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Design opportunity 7 of 8

Improving existing assistance services


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national
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accessible
transport





Design Opportunity 7 of 8

Improving existing assistance services

This is one of eight design opportunities developed from ncat's extensive research with disabled passengers across the UK.

For those who wish to explore the full evidence base, detailed findings can be found in the accompanying research report.

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Barriers

While travel assistance services like Passenger Assist and various third-party apps provide some support to disabled passengers, the experience remains fragmented, inconsistent, and often unreliable. Engagement with a wide range of disabled people, through interviews, focus groups, and open survey responses, revealed that many feel uncertain about whether help will be available, how to access it, and whether it will meet their needs.

For some, assistance feels empowering; for others, it reinforces dependence or adds anxiety.

Participants described frequent confusion at stations about where to get help, doubts about whether staff will be present, and frustration when services are booked but not delivered.

At the same time, many passengers expressed enthusiasm for emerging tech-based tools, from camera-based wayfinding apps to live status trackers, that could offer more control and predictability. However, these tools must be reliable, inclusive, and well-integrated.



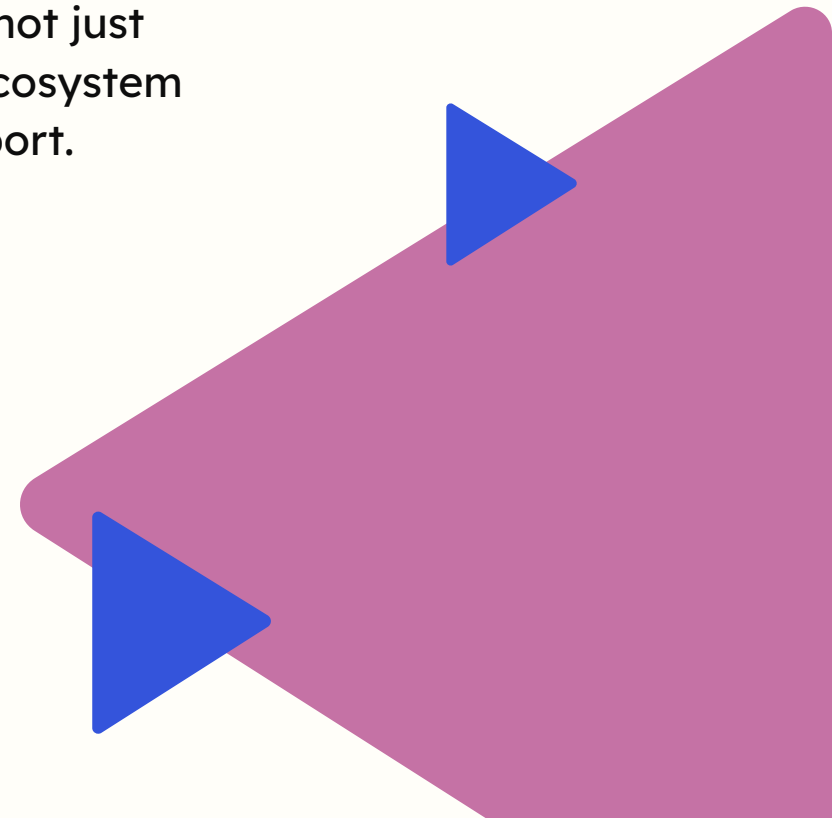
Barriers (continued)

Design Opportunity **7** of **8** Improving existing assistance services

On bus routes in particular, many passengers rely on drivers for help, from deploying ramps to offering verbal guidance, but this support can be inconsistent and depends heavily on individual staff attitudes.

There is often no formal system for requesting or confirming bus assistance, leaving many unsure of what help will be available.

There is a clear opportunity to reimagine assistance services not just as a safety net, but as a flexible, proactive, and user-driven ecosystem that enables greater independence across all modes of transport.



Design Opportunity 7 of 8

Improving existing assistance services

How might we improve and expand travel assistance services to give disabled passengers greater autonomy, confidence, and real-time control over their journeys, from planning through to arrival?



Objectives: Visible, reliable, and ready support

“

Booked passenger assistance is not always there (half the time), which affects confidence. I have to ask the public for help.

Passenger assistance app for the trains is great, but assistance might not show up though.

