Difference

Changing perceptions of disability

Response to the North East Mayoral Combined Authority's Transport Plan, 2024

Contents

Summary of Our Response

This report highlights critical gaps in transport accessibility for disabled users and sets out actionable measures to make the plans for the North East Mayoral Combined Authority Transport Plan more inclusive and equitable. We have identified issues and recommendations across 5 areas; **Information accessibility**, **Public Transport**, **Active Travel**, **Private Transport** and **Accountability**.

Key priorities include embedding accessibility in the planning and design of all transport infrastructure and ensuring mandatory disability awareness training for staff. Improving public transport infrastructure is essential with a focus on making all vehicles wheelchair-accessible, reducing notification times for assistance, and providing alternative accessible transport options during disruptions. Real-time information, delivered across multiple platforms, must meet accessibility standards to reduce confusion and stress faced by disabled travellers.

Disabled users encounter significant barriers in active travel and private transport services. Recommendations emphasize adapting shared mobility schemes to accommodate diverse needs and mandating a minimum number of wheelchair-accessible taxis within fleets. Private hire services must undergo regular disability awareness training and adopt transparent complaint procedures to tackle discrimination.

To ensure sustained progress, there must be strong accountability mechanisms which can be achieved by appointing representatives from Disabled Persons Organisations (DPOs) to transport committees. These representatives would oversee access and inclusion at all decision-making levels. Additionally,

expanding inclusive imagery and fostering participation of disabled transport users in planning processes will enhance representation and encourage greater engagement from disabled communities.

Summary of Key Recommendations

1. **Enhance Information Accessibility**
    i. Test all apps and website with disabled users to meet accessibility standards
    ii. Staff major transport exchanges with trained personnel to assist disabled travellers
    iii. Provide real-time, easily accessible transport updates across multiple platforms
    iv. Incorporate Accessibility into all plans by including disabled users in design and testing of all transport technologies

2. **Improve Public Transport Accessibility**
    i. Ensure buses, trains, metros and trains are wheelchair-accessible for independent travellers
    ii. Reduce the notification time for assistance to one hour for metros and light rails
    iii. Mandate accessible alternative transport for disrupted services, with upfront taxi payments when necessary
    iv. Establish mandatory disability training delivered by DPOs for all transport staff and service providers

3. **Address Active Travel Barriers**
    i. Ensure active travel schemes consider the needs of disabled people, such as adapted vehicles, bikes and scooters.
    ii. Included disabled people in planning and promote their participation through inclusive imager and policies.

4. **Improve Private Transport Services**
    i. Mandate minimum wheelchair-accessible vehicles in fleets

ii. Require disability awareness training run by a DPO for taxi drivers, with periodic reviews

iii. Establish clear complaint and enforcement process for discrimination in private hire services

5. **Establish Accountability Structures**

i. Appoint a member or representative from a DPO to oversee access and inclusion in transport committees.

Who is Difference North East

Difference North East Difference fights for equality for disabled people and an end to discrimination on the grounds of disability. We aim to change perceptions of disability with our work. We provide a voice for disabled people in the North East and campaign for a more equal region. We are a disabled people's organization run by and for disabled people. We have members from Northumberland to Teesside who we regularly canvas for opinions and point of view on a range of topics. We spoke to members from the North East Mayoral Combined Authority Area about their transport access, the things that work and don't, and the types of things that would help.

The Social Model of Disability

Difference North East prescribes to the social model of disability. The social model of disability tells us that a person is disabled by the barriers they face that exist within society. These barriers could be physical, economic or social and attitudinal. This means a person is disabled they don't 'have disabilities. When consulting with disabled people you will find that the person first language (person with disabilities) does not sit well with them for this reason. We would always advocate for organisations to use disabled people. If you need to refer to conditions, the preferred term is impairments. It was clear in reading your document that the references to disabled people were made with little consultation with disabled people because of the way language was used.

Why consultation and consideration of disabled people is important

Population reporting shows that incidence of disability in the population increased six points from 18% in 2002/03 to 24% in 2021/2022, an increase of approximately

5.2 million people. The figure for people in the North East of England sits at roughly 29% [1]. Disability affects every population group with the highest proportions of disability seen in Bangladeshi (39%), Pakistani and Mixed Ethnic Groups (30%). Outcomes for disabled people are lower than their equivalent non-disabled peers, for instance 13.3% of disabled people had no qualifications compared to 4.6% of non-disabled people, and only 24.9% of disabled people aged 21 to 64 had a degree versus 42.7% of non-disabled people. Disabled people are less likely to be employed with only 53% of disabled adults in employment versus 82.7% of non-disabled adults [1]. Disabled people are more likely to live in poverty [4], where 46% of all households in poverty had one or more disabled people, and 69% of food bank referrals are disabled people [3]. Scope estimates that the extra costs for those households with a disabled person amount to £709 per month [2].

