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# Design Opportunity 5 of 8

## Awareness of diverse travel needs

**\*ncat**  
national  
centre for  
accessible  
transport





## Design Opportunity 5 of 8

### **Awareness of diverse travel needs**

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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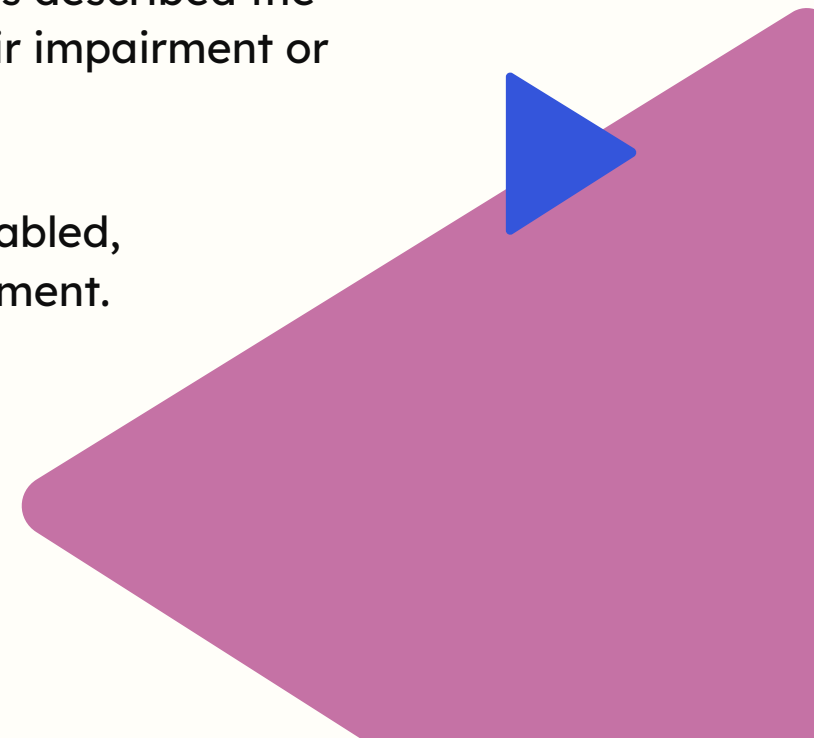


# Barriers

Disabled passengers, especially those with non-visible impairments or non-obvious access needs, often experience misunderstanding, judgement, and tension when using public transport. Across our research with disabled passengers through focus groups, surveys, and interviews, participants shared how difficult it can be to access priority seating, communicate the need for space or time, or travel without fear of confrontation.

Non-visible impairments are frequently dismissed or disbelieved. People with mobility aids or guide dogs may encounter judgement or hostility when trying to board, access a wheelchair space, or request assistance. Others described the emotional strain of constantly needing to explain or justify their impairment or access needs to drivers, staff, or other passengers.

Some people assume that if they can't see that someone is disabled, then they're not, leading to frustration, conflict, or even harassment.



