



**Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru  
The National Assembly for Wales**

**Y Pwyllgor Cyfle Cyfartal  
The Committee on Equality of Opportunity**

**Dydd Mawrth, 20 Ebrill 2010  
Tuesday, 20 April 2010**

**Cynnwys**  
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Inquiry into the Accessibility of Railway Stations: Oral Evidence

Cofnodir y trafodion hyn yn yr iaith y llefarwyd hwy ynddi yn y pwyllgor. Yn ogystal, cynhwysir cyfieithiad Saesneg o gyfraniadau yn y Gymraeg.

These proceedings are reported in the language in which they were spoken in the committee.  
In addition, an English translation of Welsh speeches is included.

**Aelodau'r pwyllgor yn bresennol**  
**Committee members in attendance**

Mohammad Asghar	Ceidwadwyr Cymreig Welsh Conservatives
Eleanor Burnham	Democratiaid Rhyddfrydol Cymru Welsh Liberal Democrats
Ann Jones	Llafur (Cadeirydd y Pwyllgor) Labour (Committee Chair)
Dai Lloyd	Plaid Cymru (yn dirprwyo ar ran Janet Ryder) The Party of Wales (substitute for Janet Ryder)
Joyce Watson	Llafur Labour

**Eraill yn bresennol**  
**Others in attendance**

Rhyan Berrigan	Anabledd Cymru Disability Wales
Joseph Carter	Multiple Sclerosis Society Cymru Multiple Sclerosis Society Cymru
Andrea Gordon	Guide Dogs for the Blind Guide Dogs for the Blind
Cathryn McShane	Dehonglwr Interpreter
Norman Moore	Cyngor Cymru i Bobl Fyddar Wales Council for the Deaf
Meryl Roberts	Dehonglwr Interpreter
John Welsman	Guide Dogs for the Blind Guide Dogs for the Blind
Anthony Wiggins	Multiple Sclerosis Society Cymru Multiple Sclerosis Society Cymru

**Swyddogion Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru yn bresennol**  
**National Assembly for Wales officials in attendance**

Annette Millett	Dirprwy Glerc Deputy Clerk
Claire Morris	Clerc Clerk
Helen Roberts	Cynghorydd Cyfreithiol Legal Adviser

*Dechreuodd y cyfarfod am 8.58 a.m.*  
*The meeting began at 8.58 a.m.*

**Cyflwyniad, Ymddiheuriadau a Dirprwyon**  
**Introduction, Apologies and Substitutions**

[1] **Ann Jones:** Good morning, everyone, and welcome back from recess to this meeting of the Equality of Opportunity Committee. We have received apologies from Janet Ryder, and we are pleased to welcome Dai Lloyd, who is substituting for her. Does anyone have any declarations of interest to make? I see that you do not.

[2] We are not expecting the fire alarm to go off, but if it does, we will take our instructions from the ushers. The assembly point is over by the Pierhead building, so that is where we will all congregate. I ask everyone to switch off their mobile phones, pagers and BlackBerrys, please, as they affect the broadcasting.

8.59 a.m.

### **Ymchwiliad i Hygyrchedd Gorsafoddd Rheilffordd: Tystiolaeth ar Lafar Inquiry into the Accessibility of Railway Stations: Oral Evidence**

[3] **Ann Jones:** For our first evidence session today, we are delighted to welcome Rhyan, who is the access and transport policy officer for Disability Wales, and Joseph Carter and Anthony Wiggins, who are from MS Society Cymru. You are all more than welcome. We have received your papers, so thank you for those. As time is rather tight, we will move straight into questions, if that is all right with you. I will start with the first question.

[4] We are aware that many stations in Wales are not accessible at all times, and many of us have personal experience of that. Can you tell us about the impact that that has on disabled people in their personal and working lives?

9.00 a.m.

