

Access for Us All?



BARRIERS TO MOBILITY:

**A REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS INTO
MAKING PUBLIC TRANSPORT IN GLOUCESTERSHIRE
MORE ACCESSIBLE**

Access for Us All? Barriers to Mobility

Summary of findings



This report and its recommendations has been a joint working partnership between Inclusion Gloucestershire, the University of Gloucestershire, and the Gloucestershire County Council SEN Travel Enablement team.

A more detailed background to the project, explanation of what the report findings were, and more detail to the recommendations, is included in the body of this report.

These are a brief summary of the 11 recommendations that this travel partnership team have made for consideration by stakeholders and appropriate bodies.

- Review of disability training for bus drivers
- Increasing opportunities for accessible cycling
- Commission a report on the state of cycle paths
- Ensure future cycle route proposals have a disability perspective
- Improve curb and pavement reporting system
- Carry out an audit and evaluation of bus stops
- Explore opportunities to improve real-time information provision
- Enable improved comments on accessibility in housing developments
- Explore the opportunities for a graded accessibility system
- Explore options for a real-time information system for accessible taxis
- Commission informational films reflecting accessible travel

Barriers to Mobility

 What issues do disabled people face when using public transport? 

Bus stops



Only **25%** of disabled people believe bus stops in Gloucestershire are well-maintained

13% say they have sufficient digital support



Wheelchair spaces

"I have missed college classes and church events when single decker buses arrive, and I am unable to board and have to wait over an hour for the next form of transport"



Transport staff

"bus drivers are not always patient enough, I struggle to communicate clearly and they do not take the time to understand me"

Cycle paths

47%



of disabled people say that cycle paths in Gloucestershire are 'poor', and a further **19%** believe they are 'very poor'



Curbs and pavements

83%

of wheelchair and mobility scooter users who responded said pavements are 'very poor'. No-one said they were 'good' or 'very good'

Introduction

Background

This report has been written using information gathered from the Barriers to Mobility questionnaire that was hosted by Gloucestershire County Council (GCC) from November 2020 until January 31st, 2021. The questionnaire was devised by the three partners within the transport project group: Inclusion Gloucestershire, the University of Gloucestershire and the SEN Travel Enablement Team from GCC. It was widely promoted by the partners involved, and also brought to the attention of other interested agencies, both voluntary and statutory, including Age UK, Student Unions and the various boards designed to enable the joint working and influencing of the appropriate bodies.

The need for such a questionnaire was identified following a number of consultation events organised by Inclusion Gloucestershire. They were aimed at enabling disabled people to raise issues that impacted on their lives, and seek ways in which challenges and difficulties could be met and overcome. The discussions took place at various venues across the county, and one of the major consistent points identified was that the difficulties that disabled people face with accessing public transport are having an unacceptable impact on their lives.

Whilst there was a recognition that the problem with access was common across all disabilities, there was a particular focus on the restrictions that were faced by wheelchair users. There is only one accessible space available on buses, which means that wheelchair users find it impossible to travel together, and that on a regular basis, people in wheelchairs are denied transport simply because that one space was already occupied by a wheelchair, or may have been used by other passengers as storage space.

It is widely recognised that all disabled people need to take greater care in planning journeys and activities because of the additional needs attributed to their conditions. Wheelchair users commented that they often avoid using buses because of difficulties with access, and also a concern that the only space available could be occupied. Following support from the Digital Innovation Fund (DIF), the idea was that the transport group would work together at addressing some of these issues. One proposal was the development and trialing of an accessible app that would enable people to get better awareness of available spaces in a real-time scenario. Other proposals included using students from the University to create a model of what a fully accessible bus could look like, and generally raise awareness of these issues amongst the wider community.

This project has been greatly impacted by the coronavirus pandemic the country has faced over the last 18 months. A proposed launch event involving various stakeholders was planned but was cancelled due to the first lockdown in January 2020. The project was delayed because of this until August, when partners were able to revisit and refresh the intentions of the group.