”



Objectives: **Visible, reliable, and ready support**

What if assistance were easy to request, clearly visible, and reliably delivered every time, across all modes of travel?

- ▶ **How might we improve the visibility, consistency, and location of help and information points across bus stops, train stations, and interchanges?**
- ▶ **Could live tracking tools assure passengers that assistance is on-site, ready, and on its way and show clearly if it's delayed?**
- ▶ **How might staff and volunteers be better identified and more proactively available to support disabled travellers?**
- ▶ **How might design solutions help bus drivers deliver consistent, respectful assistance that passengers can rely on?**



Objectives: Tech tools for independent travel

“ The Passenger Assistance app is good for longer journeys. In London Tube, easier to turn up.”

“ I use the TrainLine app for live information, but I try not to update it because the next version might not be accessible.”



Objectives: Tech tools for independent travel

“

Visual displays are very helpful, I rely on them more than announcements.

”

“

I like to plan my journey at quieter times of the day and choose carriage [I travel in] carefully. No way to know which carriages are the quietest other than by experience.”

”



Objectives: Tech tools for independent travel

“

Could they put live information screens instead of advertising?

”



Objectives: **Tech tools for independent travel**

What if assistance tools empowered users to navigate independently rather than waiting on staff or navigating unknown systems?

- ▶ **How might tools like visual guidance, remote interpreting, or camera-based navigation be built into mainstream travel apps?**
- ▶ **Could real-time updates on things like lift access, bus locations, or delays reduce dependence on staff or guesswork?**
- ▶ **How might wearable tech, real-time alerts, or personalised interfaces support more confident travel?**



Objectives:

Assistance that fits individual needs

“

**I'd love to travel with my grandchildren...
but I can't book seats for them close to me.**

”



Objectives:

Assistance that fits individual needs

What if assistance could be tailored to individual needs instead of assuming one size fits all?

- ▶ **How might route planning tools be customised by impairment type, preferences (e.g. step-free only), or anxiety triggers?**
- ▶ **Could travel alerts be tailored (e.g. crowding, event-based disruption, floating bus stop warnings) for each user?**
- ▶ **What types of assistance requests could be “pre-set”, such as boarding help, quiet carriage preference, or luggage support?**



Objectives:

Consistent support across all modes of transport

“

Could a single interface bring together booking, real-time info, staff presence, and accessibility data across providers?

”



Objectives:

Consistent support across all modes of transport

What if assistance followed the whole journey, not just at one stop or on one operator's service?

- ▶ **How might we extend assistance tools to include trains, buses, trams, and ferry services, and ensure support continues at interchanges between modes?**
- ▶ **Could a single interface or application bring together booking, real-time info, staff presence, and accessibility data across providers?**
- ▶ **What role might national standards or shared APIs play in building a seamless support ecosystem?**



Objectives: Feedback, transparency and accountability

“

Being left in the lounge and forgotten is frustrating, your whole day can be wrecked. Reassurance that you're on the right train is crucial.

”

“

In the lounge [waiting room], there is no audio announcements, and I am blind.

”



Objectives: Feedback, transparency and accountability

“

Trainline or National Rail might say a platform has changed, but it's not helpful if you can't find it.”

”

“

I want to see if Passenger Assistance staff actually updated the system, are they waiting for me, some live tracker would help.

”



Objectives: Feedback, transparency and accountability

“

We're asked to share our experiences all the time, but if nothing changes, why bother?

”



Objectives: Feedback, transparency and accountability

What if disabled passengers could easily give feedback and know it would lead to action without having to escalate or repeat themselves?

- ▶ **How might we design simple, accessible feedback tools (voice, text, in-person, or tactile/physical formats) that work for various impairments?**
- ▶ **Could service status and incident reports be publicly tracked (for example, broken lift reports, missed assistance) for transparency?**
- ▶ **What systems could build trust in accountability, such as confirmation messages, follow-up, or assistance “receipts”?**



Objectives:

Human-centred training and culture shift

“

It's attitudes which make so much difference. Sometimes when people roll their eyes it just makes me want to cry.

”

“

Bus drivers think accommodating accessibility is hard, but it's their behaviour which makes it easy or hard.

”



Objectives:

Human-centred training and culture shift

“

With the government pushing disabled people into work, if I can't guarantee I'll get on a bus, how can I get to work?