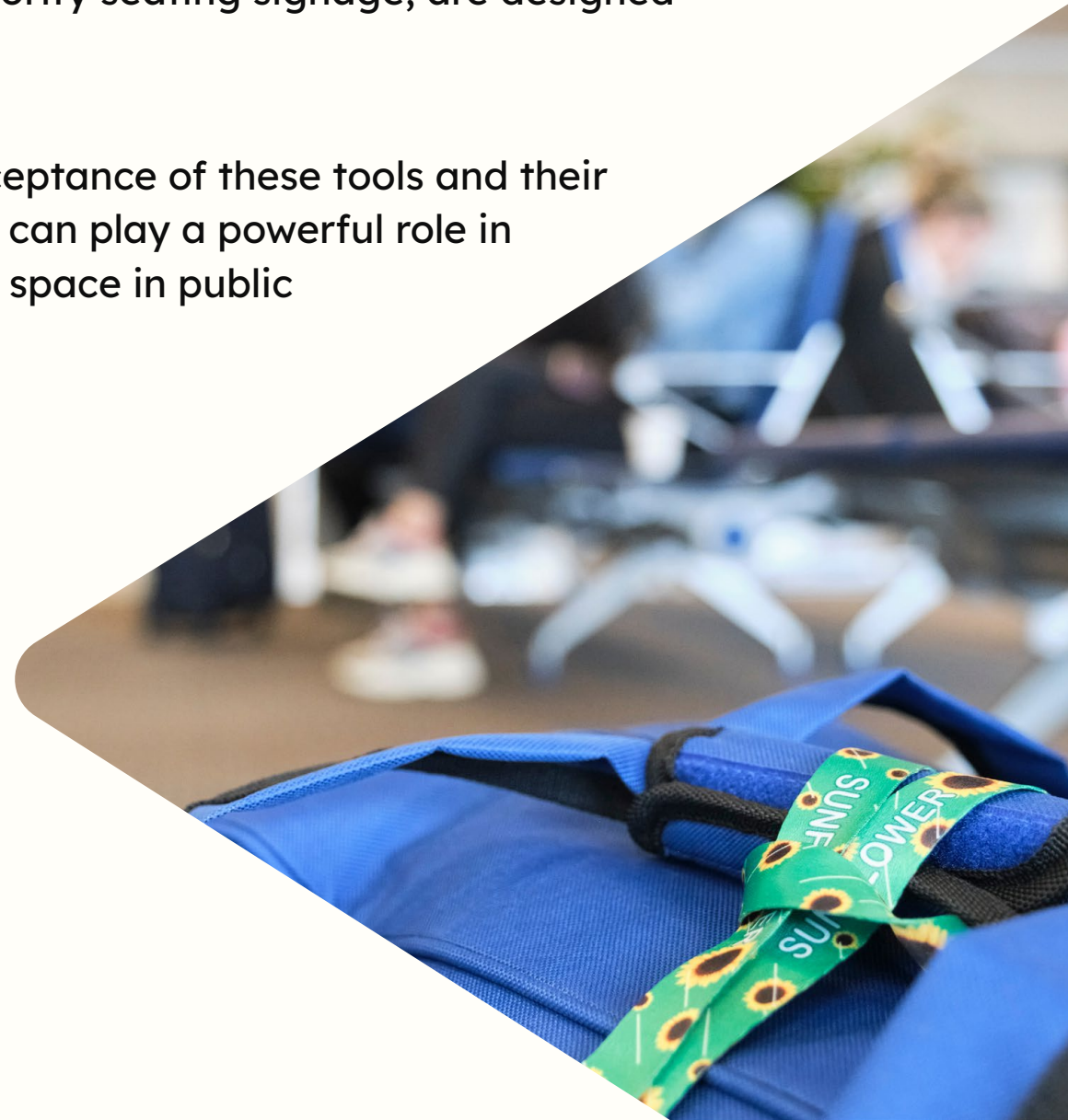


# Barriers

Some solutions, like [Sunflower lanyards<sup>1</sup>](#) or priority seating signage, are designed to foster more inclusive travel.

But public awareness, understanding, and acceptance of these tools and their meaning remain low. An awareness campaign can play a powerful role in creating a culture of care, dignity, and shared space in public transport settings.

<sup>1</sup> A discreet sign that the wearer has a non-disability and may need additional support.





## Awareness of diverse travel needs

How might we raise public awareness of the diverse access needs of disabled passengers, including those with non-visible disabilities, to create a more respectful, empathetic, and equitable transport experience?



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## **Objectives: Visibility of non-visible disabilities**

“

**Some people assume that if they can't see a disability, it doesn't exist.**

”

“

**I once had to justify needing a seat because someone told me I 'looked fine'.**

”



# Objectives: **Visibility of non-visible disabilities**

**What if people with non-visible impairments didn't have to explain themselves to be believed or respected?**

- ▶ **How might we normalise the idea that not all impairments are visible?**
- ▶ **Could simple messaging, symbols (for example, lanyards), or storytelling increase empathy and understanding?**
- ▶ **What role might fellow passengers play in offering space or support without judgement?**





## **Objectives:** Clarifying priority and space use

**“ It is not clear who has priority in the seating area, sometimes buggies take up the space. ”**

**“ People can get quite scary in these contexts too and you are very vulnerable as a disabled person travelling alone. ”**



# Objectives: **Clarifying priority and space use**

**What if priority seating, ramps, and accessible areas were clearly understood and respectfully used by everyone?**

- ▶ **How might we increase public understanding of who priority spaces are for, and why?**
- ▶ **Could campaigns tackle common misconceptions (e.g. pram vs. wheelchair priority, “young = not disabled”)?**
- ▶ **What visual, spatial, or behavioural nudges could reinforce etiquette without shame?**