[5] **Mr Carter (continues):** I will kick off, Chair, if I may. First of all, there is a very real economic impact. Over the last 10 or 20 years, there has been a push towards public transport across the board, by the Welsh Government and the UK Government. We estimate that, in 2007, there were 30 billion rail users and trips across the UK. In Wales, this entire sector of transport is essentially off-limits to people, unless they happen to know that station A, where they get on, is accessible, and that station B, where they get off, is also accessible. So, there is a real economic benefit for the south Wales Valleys and the broader commuter areas. However, disabled people are mostly unable to get to the main urban centres because they are excluded from that sector of transport.

[6] In addition, there is a real fear and perception, even if the final destination station is somewhere accessible, such as Cardiff Central, for example, which is generally a good station, about what would happen if someone was stranded, if the lift was not working, or if there were no staff. So, there are some real physical barriers and there are also emotional barriers due to bad experiences.

[7] **Ann Jones:** Rhyan, do you have anything to add?

[8] **Ms Berrigan:** It was interesting to hear what you said about the staffing at Cardiff being quite good. One of our members has experienced good disabled access, but it depends on staff availability. Even in stations such as Cardiff, it depends on who is available. One of our members said that as long as you can find somebody, they are willing to help, but trying to find a member of staff who is willing to unlock the lifts or one who is willing to put out the ramps for you as a wheelchair user so that you can get on the train is a bit hit and miss. The onus is on the disabled person to try to find someone rather than members of staff willingly coming forward to ask whether assistance is required. Members say that it is common that staff find it a pain, and the disabled person feels that he or she is a nuisance. They should not have to feel like that.

[9] **Ann Jones:** Mr Wiggins, do you want to answer the question?

[10] **Mr Wiggins:** If I may, I will mention a brief story that happened to me. I was asked

by the BBC to provide a commentary while going around several stations. The biggest problem, as I see it, is that the rail network is run by so many different companies. I arrived at the car park at the rear of Cardiff Central, where I was met by a chap from the BBC and a lady from Arriva Trains. I got my chair out and went to the pay and display machine, but I could not reach it from my chair. So, it was a good job that the BBC chap was there, because he could put the money in for me. I went into the station, and I could only go in on the left-hand side, because the shutters are normally down on the right-hand side. The steps to the platform are on the left-hand side of the station, while the lifts are on the right-hand side, which means that you have to wheel yourself through the station, out through the other set of turnstiles and around to the right-hand side to get up to the platform via the lifts. The platform is at a lower level than the trains, which are about six to eight inches higher. Arriva's answer to that is that the platforms belong to Network Rail and the trains belong to the lease company. So, you are pushed to the back of the train—in fairness, they put out a ramp for you and help you on. In truth, the staff were very helpful.

[11] I got onto the train and went up to Heath High Level, where the ramp came out again and I pushed myself off. The exit from Heath High Level is a ramp that is like the north face of the Eiger. The chap from the BBC had to hold my wheelchair on one side and the lady from Arriva Trains had to hold it on the other, otherwise it would have been a very quick exit. We reached the pavement and went along to Heath Low Level. Again, the train came in and I was pushed towards the back of it, where the ramp came out and I was, in fairness, helped on. I went back to Cardiff Central, the ramp came out and I was pushed off. I went over towards a lift and went down to the bottom in it where, strangely enough, the shutter doors were open, so we could go straight out into the car park. The lady from Arriva Trains Wales said that they had a care line, but when I asked her for the number, she said that she did not know it. So, one of the biggest problems is the number of companies that come together to form the rail network. There have been several other such occurrences when using these trains, and one of the biggest issues is with the new Ebbw Vale line that was recently opened. The lady from Arriva Trains Wales said that all of the stations on the line were disabled accessible, but the only problem is that Cardiff is not. The train arrives at platform 0, where there is no lift.

[12] **Ann Jones:** There are a lot of issues there that perhaps we want to try to tease out in terms of operators and people running these services. Platform 0 at Cardiff is notorious as the one that some of us get stuck with. It is not easy. They think that it is all right for them to say that their stations are accessible to disabled people, but if you challenge them, what they always say is, 'The train ran on to that platform because there was an issue; that is not the usual platform'. We need to try to tighten that up. Hopefully, our inquiry and your evidence will help us do that.

