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Design opportunity 6 of 8

Clarifying Operator- Passenger Commitments

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national
centre for
accessible
transport





Design Opportunity 6 of 8

Clarifying Operator- Passenger Commitments

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

Many disabled passengers carefully plan their journeys, often relying on detailed information and advance bookings to ensure accessibility.

But when systems fail, such as lifts being out of order, lack of appropriate support from on-board staff, Passenger Assistance not turning up, or real-time travel updates proving unreliable, the impact can be stressful, disorientating, and sometimes unsafe.

Passengers often don't know what to expect, what they are entitled to, or how to hold operators accountable when commitments aren't met. In return, operators and service providers may not always communicate their limitations or the thresholds of responsibility clearly.

This mismatch erodes trust. It burdens disabled travellers to “hope for the best” or over-plan to account for gaps in provision.

There is a clear need to define and communicate mutual expectations so that disabled passengers can travel confidently and operators can be transparent, responsive, and accountable.



Barriers (continued)

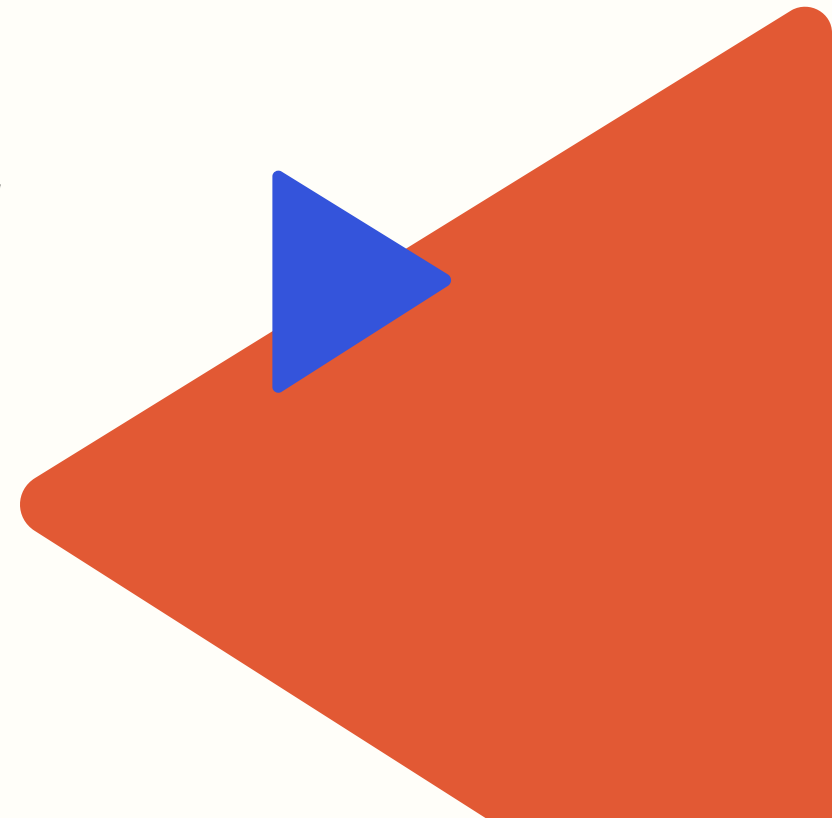
One example of this approach is Bristol Rules¹, a city-wide initiative by Bristol Nights that sets out clear, shared commitments to safety and wellbeing in the night-time economy. Although it targets nightlife workers and patrons, it offers a compelling model of how collaboration, practical guidance, and cultural framing can make public-facing environments more inclusive.

A similar approach, grounded in the needs of disabled passengers, could reshape what reliable and respectful travel support looks like.

In addition to operators and systems, disabled passengers often rely on the awareness and actions of on-board staff (for example, bus drivers, on-board hosts).

Yet there's little clarity about what kind of support, behaviour, or shared responsibility should be expected or encouraged in these everyday encounters.

¹ A set of guidelines promoting safety and respect in Bristol's nightlife and public spaces.



Design Opportunity 6 of 8

Clarifying Operator-Passenger Commitments

How might we design clear, transparent ways for disabled passengers to understand what to expect from transport services and frontline staff, and for operators to communicate what they can reliably deliver?



Objectives:

Understanding what help will be available

“

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

IH Rail assist in general treat me well. But less and less staff now at stations, I lost confidence.”

”



Objectives:

Understanding what help will be available

“

There was no staff at the doors, so the wider disability entrance wasn't working, and there was nobody to open it.”

