# **Accessible Transport Policy Commission**

The Bus Services Bill Roundtable

Outcomes Briefing

May 2025

## Overview

On Wednesday 23rd April 2025, Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson chaired a meeting of the Accessible Transport Policy Commission on the Bus Services (No. 2) Bill [HL]. This roundtable brought together bus services operators and manufacturers, local transport authorities, industry groups, disabled people's organisations and Parliamentarians to scrutinise the accessibility provisions in the Bill. This paper will be shared with government officials and Ministers and MPs to help improve the accessibility sections of the Bill.

In addition to the roundtable, the meeting also heard a presentation on the National Centre for Accessible Transport's [*The Barriers to Streetscapes Access*](https://www.ncat.uk/document/the-barriers-to-streetscape-access/) research report from Coventry University's Dr Arun Ulahannan.

## Key Findings

### While participants welcomed the government's commitment to produce statutory accessibility guidance for the design of bus stops, they said Ministers should make sure the guidance promotes rather than discourages innovation

“Within the East Midlands, we have a bus infrastructure standard that we use which has been pulled together through and agreed with operators, with local authorities, with customer groups and with accessibility groups” – Tom Morgan, Managing Director, Trent Barton

* Participants widely agreed that a lack of national design standards for accessible bus stops contributes to inconsistent and sometimes unusable infrastructure. While operators have made significant strides toward accessibility through fleet improvements, poor local infrastructure planning continues to undermine these efforts.
* Others highlighted examples of poorly designed infrastructure, such as a newly built hospital bus stop made inaccessible by a misplaced shelter, or inconsistently maintained timetable displays. Concerns were also raised about the limited influence local transport authorities have over third-party infrastructure, which can prevent them from making necessary upgrades to improve accessibility.
* Participants also underscored the importance of accessible travel information. Timetables and maps often do not meet the needs of all users, including people with learning disabilities and autistic people.
* A call was made for clear national standards that local authorities and highway engineers would be required to follow. The standards should address physical infrastructure, such as kerb height and shelter placement, and access routes, information provision, and end-to-end journey planning.
* However, participants cautioned against setting minimum national standards that might inadvertently discourage local areas from further innovation.
* There was a strong view that design standards should allow for tailoring to local context while ensuring core access requirements are met. A national framework, backed by statutory powers rather than voluntary guidance, was seen as essential.
* The East Midlands has created its own local standards through collaboration with operators, accessibility groups, and local authorities. The region has three standards that can be used depending on the location and what’s feasible. They cover access and egress, not just the hard standing at the kerbside, and journey information.
* Finally, while Transport for London’s guidance on bus stop design was mentioned as a possible starting point, participants stressed that any future national standards must reflect the operational differences between London and the rest of the country.

### There was a consensus that the Bill's accessibility training provisions were inadequate, particularly in its narrow focus on bus drivers to the exclusion of senior managers and the importance of coproducing any training with disabled people

“I don't think the Bill goes far enough in terms of training. The onus is on the operators, and we've got a responsibility as well as the commissioning authority to ensure that our staff understand the need [to provide assistance to disabled passengers]” – ***Keith McKain, National Bus Strategy Programme Manager, Surrey County Council***

* Participants did not think the training provisions in the Bill go significantly beyond existing legal requirements, except for the new obligation to keep a record of training staff had completed.
* Some noted that the Bill's exclusive focus on training drivers and other frontline staff on bus networks is likely to limit its impact on the experiences of disabled passengers. They said that the training requirements should be extended to cover senior leaders within operators and local transport authorities to promote organisational-level changes.
* The meeting also emphasised the importance of coproducing training with disabled people and their representative organisations. Victoria Garcia explained how Brighton and Hove Buses had worked with organisations like the Thomas Pocklington Trust to produce a series of training videos for drivers and other staff.
* The Bill says that the training should follow existing European Union guidelines under Article 16 of Regulation (EU) 181/2011. Participants commented that these guidelines are too limited and that the government should provide clearer expectations about the nature of the training that must be provided and how it should be delivered. They said disabled people's organisations should develop and deliver the training to make sure that their expertise is properly harnessed to bring about meaningful change.
* The roundtable also reflected on broader workforce issues that significantly impact disabled people's experiences on buses. For example, empathy is an important quality for bus drivers, who should be able to understand their passengers' needs.
* Services can also help build better relationships with passengers by making sure driving teams drive the same routes regularly, so they can build a rapport with bus users. This is particularly helpful when something goes wrong, because in these situations, drivers need to be able to manage and communicate sudden changes to the service effectively.