[13] Eleanor, we will now move on to your questions.

[14] **Eleanor Burnham:** The Chair and I share the same train regularly, but even I as an able-bodied person sometimes suffer from a bad back, so I cannot imagine how much more difficult things are for you. Platform 3 at Shrewsbury is similar to platform 0 in Cardiff in that if you are unlucky enough to have mobility problems, you have to go outside the station—you have had that experience, have you not? Platform 3 at Shrewsbury is even worse in that you have to go a considerable distance out of the station and along the wall because there is no adequate provision. It is pleasing to hear, even though it is distressing to you, that we can discuss this because there is a problem. There is one horrendous example of a gentleman who had to go up to Chester to get back to Wrexham so that he could get off the train on the right side of the platform.

[15] Your evidence highlights some of the reasons why disabled people are unable to get on the right platform. Perhaps Rhyan would like to tell us about having to listen to the garbled messages that often seem to be in Kurdish or some obscure language that most of us cannot

even hear, even if we have decent hearing. Is that a problem that you could highlight in a minute? Other issues include step entry from the car park to the station, which you alluded to, footbridge-only access to platforms and lifts that only operate at certain times of the day, even in Wrexham, which has now been greatly enhanced. All of those are still issues. How do you deal with them unless, as you said, you know about them?

[16] **Mr Wiggins:** That is right. On occasion, you have to get off at a different station and then get a taxi to where you intend to go because, if a station is not manned and it has a steep ramp such as at Heath High Level station, I would not be able to use it unless I wanted a very quick exit. At least two people need to be available to hold me back on a steep ramp exit, because I cannot hold my wheels and hope to get down in one piece.

[17] **Eleanor Burnham:** Is all the information available? Even if you had access to the internet, which some people do, is information about facilities at a station for disability access available?

[18] **Mr Wiggins:** It is not always available. As I said, Arriva Trains Wales has an advice office, but it is in Cardiff, so if the station is in Wrexham, they might not know.

[19] **Mr Carter:** To clarify that point, I believe that Arriva publishes a document annually, and it is on its website. It is quite difficult to find, but it is there and it lists every station and outlines access at every station in its network, including those in England as well as those in Wales. It outlines which stations are staffed and when, which provide access to the platform as well as which platforms provide access to the train by means of, for example, very low platforms, and which have disabled toilets. That information is available, but it is quite difficult to find and to navigate through.

9.10 a.m.

[20] It is succinct and paints an honest picture of the rail network, albeit not a very pleasant one. The data clearly show that, even in 2010, 50 per cent of stations have no disabled access to the platform. There has been a positive increase of around 5 per cent in the last 18 months, so they are moving in the right direction. However, it still means that, for half the rail network, you can be stranded when you step off a train onto the platform. That information is difficult to find. As Tony alluded, if the staff on the platform cannot give you that phone number, unless you have really planned ahead and looked into it beforehand, it is very difficult.

[21] **Eleanor Burnham:** You can get caught in Cardiff, as you said earlier, if there is no-one at the entrance to the lifts; even I have been caught when my ticket got stuck. If there is no-one there, the staff are quite a distance away. If you are in a wheelchair, it is even worse, because you have to toddle back to find them so that they can let you through, or even if your ticket gets stuck.

[22] **Mr Wiggins:** That is one of the problems that we see. As Joe alluded to, Arriva lists the stations that should be manned, but sometimes when you get off the train, there are no staff there although Arriva says that there will be.

[23] **Eleanor Burnham:** Absolutely.

[24] You have touched on my next point already, but how common is the problem of a wheelchair user not being able to get from the platform to the train, because the train service on that route consists of old rolling stock or is not accessible? What on earth do you do when, at the last minute, they change platforms?

