wheelchair space? How will a card help address that?”

“It’s not as if an assistance card suddenly makes the bus accessible or actually turn up. We need an overhaul of public transport in Scotland. It’s not working for disabled people and an assistance card won’t do anything.”

“Access to buses is restricted by cycle lanes and barriers in city centres. I can’t get on a lowered bus from street level, I have to have a kerb even to use ramps correctly, but drivers won’t consider a person who doesn’t have a wheelchair as requiring a ramp. I use the Traveline app and Google Maps to plan journeys but neither display how accessible stops are.”

“It would be good to have a bus service to use. I don’t even live rural and bus services were withdrawn at the start of the pandemic and there is no sign of them being reinstated.”

Conclusion

The majority of respondents (82%) believed that assistance cards and apps do not improve disabled people’s ability to travel independently on public transport. There were specific comments about the importance of the National Entitlement Card for making bus travel more affordable for disabled people and it was suggested that the card should also be extended to other modes of transport. Disabled people reflected on their experiences of using the Thistle Assistance card and app, with a number of respondents stating that transport staff do not recognise the card and are not adequately trained to offer appropriate assistance. To alleviate this, it is vital that staff receive disability awareness, equality, and diversity training. Respondents believed that there are too many different assistance cards available and suggested that a universally recognised card would be more convenient. However, an assistance card is of no use if the mode of transport or surrounding infrastructure is not accessible.

About Disability Equality Scotland

We are a national charity working to make life more accessible, equal and inclusive for disabled people in Scotland.

We promote access in its widest sense, including access to the built and natural environment and access to the same opportunities as are enjoyed by others in our communities thus promoting a life of dignity, respect, choice and independence. This extends beyond physical access to include access to information, access to inclusive communication and inclusion in decision-making, whether with planners over inclusive design or transport providers about accessible travel.

We represent the views of individuals with any type of impairment, as well as disability organisations and groups who share Disability Equality Scotland's values.

We are also the umbrella organisation for all disability Access Panels in Scotland and the principal provider of support and guidance to the Access Panels presently representing disabled persons at a local level throughout Scotland. Access Panels are committed to improving access and equality in its widest form, which means access to the physical environment, Education, Housing, Health, Transport, Leisure & Recreation and Social Justice amongst other areas.

We are membership led. If you are an individual or an organisation, you can [join our membership](#) for FREE and help to further our aims. We work to influence the policies of the Scottish Government, which affect how disabled people live and we work to encourage others to be inclusive and informed in their attitudes towards disabled people.