### The roundtable found that the Bill lacked mechanisms to ensure decision makers across the transport system coordinated their activities to make sure that accessibility was a priority for everyone who has a role in shaping bus services

“...who is actually going to grasp the nettle and say, 'Actually, we're going to take control of this’?” – John Birtwistle, Head of Policy, First Bus

* Participants welcomed the parts of the Bill that require decision makers to consult with certain stakeholders before making an important change - for example, the Secretary of State must consult with the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee on changes to the bus stop design guidance.
* However, they highlighted a number of areas where a lack of coordination between stakeholders could still undermine the Bill's aims to make bus services more accessible.
* Emergency works carried out by road maintenance staff next to a bus stop can sometimes temporarily prevent disabled people from using it by blocking their access, or permanently alter the stop and its surroundings in a way that makes it less accessible.
* In local areas, responsibilities for designating car parking spaces are held by different officers who work in different parts of the same authority or in overlapping local and regional authorities. Poorly designed parking rules can create unnecessary obstacles in bus lanes, which can significantly impact disabled people when buses are prevented from pulling up to the pavement, for example, to deploy the wheelchair ramp.
* In some areas, no one has been assigned responsibility for collecting information on the accessibility of bus services, such as the presence of dropped kerbs near bus stops or the accessibility of shelters and information displays. This lack of data has limited the impact of initiatives like the Department for Transport’s Bus Open Data, which provides nationwide service information for tech developers to use in tools like accessible journey planners.
* Fragmented funding and siloed decision making can make it difficult to deliver accessible transport infrastructure and services.

### Participants identified a number of oversights and missed opportunities where the Bill could more effectively address systemic accessibility challenges and promote good practice across the country

“So, what are we actually going to see in the buses Bill that will make it genuinely better outside some of the things I think around training and some of the accessibility things which will be great, I just wonder if we'll all look back in ten years and think oh actually how did that really move the dial? - Ed Wills, Managing Director, Brighton & Hove Buses and Metrobus

* Participants were asked to identify things that are currently missing from the Bill that would help make bus services accessible for disabled people.
* Participants pointed to a number of areas in which the Bill fails to fill recognised gaps in existing laws, including:
  + The lack of a legislative requirement for non-disabled passengers to vacate wheelchair spaces.
  + It is unclear whether express coaches and closed-door school services are covered by the Bill. Existing laws for these services are outdated and restrictive.
  + The Bill does not address accessibility barriers that prevent most people who use Class 3 mobility scooters from travelling on bus services.
* The roundtable called for the Bill to help simplify the UK postcode lottery concessionary fares system, which is complex and creates barriers for disabled people who want to use the bus. This should include:
  + A single, standardised application for disabled bus passes.
  + A UK-wide Companion Pass system.
  + Harmonisation across devolved nations.
* The Bill doesn't do enough to encourage local authorities and operators to continuously improve the accessibility of bus services by, for example, seeking to learning from good practice in other areas and designing innovative services and infrastructure.
* The Bill requires authorities to give a judgment in their bus accessibility plans about how accessible the services in their areas are, without specifying how they should arrive at their judgment.
* The Bill does not refer to the Public Service Vehicle Accessibility Regulations, which are due to be updated soon, despite the important role that the new version of the regulations will play in supporting the Bill's aims to improve disabled people's experiences on bus services.

### Poorly designed and maintained pavements are the most common barrier disabled people face when navigating UK streets

### **“These are things that you don't realise are there until you start using wheeled things on. Sometimes, I just don't have the energy to leave my house.”** **– Participant in The Barriers to Streetscapes Access study**