[25] **Mr Wiggins:** It is a difficult scenario. As I said, the times when I have used the trains, the staff on the trains have always been helpful. However, sometimes, when I have got off the train, there should have been staff there, but there were none, or they have gone somewhere. It means that you are stuck on the platform waiting for someone to turn up. If not, the other train passengers are always kind and helpful and will give you some assistance. However, being stuck in the middle of a platform with no-one around late at night can be a little distressing.

[26] **Ann Jones:** I would like to come in on that point and tease out from Rhyan the consequences of a last-minute change of platform. How do you cope, and how do people with hearing impairments cope when that happens?

[27] **Ms Berrigan:** From personal experience, it happens quite a lot. You have to follow the crowd. I do not know whether the train has been delayed, there has been a change of platform or the train has broken down until I can find a member of staff. When I find a member of staff, they can sometimes be quite rude and they are not deaf aware. Staff need disability equality training to understand not only deafness, but all disabilities in general. For example, I could follow the crowd and get on the wrong train and end up somewhere where I do not want to be. So, staff need to be aware so that I can go and ask, but they are not always aware of how various disabilities affect you. Due to the fact that I am confident, I will ask other passengers, but if I was profoundly deaf and used mainly sign language, then I would have great difficulty and might not want to do that. Disability equality training is important. At the moment, I do not think that Arriva, or train providers in general, provide it to their staff.

[28] **Eleanor Burnham:** It must be difficult if you are blind, for example, and listening to announcements because, quite frankly, they are very difficult to understand. Do you agree with me on that? Do you also agree that there are often discrepancies between what is going on and what is shown on the screens and transmitted in the announcements?

[29] **Mr Carter:** I agree; it is very true. It is not an area in which the Multiple Sclerosis Society Cymru has done much research, but from personal experience, I have found that to be the case. It is very confusing, even for someone who could make a quick dash down the steps and back up again to the next platform, but if you have to try to navigate a maze of stairs, try to find the lift and get down again, and you cannot see or hear, it is very difficult. These changes always seem to happen at the last minute, particularly in large stations, and there is only ever a minute or two to spare when, suddenly, it is all change.

[30] **Eleanor Burnham:** Absolutely. My last question is about the lack of parking spaces for the disabled. Is that a factor that can make rail travel inaccessible to certain disabled people and those with mobility problems particularly?

[31] **Mr Wiggins:** With Cardiff being the main rail station in Wales, the amount of parking places for disabled people is extremely restricted and it is annoying, on occasions, when you go there and find that there is a builder's van or another type of van parked there. Once I have got my chair out of the car and gone to pay, I find that I cannot reach the pay and display machine. Having put the question to Arriva Trains, I got the usual answer back, saying, 'Ah, well; we don't operate the car park'.

[32] **Ann Jones:** It might help if Arriva Trains talked to the managers of the car parks and told them about the problems that its travellers are experiencing, rather than just not assume any responsibility whatsoever.

[33] **Mr Wiggins:** Indeed.

[34] **Eleanor Burnham:** This is a big issue that we need to address. Do you not agree that there is a lack of continuity in terms of what disabled access means?

[35] **Ann Jones:** Yes. I think that we might find that something will come out of this report. I do not want to pre-empt it, but that might be an issue that will come out of the report. Would you like to continue, Dai?

[36] **David Lloyd:** Thank you for your paper. Most of my questions have been touched on, but we will give you the platform to emphasise certain points. My first question is about the availability, or otherwise, of accessible toilets and whether those accessible toilets are equipped to enable a carer to change a person's incontinence pads. Who would like to answer that question, according to their experience?

[37] **Mr Carter:** Our research shows that only 10 per cent of stations have disabled toilets and obviously they will vary dramatically in standard. There are very different standards for disabled toilets. I know that Mencap has done a lot of work on this and several charities have been advocating a massive reform of disabled toilets, making them far larger. Only 10 per cent of stations have them. Not a particularly large percentage more than that would have any toilets at all. The main problem is the lack of staff. Arriva is unwilling, rightly or wrongly, to have toilets at stations that are not staffed due to vandalism, and people going in to take drugs or to perform other acts. That is a real concern. Even where the disabled toilets tend to have radar keys—there are still very few of them—I suppose that there is an issue of liability, perhaps, in terms of unmanned stations. Arriva may feel that having a disabled toilet, even with a radar key, is not a very safe option because it cannot take care of the person using it.

