



July 2025

Invisible Barriers: How public attitudes affect inclusive travel

Findings from focus groups with
disabled people

Highlights Report

This report is part of a series of research conducted by the National Centre for Accessible Transport (ncat) since its launch as an Evidence Centre in early 2023. Whilst this is a standalone report, we would recommend it is considered alongside other ncat research published from late 2024. As ncat progresses further, reports and insights will also be published on [ncat's website](http://www.ncat.uk) (www.ncat.uk)

ncat encourages you to freely use the data available in this report for your research, analyses, and publications. When using this data, please reference it as follows to acknowledge ncat as the source:

‘ncat (2025). ‘Invisible Barriers: How public attitudes affect inclusive travel, Findings from focus groups with disabled people’. Available at www.ncat.uk

This research informed the development of the main report and findings within *Invisible Barriers: How public attitudes affect inclusive travel*, available on [ncat's website](http://www.ncat.uk) (www.ncat.uk), where ncat conducted a study to identify what interventions would be most impactful in improving the attitudes of non-disabled people towards disabled people when using transport.

Content warning: this report includes details of verbal and physical abuse experienced by disabled people. It also has references to suicidal thoughts. If, after reading this report, you need support, please see [RiDC's Get Support page](https://ridc.org.uk/ridc-consumer-panel/get-support) on their website (<https://ridc.org.uk/ridc-consumer-panel/get-support>).

1 Why did we do this work?

Disabled people make 38% fewer journeys than non-disabled people. This figure has not changed for over ten years (Motability, 2022). To

understand more about this transport accessibility gap, ncat surveyed 1,195 disabled people about the barriers they experienced while travelling (ncat, 2024). **We found that 59% of disabled people experience negative attitudes when travelling, across all modes of transport.** The survey showed that the effects of negative attitudes are a significant barrier for disabled people when using transport.

When referring to negative attitudes, we mean the negative thoughts, feelings and behaviours people have towards disabled people.

To understand these negative attitudes, how they affect disabled people when travelling and what interventions disabled people think would help to address these, we conducted a series of focus groups to explore the survey findings in more detail. This report presents the findings of this study.

2 What did we do, how did we do it, and who did we work with?

ncat ran three focus groups, each including three-to-six participants. A total of 14 participants took part. Participants were identified through a screener questionnaire sent to disabled members of the [Community of Accessible Transport Panel](#) who had told us in our previous survey on transport barriers that they had experienced negative attitudes when travelling.

Participants were selected based on the following criteria:

- Impairment types and access needs (mobility, cognitive, sensory, visible and non-visible impairments)
- Age

- Gender
- Ethnicity
- Region of the UK

The focus groups were categorised loosely by participants' impairment types and access needs. Whilst almost all participants had more than one impairment or access need, we planned each discussion to focus primarily on one of the three broad impairment categories (mobility, cognitive, sensory). However, through our discussions, we found that age and the visibility of someone's impairments or access needs were more significant factors than impairment type when it came to experiencing negative attitudes.

The sessions were held online using Zoom and lasted 90 minutes each. The focus groups discussed the types of attitudes disabled people experience whilst using all modes of transport, including walking, wheeling and cycling. Participants also talked about the impact of negative attitudes and their recommendations for how these could be improved.

The focus groups were audio and video recorded. These recordings were uploaded into qualitative analysis software and then transcribed. Thematic analysis was then used to code the transcripts.

Quotes have been anonymised to protect the participants' identities. This means we have removed all personal information and used gender-neutral pronouns throughout.

3 What did we find?

Disabled people experience significant barriers to transport because of the negative attitudes of other people. Whether it's verbal abuse from other passengers, or transport staff not believing disabled people when they ask for what they need, negative attitudes are widespread and have a significant impact on disabled people's wellbeing and ability to travel independently.