Travel is vital to the ability of an individual to participate fully in the world, and to access their human rights. However, national research by Scope shows that disabled people are often denied this right.

- 30% of disabled people say that difficulties with public transport have reduced their independence.
- 31% of disabled people have had to rely on someone to help them use public transport
- 29% have had to change their travel plans.
- 26% of disabled people have ended up not travelling at all to avoid issues with public transport.
- 54% of disabled passengers always or often feel anxious when travelling on public transport and 52% always or often feel stressed. [5]

These findings compute with the findings we have when talking to our disabled members across the region who said in a recent opinion event; "I think it's very important this is accessible transport to make sure that people can use it".

We note that inaccessible consultation processes often mean that disabled people are left out of these types of consultations, so we hope that you take our feedback seriously.

Our Reflections on the Transport Plan

We welcome the reflections on the health and income-based inequalities that exist within the North East. We hope our work here helps you understand that disabled people are most affected by these inequalities and justice for these groups cannot exist outside of disability justice. We are concerned however about the lack of detail surrounding access specifically for disabled people, and for detail about how inclusivity and accessibility will be ensured in the measures particularly around active travel and public transport. We are concerned about how accountability for inclusivity is built into the plan. We understand the fundraising is required to add detail into the Key Performance Indicators, but currently there is very little in any of the KPIs that monitors or pushes access and inclusion for disabled people. In the sections that follow we have grouped our concerns under Information Accessibility, Active Travel, Public Transport, Private Transport and Accountability. At the end of each section, we have included some key recommendations to improve access and inclusion.

Information Accessibility

We welcome NEMCA's commitment to improving the accessibility of information across all transport routes. Our members speak often about the way that information is currently inaccessible for instance, due to inaccessible formatting, poor communication between transport providers and users. Some of our members told us about new technology that is being implemented across the region that is inaccessible to them.

> *"They have digital display boards in parts of the city now… They put new ones in the Haymarket, which you just cannot read, right? And it's not just me. A friend of mine who isn't visually impaired, she was struggling the other day."*

We are concerned that some of these technologies are being implemented without full testing by a range of users and would ask this review to think seriously about embedding access checking into every implementation of technologies.

Other members spoke about the information tannoy on the current metro system alongside a general lack of easily accessible up to date information for users.

> *"And I can't explain how many times I've been say late for looking after my granddad or sort of just had a meltdown myself, because I just cannot get any information. Like the board doesn't update. You know, you can't. You can't use that Tannoy at all. It's just you. So there's nothing online updates. And I think we definitely have the technology to do that, to have somebody say, oh, you know what it's gonna be 10 minutes. Problem solved. You can kind of go on with your day."*

As this member points out, ensuring there are real people in these travel systems is important for access. It is also important that these customer service providers are trained in disability justice and recognise part of their role is to aid travel for disabled travellers. Our members regularly report transport staff cause further distress by refusing access, confusing journeys and refusing to tackle poor behaviour from nondisabled travellers.

We welcome the intention to create a one stop shop for all ticketing and servicing information as multiple apps and sites is a massive barrier for disabled people

> *"like having to do things like get the bus and or metros or various things like that, various people tells us numerous different apps that they use, but there's one app that you use to buy a ticket, for example, but that app won't tell you what the updated train time is"* and this *"adds kind of more stress, because there's just, I think, in an attempt to make things easier, that ended up, rather than just having one thing that works, well, there's just numerous different things, and none of them are really kind of in communication or in sync with each other, so I never quite know where I sort of need to be."*

However, other members talked about the inaccessibility of web-based information and apps *"They're not very easy to read. They don't have proper colour contrast, a good font or anything."* Reliance solely on apps and websites to distribute up to date travel information means disabled users are left behind. We would recommend that any new online system is built with and tested by disabled people.

Recommendations for Information Access

- Get disabled people to test any new technology before it is implemented
- Build websites and apps that meet accessible standards [6]
- Ensure the biggest transport exchanges are manned by people who have received disability awareness training, and are empowered to tackle 'problem passengers'

Active Travel

Our members talked about the scooter hire scheme in Newcastle, and their belief that it had been stopped in Sunderland. The issues they discussed with the access and the way they make pavements vulnerable for other users and block access is also applicable to when the bike scheme was introduced in Newcastle.