”



Objectives:

Understanding what help will be available

What if disabled passengers always knew upfront what support or access features would be available on their journey?

How might we clearly communicate what is included (and not included) in assistance or accessibility services? For instance, will

- ▶ **staff accompany you through the station, help you to your seat on a bus, or only notify you of their arrival when you've booked assistance?**

Could booking services and station signage offer more reliable,

- ▶ **plain-language explanations of what to expect, such as lift availability, how to find assistance staff, or what to do if no one appears?**



Objectives:

Understanding what help will be available

What if disabled passengers always knew upfront what support or access features would be available on their journey?

What does “assistance confirmed” mean in practice: will someone

- ▶ **meet you at the train door/platform, call your name, wait by a help point, or just be alerted to your presence?**



Objectives:

Accessible guidance on rights and support

“

What can I do if Passenger Assistance doesn't show up?”

”



Objectives:

Accessible guidance on rights and support

What if there were a simple way to understand your rights as a disabled passenger, and what to do when things go wrong?

- ▶ **How might operators proactively share key policies?**
Could this be shown in multiple formats (visual, audio, digital, easy-read)?
- ▶ **How can we frame these commitments in a way that supports autonomy and self-advocacy?**



Objectives: Proactive updates about changes or disruptions

“

Would be useful to know if lifts are working in advance. Even if they are not, it's helpful so you can plan ahead/a workaround.

”



Objectives: Proactive updates about changes or disruptions

“

Lift was broken, and I didn't know about it before the journey. It meant I had to travel to another station (back or further ahead) to then get a taxi home... added an extra 2 hours to journey time!”

”



Objectives: Proactive updates about changes or disruptions

What if disruptions, outages, or reduced services were communicated clearly and early enough for disabled travellers to make informed decisions?

- ▶ **How might we alert users to issues (for example, out-of-service lifts, staff shortages) in a timely, location-aware, and accessible way?**
- ▶ **Could live systems flag when an “unmanned station” is expected during a trip?**
- ▶ **What role can apps, information screens, staff, and signage each play in setting real-time expectations?**



Objectives:

Real-time tracking of booked support

“

It is hard to know in advance if the booking of Passenger assistance went through alright and if there will be anyone expecting me.

”



Objectives:

Real-time tracking of booked support

What if you could confirm at any time that assistance or facilities are available, active, and ready for you?

- ▶ **How might booked services be tracked in real time (for example, status bar for Passenger Assistance arrival)?**
- ▶ **Could booking platforms offer reassurance tools like confirmation check-ins or alerts?**
- ▶ **Is there an opportunity for passengers to report gaps or discrepancies simply and accessibly?**



Objectives: Fixing problems with empathy and accountability

“

If there are any changes, like last-minute platform changes, it takes a long time to take a lift and then another one.”

”



Objectives: Fixing problems with empathy and accountability

What if transparency helped build trust, not just minimal compliance between passengers and operators?

- ▶ **How might systems be designed for responsiveness and feedback when things don't go to plan?**
- ▶ **Could failures be acknowledged and addressed without forcing users into complaint processes?**
- ▶ **What does a “culture of accountability” look like in transport, where passengers feel heard, not blamed, and how can design contribute to it?**



Objectives:

Clarifying commitments of bus drivers

“

**I am blind and the streets are noisy,
so I can't hear electric buses coming.**

”

“

**It's hard to get driver attention as a w/c
user, so I have to wave violently.**

”



Objectives:

Clarifying commitments of bus drivers

What if disabled passengers knew exactly what kind of support they could expect from bus drivers, and it was delivered consistently?

- ▶ **How might we define and communicate the core responsibilities of bus drivers in supporting disabled passengers (for example, deploying the ramp, waiting for someone to sit, offering verbal confirmation of route or stop, stopping the bus at request stops)?**
- ▶ **Could these expectations be published clearly online, in travel apps, or as part of a visible passenger charter so disabled travellers don't have to guess or ask each time?**
- ▶ **Could a code of conduct or service expectations from staff to passenger be clearly communicated and visible on board transport vehicles (for example, beside a bus driver) so that the agreement between operator and passenger is clear?**



Objectives:

Clarifying commitments of bus drivers

What if disabled passengers knew exactly what kind of support they could expect from bus drivers, and it was delivered consistently?