Attitudinal barriers faced by disabled people

Five key themes were identified from the focus groups concerning the specific attitudinal barriers disabled people face when using public transport, where these attitudes come from, and the impact they have on the wellbeing of disabled people:

1. **The public and transport staff have a very limited understanding of disability.** Focus group participants felt that people's understanding of disability was based on stereotypes and a lack of awareness about the complexity and variety of impairments. For instance, people with non-visible impairments and access needs experience disbelief and less help and support than people using assistance aids. In addition, young disabled people experience negative treatment because members of the public don't believe that young people can have access needs. One participant said the following:

"I'm in my thirties, a lot of people will say to me, 'Oh, you're a bit too young to be disabled. Why are you using a walking stick? It's like you're giving up,' and it's just, it's really disheartening."

2. **Other passengers are sometimes abusive towards disabled people using transport.** Many participants have had unsettling

experiences of verbal abuse from other passengers, with many receiving threats of physical violence. Participants described being sworn at, laughed at, forced off a train, their carers being threatened and intimidated and being called derogatory and dehumanising names. One participant noted:

“I remember once when the ramp didn't work - I was on the bus and it was an electronic ramp, so I had to tell the bus driver to take the bus out of service. And these elderly ladies come up to me and said, ‘We're gonna be fu***ng late for work because of you’. And then I had another, a mother with a child in buggy and I said, ‘There was no space’ and she said, ‘You're gonna make me late for picking my fu***ng daughter up from school.’”

- 3. Politics and news media play a significant role in shaping negative attitudes towards disabled people.** Participants felt that politicians portrayed disabled people as “scroungers” and as societal “baggage” and that this filtered down into the general public’s perception of disabled people. Focus groups highlighted that there is a lack of nuanced representation of disabled people in media, as one participant noted:

“I think one of the biggest problems we all face right now is the fact that the media are portraying disabled people as scroungers, as to be hangers-on, you know, things like that. It's such a negative concept of what disability is, and it seems to have changed quite a lot in the last few years. I'm not gonna get into government or politics or anything, but I think it's changed very much where disabled people seem to have a handout, that they always want more, which is complete nonsense. All we want is an independent life.”

- 4. The negative attitudes that disabled people face when using transport have alarming implications on their mental health and confidence.** Participants expressed feeling anxious and

scared when using public transport. Some participants discussed how the negative interactions with staff members and other passengers had led to panic attacks, dissociation, and feeling suicidal. These barriers and experiences actively harmed their sense of confidence. One participant highlighted the anxiety they feel when traveling:

“I've been refused to get on the bus before because the driver wouldn't lower the ramp. And, you know, my experience mirrors quite a few of what other people have said, like just the attitude and it makes you so anxious. You know, you want to get on the bus [...] you've got a bus pass, so you don't have to pay. But the anxiety and the butterflies I get at just the thought of me going on a bus.”

5. Disabled people are not using certain transport modes, are travelling less and are not feeling able to travel independently because of negative attitudes. Disabled people told us how they leave the house less because they did not want to face the negative attitudes alone. Some participants expressed avoiding public transport altogether. Participants' desire for independent travel was also at odds with the realities of using public transport. Participants expressed frustration at not being able to travel without having someone accompany them because of the physical barriers and negative attitudes they faced.

“You become introverted. You don't want to go out. So, you then have those long spaces of time. I don't know about anybody else feels, but I just don't want to go out unless there's someone with me. I've got my husband, or my older children and they can assist me. But I don't want to be like that. I want to be in a position of when I feel I want to go out, I can do it on my own.”

Improving attitudinal barriers

As part of the focus groups, participants also discussed what improvements they felt were needed to help address the attitudinal barriers they face when using public transport. Three key areas emerged:

1. Meaningful collaboration with disabled people is critical in the design of transport infrastructure and improving attitudes.

Participants felt that many existing accessibility issues resulted from disabled people not being included in the design and planning of transport services. Participants made distinct connections between built environment barriers and negative attitudes – suggesting that improving infrastructure, in collaboration with disabled people, would lead to improved attitudes. Participants discussed the importance of including disabled people's perspectives in the design stages of infrastructure, as they are the experts when it comes to accessibility and barriers to transport.