> *"They blocked, put a block on but you know, when any pedestrian is very vulnerable, because they ride on the pavement half the time. They're not supposed to, but they do, because the traffic is they go on the pavement and they park and plonk themselves in the middle of pavement. So if you've got a buggy, wheelchair, any any mobility aid, you have to go on the road."*

Our members also talked about the barriers to accessing the scheme, from physical inaccessibility of the equipment to the costs applied and especially the requirement for a bank card with pre-authorisation in order to use them.

Disabled people are concerned about active travel schemes that feel like they bully disabled people into attempting to do things they can't.

"If I walk too much, I'm ill for the rest of the day. So it's her whole thing was trying to get us out of like, a few years ago, actually, I had a really bad flare up with my arthritis. I couldn't walk, I couldn't use my hands and do anything… my wheelchair has given me freedom. It means I can go outside, whereas if I'm not in it, I'm stuck in the house."

Disabled people want the opportunities to improve their health and contribute to improving their climate impact but often schemes like these create social beliefs that increase hate and aggression towards disabled people.

Recommendations for Active Travel

- Ensure disabled people are represented in conversations about Active Travel, including using images of disabled people in promotional materials
- Think about extending popular schemes to encompass adapted vehicles, eg. Hand cycles, and allow for bigger budgets to allow disabled people to access schemes such as the Cycle to Work Scheme
- Encourage businesses to build accessible facilities so that disabled people can wash and change like their non-disabled peers
- Ask any active travel providers to undertake Disability Awareness and Equality training from a Disabled Persons Organisation (Difference North East, Disability North, DAD) and have a plan for engaging a range of users with different impairments.

Public Transport

We welcome a more joined up cross service system, because as one of our members explains the multiple apps and services significantly increases stress and reduces access.

"… for example, like having to do things like get the bus and or metros or various things like that, various people tells us numerous different apps that they use, but there's one app that you use to buy a ticket, for example, but

that app won't tell you what the updated train time is. But then you could use Google Maps, but then that's sometimes, you know, like, doesn't provide with all the information or all the routes. And then there's, like, the pop up, and then there's a different one. There's just too much, sometimes, just for the same service, and then you've got, obviously, the timetables, and then the boards, and it's things really not marrying up. And a lot of the time when I'm kind of faced with just, oh, just download the app, I think I'll just not do it. I'll just chance it"

But we would caution going entirely digital as digital is horrendously inaccessible for lots of people.

"For bus stops, that's been a really big one, I think, because in Sunderland, just occasionally, they will close a bus stop, or close a bus lane, but there's no information on any of the apps whatsoever or the website whatsoever, and because of things like my real time management skills and time blindness, I get somewhere almost exactly as I need to be there, and I'll get somewhere."

There are ongoing and serious issues to be addressed when it comes to communicating changes and ensuring that information is accessible to all. As our members will tell you, lack of accessible information increases stress and anxiety and ultimately leads to disabled people not using transport.

We would also encourage you to think more thoroughly about how different areas are connected, even within the city. Many disabled people can't travel between neighbouring areas without long journeys.

"I'm currently having a go into town and then out from town, whereas a taxi would just kind of go straight there. So I'm very much aware that kind of Stagecoach has one kind of line and then Go NorthEast has another, but they hadn't really moved to together. So often, I'm kind of finding myself going kind of weird ways around things to kind of get there."

Our members tell us that having to plan routes like this increases energy usage, costs more as taxis are used to make up the difference. The sensory

overstimulation also makes it difficult for disabled people, and so having to plan long journeys.

> *"So I think when you have any sort of disability or developmental disorder, because, you know, you'll have more it'll take longer to do things than a lot of people would. And also, you spend a lot of your life sort of appointments and things like that. And the last thing we need is to just spend three hours waiting for a train on top of that, or, you know, not be able to get it without waiting for somebody else to show up."*

Disabled people are reliant on public transport and sometimes due to the nature of their impairment or other access issues such as costs have no other alternatives, but what we hear constantly is that the services don't meet their needs.