Despite the delays, it is felt that this report demonstrates accurately the challenges faced by people across the community who have difficulties with mobility. The recommendations and outcomes for consideration in this report will be presented and discussed by a variety of interested stakeholders, including Gloucestershire County Council, the Physical Disability and Sensory Impairment (PDSI) board, the Gloucestershire Community Railway Partnership (GCRP) group, and Visit Gloucestershire, and will be hoped to help steer the work of the partnership transport board into the future.

How was the survey distributed?

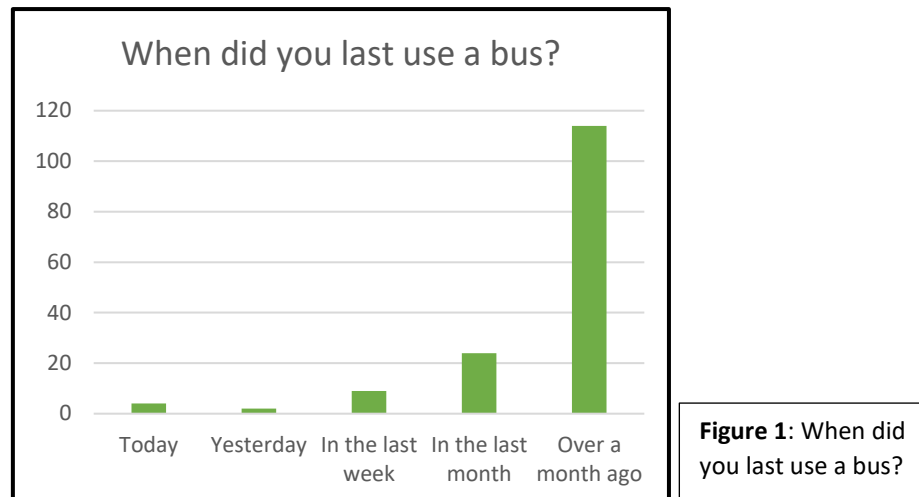
The Barriers to Mobility survey was hosted on the County Council website and there were also easy-read and other versions available for those who needed a more accessible format. The survey was promoted in a variety of ways, including asking other voluntary and statutory bodies to bring it to the attention of their memberships. These groups were not all disability-focused, and included Age UK Gloucestershire, the University of Gloucestershire Students Union, and the Barnwood Trust. Stagecoach West buses also carried promotional material highlighting the survey, and a social media campaign was undertaken to share the survey further on Instagram and Facebook.

Findings

Who completed the survey?

The Barriers to Mobility survey was completed by in excess of 150 people across Gloucestershire. The evidence showed that, regarding demographic data, the survey had 72% of respondents that were over 50 years old, and physical disability and age-related mobility issues were the most commonly reported additional needs.

The survey also asked questions about which forms of public transport respondents used the most. Buses and trains were the most frequently used methods of transport; 69% said they use buses to get around. While many respondents reported that they make use of taxis, a greater amount said that they do not use public transport at all because there is nothing suitable for their needs. While 62% of respondents said they use public transport less than once per week, 17% said they don't use it at all. Additionally, 74% of respondents said that they last used public transport over 1 month ago, however it is suspected that this figure was influenced by a reduction in transport usage as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.



The survey posed questions about reasons for using public transport and where people typically travel. Shopping and socializing were the most frequently reported reasons for using public transport, while travelling to school and college were the least likely reasons. This statistic is likely related to the low proportion of young people that completed the survey.

Key Issues

Transport staff: interactions with passengers

A key element of navigating public transport as a disabled person is the ability to communicate with staff and feel respected by others when travelling. The conduct of bus drivers, train station assistants, taxi drivers, and many other transport workers can greatly influence the experiences of disabled people using these services. For many people, unwelcoming staff can put them off using public transport altogether, in favour of expensive private transport. This is unfair and unjustified, and it is hugely important that public transport companies work to keep in mind the differing needs of their passengers.

The survey produced some significant data on the experiences of disabled people communicating with staff on public transport. Several respondents reported that many bus drivers are not sufficiently trained to help many of their passengers and are often dismissive of people who have different communication needs. One person said:

“My issue is that the bus drivers are not always patient enough, I struggle to communicate clearly, and they do not take the time to understand me which is embarrassing. I often end up buying an all-day bus ticket when I only need a ticket to go in one direction”.