## **Objectives:** Promoting inclusive travel culture

**“ You are very vulnerable as a disabled person travelling alone. ”**

**“ If the staff are kind, it makes all the difference. ”**



# Objectives: **Promoting inclusive travel culture**

**What if buses, trains, and stations felt like shared spaces where support and patience were part of the culture?**

- ▶ **How might we foster a culture of respect and care among all travellers, not just compliance?**
- ▶ **Could real passenger stories, staff experiences, or co-designed messages help humanise the issues?**
- ▶ **What emotional tone or language builds connection, not defensiveness?**





## **Objectives:** Supporting campaign symbols

**“ Wearing a sunflower lanyard helps, but I still get stares when I sit in priority seating. ”**

**“ I wear the [sunflower] lanyard but often staff don't seem to know what it is for. ”**

**“ It would help if announcements or signage mentioned what the sunflower lanyard means. ”**



# Objectives: **Supporting campaign symbols**

**What if symbols like the 'hidden disabilities sunflower' lanyard were widely recognised and supported by the public and staff alike?**

- ▶ **How might we raise national recognition of existing schemes that signal hidden access needs?**
- ▶ **Could signage, apps, or wearable tools be promoted with clear public messaging and real-life examples?**
- ▶ **What would help passengers and staff respond helpfully when they see someone using these symbols?**



## **Objectives: Creating a culture of understanding, not justifying**

**“ It’s exhausting always having to explain myself. I just want to travel in peace! ”**

**“ People think I’m lying when I say I need the priority space. ”**

**“ The worst part is having to prove I need support every single time. ”**



## **Objectives: Creating a culture of understanding, not justifying**

**“**

**I'd rather not go out than deal with all the looks and judgement.**

**”**

**“**

**You end up planning your whole day just to avoid confrontation.**

**”**



# **Objectives: Creating a culture of understanding, not justifying**

**What if people didn't have to constantly self-advocate to get the space or understanding they need?**

- ▶ **How might campaigns shift the responsibility for awareness away from disabled people and onto the wider public?**
- ▶ **Could we build social expectations that support giving space, offering help, or simply not questioning someone's access needs?**
- ▶ **What kinds of messages and stories reinforce that access needs are valid, even when non-visible, and don't require justification?**





# Target users

This opportunity primarily focuses on the needs of:

- ▶ **People with non-visible disabilities**, such as chronic pain, fatigue, neurodivergence, or mental health conditions, who often face disbelief or judgement when accessing priority spaces or requesting assistance
- ▶ **Wheelchair users and others with visible mobility aids**, who frequently experience tension or competition over space, particularly in boarding areas or designated zones
- ▶ **Blind and visually impaired passengers**, who may require space or support that isn't always visible to others
- ▶ **Neurodivergent individuals**, for whom social misunderstandings, sensory overload, or unexpected interactions can lead to stress or confrontation

It also aims to consider the needs of:

- ▶ **Deaf or hard-of-hearing passengers**, who may miss announcements or struggle to respond in expected ways
- ▶ **Elderly passengers**, who may have non-obvious needs around balance, stamina, or sensory sensitivity.

# Design scope and constraints

## In scope:

**This opportunity focuses on public-facing awareness efforts that help foster understanding, empathy, and respect for diverse and often non-visible access needs in public transport. In-scope proposals may:**

## In-scope proposals should:

- ▶ Focus on communication, education, and cultural change across buses, trains, stations, and stops
- ▶ Use campaigns, signage, symbols, storytelling, or on-site prompts to influence attitudes and behaviours
- ▶ Improve public understanding of priority seating, accessible spaces, and non-visible disabilities
- ▶ Encourage recognition and support for schemes like sunflower lanyards or similar identifiers
- ▶ Be scalable across modes and regions, with both physical and digital components
- ▶ Complement existing accessibility measures and design interventions.



# Design scope and constraints

## Out of scope:

### This opportunity does not cover:

- ▶ Changes to transport infrastructure or vehicle design (for example, seating layout, signage systems)
- ▶ Technical fixes like app development, unless tightly linked to awareness aims
- ▶ Enforcement or legal reform regarding access rights or priority spaces.



# Stakeholders

- ▶ **Disabled passengers and advocacy organisations**
- ▶ **Public transport users and community groups**
- ▶ **Transport operators (bus, rail, and tram)**
- ▶ **Communications teams and public campaign/PR specialists**
- ▶ **Station and vehicle signage designers**
- ▶ **Organisations managing lanyard or identifier schemes (for example, Hidden Disabilities Sunflower)**
- ▶ **Frontline staff and customer service teams**
- ▶ **Government and local authority transport departments.**

# 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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