- What tools, reminders, or onboard prompts might help drivers**
- ▶ deliver this support confidently and respectfully, even under time pressure?**



Target users

This opportunity primarily addresses the needs of disabled passengers who rely on timely, accurate, and respectful support from transport services and who are most impacted when commitments aren't clearly communicated or fulfilled. This includes:

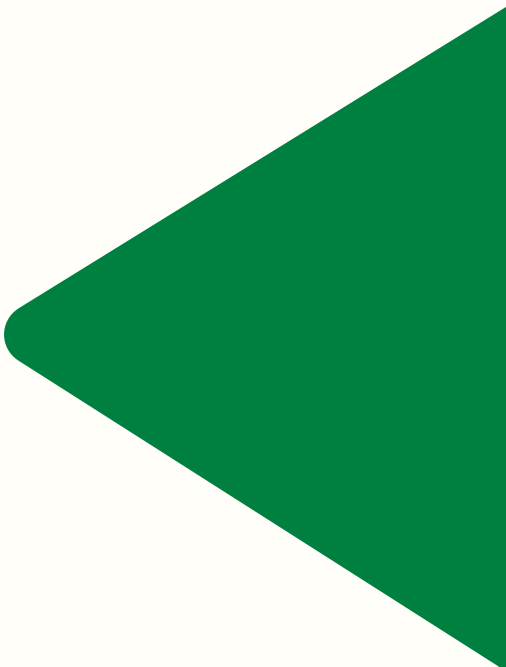
- ▶ **Passengers with physical or mobility impairments** may depend on step-free routes, booked assistance, or facilities like lifts, ramps, and accessible toilets and are disproportionately affected when these features are unavailable or unpredictable.
- ▶ **Blind and visually impaired passengers**, for whom accurate, consistent information (especially about disruptions or assistance availability) is crucial for navigating independently and safely.
- ▶ **Deaf or hard-of-hearing passengers**, who may miss verbal announcements or on-the-spot updates without clear visual alternatives.
- ▶ **Neurodivergent passengers or those with cognitive impairments** may experience stress or confusion when journeys don't follow expected patterns or when communication is unclear.
- ▶ **Elderly passengers**, who often share overlapping access needs and benefit from clear guidance, reassurance, and predictable support.



Target users

- ▶ **People with mental health conditions**, for whom trust, emotional safety, and a sense of control over the journey are essential.

This opportunity also recognises the critical role of service providers in building transparent and accountable systems, and is intended for:

- ▶ **Bus drivers, station staff, and frontline workers**, whose behaviour and communication often determine whether disabled passengers feel respected and supported. They need clear guidance, practical tools, and cultural reinforcement to deliver consistent, empathetic assistance.
 - ▶ **Transport operators and service managers** are responsible for defining and upholding service commitments, training staff, and responding effectively when things go wrong.
 - ▶ **Digital service providers**, such as app developers and real-time information platforms, whose interfaces shape how expectations are set, confirmed, and updated in transit.
 - ▶ **Policy makers and regulators**, who help establish accountability, minimum service standards, and enforcement mechanisms across the transport network.
- 

Design scope and constraints

In scope: This opportunity focuses on improving communication and expectation-setting between disabled passengers and transport operators.

In-scope proposals may:

- ▶ Clarify what disabled passengers can expect before, during, and after their journeys
- ▶ Improve transparency around booked services, service disruptions, and operational limitations
- ▶ Support accessible presentation of rights, responsibilities, and fallback options when things go wrong
- ▶ Enable real-time tracking or confirmation of support, like Passenger Assistance or facility status
- ▶ Offer practical tools or systems for both passengers and staff to manage service expectations
- ▶ Use design to foster empathy, trust, and accountability when services don't meet commitments
- ▶ General awareness campaigns, directly tied to clarifying rights and expectations in transport contexts.



Design scope and constraints

Out of scope:

This opportunity does not cover:

- ▶ Designing or improving physical infrastructure such as lifts, toilets, or station layouts
- ▶ Major reforms to national accessibility policy, although it may inform future guidance
- ▶ Redesign of the assistance booking process itself (addressed in related service opportunities)
- ▶ Enforcement or complaints systems managed solely through legal or regulatory frameworks.

Stakeholders

- ▶ **Disabled passengers and advocacy organisations**
- ▶ **Train and bus operators, including managers, bus drivers and assistant coordinators**
- ▶ **Station staff and Passenger Assistance teams**
- ▶ **Customer service and complaints resolution departments**
- ▶ **Transport regulators and accessibility compliance bodies**
- ▶ **Developers of booking systems, apps, and real-time service platforms**
- ▶ **Accessibility consultants and legal advisors**
- ▶ **Policy makers at local and national levels.**

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

Design Opportunity **6 of 8** Clarifying Operator-Passenger Commitments



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