It also became apparent that travelling on buses was not always as comfortable for disabled passengers, given the challenges they face:

“If you can get in the wheelchair space the bus drivers are so erratic it's painful... The last time I went on a bus even with the brakes on my wheelchair I had to grip the pole for dear life and my husband had to put his feet on the wheelchair to stop me moving”.

Many disabled passengers report their experiences using public transport have been upsetting and even traumatic.

When asked about ways public transport could be made more accessible, several respondents said that staff need more training on how to meet disabled passengers' needs. Respondents told us that wheelchair spaces on buses are often taken up by non-disabled people, particularly passengers with prams or large bags of shopping, and bus drivers may fail to understand how important it is for wheelchair users to be able to find a space on the bus. It appears that more training is needed on the differing needs of their passengers, especially disabled people. Several participants highlighted that bus drivers often just do not know that someone on the bus needs help or has particular communication needs. When asked what the biggest issue they faced on public transport, they said:

“Not enough people (e.g., bus drivers) are understanding of people with learning disabilities”

“...would be a benefit [to hearing-impaired passengers] if all drivers had a basic knowledge of sign language”.

It is clear that there is much work to be done if disabled people are to be encouraged to use public transport more, with the dignity and respect they deserve. Public transport is something that should be available to all members of the public.

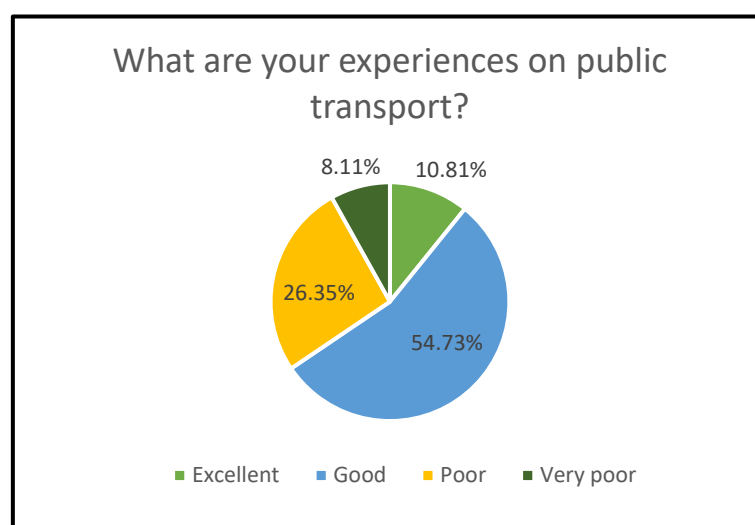


Figure 2: What are your experiences on public transport?

Cycle routes

A safe, accessible, and sustainable network of cycle routes would give all residents, irrespective of ability or age, the opportunity to cycle when needed. People of all ages, abilities, and needs should have access to useful cycle routes that are properly maintained, accessible, and offer access to places that people need to visit, including shops, hospitals, train stations and bus stops. The survey asked about the cycle routes across Gloucestershire, and the general consensus was that cycle paths are poorly designed, poorly maintained, and can be considered either unnecessary or inaccessible for many cyclists.

Some of our respondents said:

“They are either converted pavements or dirt tracks, neither of which is safe or practical for regular commuters. I use one to get to work and it is muddy, poorly maintained and covered in large gravel that is dangerous for inexperienced cyclists”.

“They appear and disappear randomly. They cross junctions. They are often just in the gutter of a road so full of gravel/glass etc”.

One of the side effects of the coronavirus pandemic has been a significant increase in the use of bikes to get about, as opposed to buses, trains, and cars. This has helped contribute to some greener living in the county, and improvements in the carbon footprint that our current way of living usually leaves. However, if this is expected to become a regular activity once the pandemic is more under control, then the current state of most cycle routes is a major obstacle to greener living as they discourage people from using their bikes to get around. It is imperative that local authorities improve conditions on cycle paths and cycle lanes if they want to develop sustainability and strengthen quality of life in the county.