> *"I think my biggest issue with accessibility is me as a wheelchair user, I actually can't get on the metro unless I have someone with us, and I'm in a manual chair, if I'm in an electric chair, you physically can't get over because there's such a big gap. So that means I actually can't travel. And when it comes to busses, they're not accessible either. I don't think a lot of people know that, but you can get on again if you have a carer, because they can push you on. But if you're by yourself, you physically can't get up because it's such a tight corner that your wheel kind of Jolt up. So you're not in a straight line, so you physically can't get on. Then usually there's a pole in the way when you're trying to manoeuvre yourself to the back seat. So I actually can't get outside at all and travel unless I have someone with us who is able to push us on, which isn't all the time."*

Most disabled people are capable of some level of independent travel if the structures are put in place to support them. Our members tell us that even when a particular type of service is accessible to them, when a replacement service is offered it is not suitable to their needs increasing expense, waiting times and pain and suffering.

> "What I've ended up doing, I think, last week alone, because of the amount of cancelled metros, I ended up paying a lot of money in taxis, because the

idea of waiting and trying to figure out times and things became really, really so stressful that I ended up just being like, this isn't really worth the meltdown. I'll just shell out the money for a taxi back from where I am… I just think it's the put that there as a kind of an alternative in some ways, whereas, actually it's not really an alternative for a lot of people."

Recommendations for Public Transport

- Prioritise transport providers who exceed the basic standards for accessibility. At a bare minimum, buses, trains and metros should be wheelchair accessible for a lone wheelchair user
- Reduce the "Arrive and Go" target times for Metro and Light Rail from 4 and 2 hours (respectively) to an hour – like everyone else.
- Prioritise the travel of a 'lone' disabled person, and design the systems so that disabled people can travel on public transport alone
- Ensure service providers have alternative transport that meets the needs of all types of users, and if not, taxi services should be paid for in advance for those users
- All staff to be trained and enforce prioritisation policies such as wheelchair users over buggies/prams

Private Transport

Our members frequently have issues with taxis from companies being engaged with home to school run contracts which mean there aren't wheelchair accessible taxis available from 7am-10am in a morning and between 2pm-5pm on evening. This vastly cuts down the time a wheelchair user is able to be out and about, and means that any work related activity they may wish to undertake is impossible. Our members also note that there are a lack of wheelchair accessible vehicles, particularly outside of Newcastle, and those that are available are charging more for a lone wheelchair user than a lone non-wheelchair user. Although this is against the law [7], there is very little recourse a disabled person can take especially when that taxi may be the only one in their area that can provide their service. Finally,

many of our members continually face ableist attitudes and remarks when using taxi services, including refusal of service on grounds of disability, and refusal of reasonable assistance.

Recommendations for Hackney Carriages and Private Hire Vehicles

- Insist on minimum levels of wheelchair accessible vehicles in fleets over a certain size
- Mandate Disability Awareness Training (including a taxi driver's legal duties) run by a Disabled Persons Organisation as part of licensing conditions for all drivers, with a three year review
- Create complaint pathways in local councils where disabled customers who have faced discrimination can easily have their complaint dealt with and be given financial recourse. Companies who repeatedly have discrimination complaints will have their licenses revoked.

Accountability

We welcome the Joint Transport Committee as the challenge and accountability board that will interrogate the implementation of the plan. We would ask you to consider appointing one member of the committee to oversee access and inclusion, or invite someone from a disabled person's organisation to attend meetings as a committee member. We find that prioritising inclusion at this level is one of the most effective ways of ensuring that desires of accessibility and inclusion come to fruition.

Conclusion

The North East Mayoral Combined Authority Transport Plan presents an opportunity for change and to rebuild the North East's transport system to be more inclusive and accessible fostering greater inclusivity and accessibility for all residents. However, without targeted action, the barriers and inequities that already exist for disabled people may persist or be magnified.

By embedding accessibility at every stage of planning, design and implementation, the Authority can lead the way in creating a transport service that genuinely caters for everyone. Our recommendations have emphasized practical and achievable steps – from reducing notification time, and increasing the number of wheelchair accessible vehicles across all fleets, to testing all information points (web based and in real life) with disabled users before implementation.

Disabled people represent over a quarter of people in the North East and continue to face disproportionate levels of poverty, isolation and unemployment. An accessible transport network is more than a convenience – it is a fundamental right and a necessity for social and economic inclusion. Addressing these disparities will not only benefit disabled people but will create a fairer, more efficient transport system for all.

We urge the North East Mayoral Combined Authority to adopt the measures outlined in this report and engage with Disabled People's Organisations at every stage of implementation. Through collective action and sustained accountability, we can build a transport network that reflects the diverse needs of our community and promotes the rights and dignity of disabled people across the region.

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We are **Difference North East**, the disability rights and justice charity for the North East of England.

We campaign to end discrimination, improve accessibility and inclusion, and change perceptions of disability.

differencenortheast.org.uk

Difference
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