* Dr Arun Ulahannan presented findings from a mixed-methods research project combining qualitative interviews with a quantitative survey of 1,195 disabled people. To his knowledge, this was the first time this statistical approach had been applied in this context. Most participants had mobility impairments, but the study also included people with visual, hearing and learning disabilities.
* 87% of participants reported that pavements in their area failed to meet their needs. Key issues included poor maintenance, obstructive designs and inconsistent surfaces. These problems left people feeling physically and emotionally drained, with some choosing to remain at home rather than risk a difficult or unsafe journey.
* Street furniture—particularly advertising boards and pavement parking—was the second most frequently cited barrier. Participants described how they routinely changed their routes to avoid obstructions, sometimes opting for significantly longer journeys to reduce stress and risk.
* A striking 97% of respondents had been forced to walk or wheel in the road due to inaccessible pavements. 92% had, at least once, abandoned a journey and turned back home. Several reported being subjected to hostility from members of the public for using the road. As one participant put it, “It’s safer for me to go on the road than it is to actually approach somebody now because of the mentality.”
* Participants also reported extremely poor experiences when raising concerns with local authorities. Just 2% strongly agreed that their local council listened to them. Most said their concerns were either ignored or dismissed without action, eroding trust and reinforcing their sense of being excluded.

### Street-level barriers leave disabled people feeling exhausted, invisible, and responsible for fixing a system that routinely excludes them

### **“It was thought that participation in society was draining, and several participants were quoted as saying that they had to pick their battles in society.” – Dr Arun Ulahannan, Assistant Professor of Future Transport, Coventry University**

* The research identified four major consequences of inaccessible street environments: exhaustion, anxiety, invisibility, and blame.
* Participants described how simply participating in daily life – whether going to work, shopping, or seeing friends – became exhausting due to the constant need to plan and adapt. Some said they had to choose between activism and simply getting through the day.
* Unpredictability, such as unexpected roadworks or unclear signage, caused significant anxiety. Inconsistencies in infrastructure across different areas meant people could not rely on past experience to judge accessibility.
* Many participants said they felt “invisible” to both planners and the public. Poor engagement in the design of new infrastructure often led to features that were worse than the systems they replaced.
* Across all areas – complaints, journey planning, and everyday navigation – participants reported that the burden of adaptation fell overwhelmingly on them. One said they felt “burdened with adjusting to society” rather than supported by systems that anticipate their needs.

### Disabled people’s experiences must be central to decisions about street design and public transport, and feedback must go both ways

### **“We must not just take from disabled people but also communicate back to them how things are changing, what we are doing with their experiences and their involvement.” – Dr Arun Ulahannan, Assistant Professor of Future Transport, Coventry University**

* Dr Ulahannan concluded that disabled people must be involved from the start in shaping services and infrastructure. Their experiences should not be treated as one-off consultations but as part of an ongoing partnership.
* He emphasised that no single disabled person’s experience can represent all others. Effective inclusion must recognise and reflect this diversity.
* The study found that disabled people wanted more than just opportunities to share concerns—they also wanted feedback about how their input was used. A two-way flow of communication with local authorities and transport providers was essential.
* Findings from the team’s wider transport barriers database also revealed persistent challenges with public transport: 49% of respondents cited lack of space on buses as a key barrier, 44% highlighted negative public or staff attitudes, and another 44% reported problems with pavements near bus stops.

## About the Accessible Transport Policy Commission

The Accessible Transport Policy Commission is part of the [National Centre for Accessible Transport (ncat)](https://www.ncat.uk/) and works to remove barriers to transport for disabled people across the UK.

The Commission holds meetings in Parliament to bring together Parliamentarians, disabled people, transport professionals and policymakers from the national, regional, local and devolved levels of government to improve public policies and everyday practices. It does this by applying evidence and insights from ncat and a wide range of other experts through roundtable discussions, research symposiums and cross-sector meetings.

The Commission is chaired by Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson DBE DL (Crossbench) and convened on a cross-party basis with Parliamentarians from both Houses.

Baroness Grey-Thompson is joined on the Commission by a number of vice-chairs:

* Lord Shinkwin (Conservative Party)
* Baroness Brinton (Liberal Democrat Party)
* Zarah Sultana, MP for Coventry South (Independent)
* Sorcha Eastwood, MP for Lagan Valley (Alliance Party)
* Richard Baker, MP for Glenrothes and Mid Fife (Labour Party)

The Commission’s secretariat is provided by the cross-party think tank Policy Connect.

## About the National Centre for Accessible Transport

The National Centre for Accessible Transport (ncat) works to remove barriers through the development and dissemination of inclusive and robust evidence.

Our evidence will inform policy and strategy, and inﬂuence investment decisions by government, transport operators, and providers of mobility services.

Our work is fully rooted in the realities of the lived experiences of disabled people and stakeholders who inform and help prioritise our work.

ncat considers the transport system as a whole, to create an evidence base that inspires others to develop solutions for accessible travel that works for everyone.

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