2. Education and awareness raising through humanising disabled people, along with increasing understanding about disability and barriers, are key aspects for improving public attitudes.

Participants highlighted the importance of public education and raising awareness about dismantling attitudinal barriers. They discussed the need to humanise the public perception of disabled people to help the public understand what it's like to live with an impairment or unmet access needs.

Participants particularly stressed the role of education and the importance of having young people be aware of disability as a way of combating prejudice and ableism.

3. Political and social change and a commitment to improving attitudes towards disabled people needs to 'come from the

top.' Participants felt there needed to be a large political and social shift about our perceptions of disability. They discussed the role of government departments, political voices, campaigns, public role models and news stories in shifting the tides on how society talks about and understands disabled people. Participants stressed the importance of humanising disabled people and moving away from the negative connotations that disabled people are often associated with.

4 What conclusions did we come to?

Many different disabled people experience negative attitudes when travelling for a variety of reasons. From being disbelieved to being disrespected, staff and other passengers behave in ways which make it more difficult or sometimes impossible for disabled people to travel. The impact of these negative attitudes has a significant negative effect on disabled people's wellbeing.

This research shows that more evidence-based interventions are needed to improve disabled people's experiences and reduce attitudinal barriers when using transport. Crucially, these interventions need to be co-produced with disabled people. This means sharing power and responsibility when making decisions and designing new ideas. Interventions should be focused on educating the public as well as transport professionals. Disabled people want non-disabled people to understand more about what it means to be disabled and how they can respectfully support disabled passengers. Ultimately, disabled people want to see change coming from the government, with more regulation to ensure disabled people are treated fairly when travelling.

5 What should happen next?

Based on the research findings, ncat proposes the following recommendations with the aim of improving public attitudes towards disability:

We have made recommendations for people in the transport and policy sector:

- **Recommendation 1 – Coproduction**

Future interventions to improve attitudes towards disabled people when travelling must be co-produced with disabled people.

- **Recommendation 2 – Education**

Both the public and transport staff need increased and improved education. This includes formal training and public perception campaigns led in collaboration with disabled people.

- **Recommendation 3 – Regulation**

Government bodies need to take responsibility for improving attitudes towards disabled people. New and improved regulations are required to reduce discriminatory language and behaviour.

We have made recommendations for ncat and its future activities:

- **Recommendation 1** – ncat will use and share these findings to inform future research in conjunction with other priorities identified through the voices and experiences of disabled people.
- **Recommendation 2** – ncat will work with partners and stakeholders to make these findings available for them to use to robustly evidence the issues faced by disabled people when accessing transport.

- **Recommendation 3** – ncat will work with policy makers, transport providers and industry to translate these findings to influence future policy and to develop solutions, products and services to reduce the transport accessibility gap.

6 About ncat

The National Centre for Accessible Transport (ncat) works as an Evidence Centre developing high quality evidence, best practice, and innovative solutions to inform future disability and transport strategy, policy, and practice by:

- Engaging with disabled people to better understand their experiences and co-design solutions
- Amplifying the voices of disabled people in all decision making
- Collaborating widely with all transport stakeholders
- Demonstrating good practice and impact to influence policy

ncat is delivered by a consortium of organisations that includes Coventry University, Policy Connect, The Research Institute for Disabled Consumers (RiDC), Designability, Connected Places Catapult, and WSP. It is funded for seven years from 2023 by the Motability Foundation.

For more information about ncat and its work please visit www.ncat.uk

To contact ncat, either about this report or any other query, please email info@ncat.uk



7 References

- Motability. (2022). *The Transport Accessibility Gap*. Available from: https://www.motabilityfoundation.org.uk/media/iwaidhxx/motability_transport-accessibility-gap-report_march-2022_final.pdf