”



Objectives:

Human-centred training and culture shift

What if every staff member's assistance was confident, respectful, and informed, not just compliant with policy?

- ▶ **How might staff training be co-designed and delivered by disabled people, using real stories and roleplay?**
- ▶ **Could emotional intelligence, problem-solving, and dignity be championed alongside technical knowledge?**
- ▶ **What continuous learning or feedback loops might help improve staff confidence and responsiveness?**



Target users

This opportunity primarily focuses on the needs of disabled passengers who use or depend on travel assistance, including:

- ▶ **People with mobility impairments**, who may require step-free routes, help boarding, or assistance with luggage.
- ▶ **Blind and visually impaired passengers**, who often rely on staff or tech-based navigation support and benefit from real-time, non-visual information.
- ▶ **Elderly passengers**, who may experience reduced mobility, slower processing time, or a need for reassurance during multi-stage journeys.

It also aims to consider the needs of:

- ▶ **Deaf or hard-of-hearing passengers**, who may miss spoken instructions or updates and need accessible communication options when seeking help.
- ▶ **Neurodivergent individuals and people with cognitive impairments**, who may need consistent routines, reduced sensory load, and clear expectations around assistance.
- ▶ **Passengers with mental health conditions**, who may experience heightened anxiety, especially when support is unreliable or unclear.



Target users (continued)

In addition, this opportunity is relevant to travel service providers and system developers, including:

- ▶ **Train, bus, and multimodal operators**, who deliver assistance services and need clearer frameworks for consistency, visibility, and follow-through.
- ▶ **Frontline staff, managers, and volunteers**, whose training, visibility, and availability shape the passenger experience.
- ▶ **Technology providers**, building tools like booking apps, live info platforms, or remote assistance features that influence user autonomy and trust.

Design scope and constraints

This opportunity focuses on improving the reliability, visibility, personalisation, and continuity of travel assistance services across all modes of transport.

In-scope solutions may:

- ▶ Enhance or redesign how assistance is booked, tracked, and delivered
- ▶ Improve the visibility and consistency of assistance points, staff, or interfaces
- ▶ Expand tech-based tools (e.g. real-time updates, navigation aids, wearables) that support independent travel
- ▶ Allow users to personalise assistance preferences and receive tailored journey updates
- ▶ Create integrated support systems that span different transport modes and operators
- ▶ Support better training, behaviour, and accountability among staff delivering assistance
- ▶ Enable feedback and transparency mechanisms that give users confidence in support services.

Design scope and constraints

Out of scope:

This opportunity does not cover:

- ▶ Redesign of physical station or vehicle infrastructure (e.g. lifts, platforms, vehicle interiors) unless it directly relates to how assistance is delivered
- ▶ Broader awareness or culture-change campaigns not tied to assistance services
- ▶ Full system overhauls of national scheduling, routing, or staffing structures
- ▶ Complex technology dependent on long-term regulatory changes or proprietary cross-operator integration that can't be prototyped or piloted.

Stakeholders

- ▶ **Disabled passengers and advocacy groups**
- ▶ **Frontline staff, including assistance teams, drivers, and station personnel**
- ▶ **Transport operators across rail, bus, tram, and ferry services**
- ▶ **App and tech developers providing booking systems, real-time info, and navigation tools**
- ▶ **Customer service and accessibility leads within transport organisations**
- ▶ **Training providers, especially those co-designing with disabled people**
- ▶ **Policy makers and regulators, setting expectations for service delivery and accountability**
- ▶ **Local and national transport authorities coordinating multi-operator services.**

Next Steps

Visit the [Translating research into design opportunities project page](#) to find links to the full report, along with a shorter ‘highlights’ version that is also translated into easy-read and BSL.

The main project page also has direct links to the 8 individual design opportunities as below:

- 1 Bus stop accessibility**
- 2 Bus interior flexibility and accessibility**
- 3 Personalising ‘live’ travel information**
- 4 Train station accessibility**
- 5 Awareness of diverse travel needs**
- 6 Clarifying operator-passenger commitments**
- 7 Improving existing assistance services**
- 8 Identifying and sharing inclusive transport practices (vehicle, infrastructure, service, etc.)**

Contact Us



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