Accessible cycling is something to be encouraged amongst the disabled population, given both its environmental and health benefits. However, there are little, if any, safe opportunities for disabled people to experience and become competent in such an activity. Currently, the limited access to such provision acts as a barrier for this; disabled cyclists in Cheltenham, for example, have to travel to Gloucester in order to engage in this activity. This adds major logistical issues on top of the difficulties brought about by the various disabilities.

Survey participants were asked how they think cycle routes could be improved in Gloucestershire. Some people said that cycle lanes on roads should be safer and better enforced;

“Better defined with penalties for motorists who use them and they must be enforced by the police”.

Other people discussed the fact that routes are incomplete and difficult to navigate, so should be planned out better and cover all the major areas in the county. Disabled people can make use of accessible bikes, but these are generally not conducive to the safe travelling on existing cycle routes, because of the greater difficulties experienced in guiding and using such bikes:

“1. provide dedicated cycle paths, separate from traffic, and from pedestrians. 2. join them up so that they form a proper network. 3. when new roads or road changes are designed, think about cyclists from the beginning. Too often, it looks like cycle paths are just painted on after everything else is complete. 4. maintain them properly”.

It is important that cyclists are safe and comfortable when travelling in urban areas, and all citizens should have the opportunity to cycle if they wish.

Physical landscape

In order for the public to be able to use public transport effectively, the physical landscape of towns and cities must be well-maintained and fit for purpose. In this context, the physical landscape refers to the availability and safety of dropped curbs, pavements and tactile paving, bus stops and shelters, disabled parking spaces, and any other building or architectural features of an area. The statistics on what people thought about the physical landscape in Gloucestershire reflect a fairly negative view of the current provision. Only 25% of respondents said bus stops were well-maintained, and 83% of wheelchair and mobility scooter users said pavements in the county are ‘very poor’. It appears that little care has been taken to accommodate the needs of the disabled in the building of Gloucestershire’s towns and cities.

The Barriers to Mobility survey asked questions about the respondents’ experiences with the physical elements of getting about. Many people reported issues with curbs and pavements, and a significant issue that was raised involved the prevalence of pavement parking:

“either ban or properly enforce rules on pavement parking. In Cheltenham I regularly find streets impassable. When reported there is no sign of action. Pavements are regularly uneven; curbs are either not dropped properly or maintained. Meaning I have fallen out of my chair before now. Or had to turn round and find another route - usually unnecessarily longer.”

Parking on pavements often means that wheelchair users cannot pass between the car and the building either side of the path, and this brings huge obstacles to their journeys. This respondent also raised the issue of dropped curbs. Others corroborated this, with one person saying,

“If I am out with my family I routinely need to follow a different route to that of my wife and children, often finding myself having to use the road instead of the path”.

Using the road instead of the pavement is very unsafe and puts wheelchair users at great risk of vehicle accidents.

Some respondents told us that bus stops can be confusing and awkward, especially for people with learning disabilities. One person told us,

“[My son] cannot remember that at some bus stops you have to put your hand out and at others you don't. Consequently, he will stand at a bus stop for hours wondering why none of the buses stop for him. As mentioned above, it is often not clear to him where to stand to catch a bus. He might stand at the wrong place or on the wrong side of the road”.

It is clear from the data we have collected that bus stops often do not serve their purpose appropriately. Some bus stops have designated shelters, while others just have a sign with little or no information on them. Many groups, including those with learning disabilities and

people with anxiety-related mental health conditions may feel overwhelmed or frightened when catching a bus due to the lack of continuity in bus stop provision.

Tactile paving was also an issue that was raised in the survey. It was designed as a sensory aid for sight-impaired people warning them of an upcoming road, and while other disabled people (e.g. wheelchair users) may feel that tactile paving is uncomfortable and difficult to use, it nonetheless serves as a potentially life-saving sensory aid for the visually impaired.

It is clear that the pavements and other physical aspects of the landscape in Gloucestershire are not fit for many groups to use. This is unfair and effort should be made to improve the accessibility of towns in the county.

Planning journeys and spontaneity

Disabled people often do not have the option of taking spontaneous journeys on public transport. Their trips need to be extensively planned so that they can ensure their needs are accommodated when travelling, especially on public transport.

The first issue many disabled people have when making journeys is that there is often no transport available for them. 40% of respondents to our survey said that bus irregularity impacts their choice of transport, and 27% of wheelchair users said that if there was no wheelchair space on the bus, they would go home. One respondent said that,

“I can only travel on double decker buses as they are wide enough to accommodate my electric wheelchair. I have missed college classes and church events when single decker buses arrive, and I am unable to board and have to wait over an hour for the next form of transport. I can’t afford £50 for a taxi to drive me to these events so I miss them if a double decker bus isn’t on my route when I need to travel.”

Not having access to transport that serves their needs can have a huge impact on disabled people; 17% said having no space on buses or in taxis leads to feelings of isolation, and 18% said this has made them late to appointments and social events.

When disabled people can find transport that is regular and takes them where they need to go, they may have frightening or embarrassing experiences when trying to board or communicate on a bus. A respondent told us an experience they had when getting on a bus to travel with their daughter:

“I tried to access a bus in my larger comfort powerchair but got stuck. Embarrassment at having to get off again, exhaustion at having to go home, drive to the bus stop to get my smaller and slower chair out and onto the next bus. This was for a home education trip for my daughter. She shared the embarrassment and exhaustion.”

It is unacceptable that so many people are subjected to such negative experiences on public transport. Disabled people should be able to travel in comfort and safety in the same way that non-disabled people do.

For many disabled people, the weather can have a disproportionate impact on their experiences using public transport. While most people would not think about poor weather when travelling on the bus or the train, for many disabled people, the weather can be a significant obstacle to travelling freely. One respondent told us:

“Accessing the Stagecoach bus is extremely difficult and scary when raining as the gradient of the ramp can lead to my power wheelchair slipping upon accessing the bus and also while in the wheelchair space”.

Another person said that,

“Getting wet and being wet for the journey aren't as easy as an able-bodied person putting up an umbrella” ,

This is one of the extra considerations many disabled people need to make when planning a journey. For many, the public transport services in Gloucestershire simply do not serve their needs and it is almost impossible to spontaneously travel somewhere the way a non-disabled person might. One of our respondents exemplified this by saying,

“[travelling] requires considerable advanced planning, I cannot be spontaneous, it is gritty and undignified”.

One of the most important elements of travelling on public transport is having access to accurate information regarding arrival and departure times and seat availability. It should be easy for passengers to find this information and the provision should be user-friendly and fit for purpose. Some respondents to our survey had positive comments to make about accessing travel information. One person said that, ***“the Stagecoach bus app is very useful”***, and 82% of respondents had never missed an appointment or social event due to lack of access to information. However, some issues were raised about how those with learning disabilities use travel information. One respondent said that there is:

“Never any information that is learning disability friendly”,

with others commenting the issue of a disconnect between information that is provided and what passengers actually need to know.

“The timetables are not in the slightest bit user friendly. They should start from the point of giving all of the information a user needs clearly and then go from there, not as it appears, what is the smallest area of paper we can cram this onto”.

The survey made apparent that buses do not provide information about which stops they are approaching, and this causes problems for a lot of people. A respondent said that,

“When on the bus, [my son] will then struggle to remember where to get off. Announcements of the upcoming stop would help with this. Otherwise, it's very likely that he will miss his stop and not realise until the terminus. He has the same problems with trains so unless it's a direct train where there's only one stop, it's too risky”.

Bus passengers should be able to view information about upcoming stops, and it would be hugely beneficial for buses to be equipped with audio-visual information like trains are. A respondent recommended that passengers should be able to access:

“electronic updates on each bus shelter or an app where I can track how far away the bus is from my nearest bus stop so I don't have to spend so long waiting, especially after dark.”

In an age of extreme technological advancement, public transport users should be able to view live updates to services, and this would make buses, trains, and taxis much more accessible for all their passengers.

This report has highlighted what we feel to be four major issues that reflect the difficulties experienced by a range of people when accessing public transport. These issues are:

- Transport staff: interactions with passengers
- Cycle routes
- Physical landscape
- Planning journeys and spontaneity

Having looked at the comments and results from the questionnaire, the transport group is making the following proposals for consideration by the appropriate stakeholders and other involved parties.

Transport staff: interactions with passengers

One issue raised by respondents to the questionnaire was that there was a feeling that there was sometimes a lack of understanding of disability and equality issues, especially when it came to transport. We therefore recommend that a full audit and review of such training is undertaken by transport providers and that organisations involved with the various disabilities can comment on and influence the training content.

Cycle paths

Based on the report, one recommendation would be for consideration to be given to accessible cycling opportunities across the county. Currently, these activities are focused on Gloucester and the Forest of Dean, we feel it would be valuable to identify an increase the number of venues providing this opportunity to enable a greater uptake. If disabled people are able to gain confidence and proficiency in cycling, then they may be more able to use any existing or new cycle paths.

Given the current state of cycle paths being in various states of repair and accessibility, it is recommended that consideration is given to commissioning a report on the current status of existing paths and make any recommendations for improvements and developments to improve and make cycle paths more accessible, for consideration by the appropriate bodies.

The intention to create a new bespoke cycle path between Cheltenham and Gloucester along the B4063 has been suggested for consideration by Gloucestershire County Council. It is recommended that the PD & SI board consider these proposals and then look to ensure it makes appropriate comments on the scheme and its suggested proposals ensuring that a disability perspective is considered.

Physical landscape

The physical landscape as far as public transport is concerned includes the condition of pavements, dropped curbs, tactile paving, bus stops, inconsiderate parking, etc. These recommendations are made to try and address some of these issues.

It is recommended that consideration is given to improving the current reporting process around poor curbs and pavement obstructions. Currently, the county council has a system in place for the reporting of potholes, and consideration could be given as to whether this may be expanded. Alternatively, consideration could be given to the use of an online system such as 'Common Place', a website-based system that has been successfully used in some parts of the county. It is believed that regular reporting would assist the county council in prioritizing repairs for pavements, and identify places where obstructions are currently found.

It is recommended that an audit of current bus stops is undertaken so that some of the stops felt to be inaccessible or restrictive may be identified and a strategy created for a more coordinated and cohesive approach to the provision of such stops. It is also suggested that there is a regular and transparent communication process between all interested parties around the refurbishment and replacing of existing stops, and introduction of new bus stops as there appears to be no definitive legislative understanding of what a bus stop must offer in order to be accessible.

It is recommended that consideration is given to increasing the number of accessible information sharing points so that more real-time information can be available to assist all people with planning their journeys as appropriately. Consideration should be given to identifying ways in which this information could be provided in an easily understood and accessible manner, reflecting the differing needs people may have.

It is recommended that, as part of any new housing development, comments on the siting and availability of accessible crossings and dropped curbs etc. are asked for as part of the planning process, with consideration being given as to whether any changes to existing crossings or pavements could be supported by funding through the Section 106 funding available. It is recommended that such comments actively involve people with a lived experience of a range of disabilities. This consideration could also be given to the siting of any new bus stops required to service new housing developments.

Planning journeys and spontaneity

For many people, the need to carefully plan any journey is essential. This is particularly pertinent to disabled people, who may need to book assistance whilst undertaking a journey on public transport. This need to plan ahead can have a serious impact on spontaneity and the ability to be flexible. It is therefore felt that the idea of a graded disability access system may help identify different planning requirements. Currently, we tend to state transport or venues are either accessible or inaccessible, whereas we do not believe this is the case. Consideration should therefore be given to the development and implementation of a graded system, which could reflect the variety of access needs and challenges people face. We believe such a grading system would enable types of transport and venues to more accurately make their accessibility issues known, and enable disabled people to seek further information as necessary to make an informed choice.

It is recommended that consideration is given to exploring with taxi service providers how they can best make people aware of the availability of accessible taxis by providing a more real-time service advising of such availability.

The group would suggest that a further recommendation could focus around raising the awareness of the wider public around disability access issues, and the impact they may have on disabled people. This would also enable training opportunities for disabled people and those who may experience anxiety around travel. One way of addressing this could be the creation of some information films created demonstrating the variety of different challenges faced by disabled people, intended to help raise awareness with transport providers and the wider community in general.