[38] **Mr Wiggins:** I must be honest: disabled toilets are very few and far between. Without criticising people too much, they are not very hygienic either. Many disabled people, particularly those who use wheelchairs or crutches have to use mechanical means to go to the bathroom. By not being overly hygienic, you can get infections, which can be quite unpleasant. I have to take alcohol gel with me so that I have to use that as well as trying to wash my hands. It is not something that I like to mention that much, because it is a personal thing. What do I suggest? Because I cannot clean myself or have to use unhygienic facilities, I have to take what preventative measures that I can. I might smell a lot of alcohol, but I have not been drinking, I have just been cleaning my hands.

[39] **David Lloyd:** I think that we have covered the question about the lack of accessible travel information. I will now move on to the issue of staffing and assistance, which you have also touched on.

9.20 a.m.

[40] You have mentioned in your paper that 83 per cent of stations are unstaffed. We have heard that one of the consequences of that level of unstaffedness, shall we say, is the lack of toilets. Are there any other consequences to the fact that 83 per cent of stations are unstaffed in Wales?

[41] **Mr Carter:** Aside from the toilets issue, the other issue is that if you have a station where the platform is not the same height as the train—we estimate that at 10 per cent of stations people cannot get off the train onto the platform—there will be no-one around to assist you. You speak of 83 per cent of stations being unstaffed, but only six stations across Wales are staffed for 24 hours a day, or very close to 24 hours, namely Carmarthen, Cardiff Central, Bridgend, Swansea, Newport and Holyhead, obviously, because of the ferry port. In a reasonably sized station such as Wrexham, which is staffed the vast majority of the time, and normally those staffing hours coincide with the train times, if the train is running late, which so often happens, and if someone is reliant on there being a member of staff to assist them at



the other end or to make sure that the lift has not been switched off, which unfortunately so often happens, the station which is technically classed as being accessible suddenly becomes inaccessible. I know of a gentleman from Wrexham who is one of our members who, on several occasions going back on the last train or the second to last train, has been urged to get off at Shrewsbury and try to get a taxi to Wrexham because the train operator cannot guarantee that by the time that the train gets there, although it may be only five minutes late, there will be anyone at the station to assist him, and, crucially, the lift would have been switched off because of security issues and vandalism.

[42] **Eleanor Burnham:** If I may interject, the manning of Wrexham station finishes at 7.30 p.m., and you are right that the train is often late.

[43] **Ann Jones:** Dai, are you happy?

[44] **David Lloyd:** I am deliriously happy, Chair.

[45] **Ann Jones:** Thank you. We will move on then. Mohammad, do you want to ask your set of questions?

[46] **Mohammad Asghar:** My question, Joseph, is regarding the assisted passenger reservation service. Can you tell the committee about the assisted passenger reservation service? What is good about the service and what are its limitations? How could it be improved?

[47] **Mr Carter:** I am afraid that this is an area on which we have not done much work. I am afraid that I am unable to comment on that, but I am not sure if my colleague has any comments to make.

[48] **Ms Berrigan:** There was a Passenger Focus survey on assisted passenger rail services in 2008, and it found that when a third of disabled passengers who had booked the service turned up, there was no-one there to meet them even though they had booked 24 hours in advance. You can only book for the station that you start from and not the station that you arrive at, which is something else to consider. There is also the fact that you have to give 24 hours notice in advance, which means that you cannot be spontaneous—you have to plan. If a non-disabled person said, 'Today, I am going on a day trip to Bath', they can just go to Bath. If a wheelchair user or someone with mobility problems says, 'I have to go to Bath and I have to book the staff there to meet me', that takes away their independence. It must be fully inclusive, and to have independent living you have to rely on staff to be there, and it is not guaranteed at the end. The staff of the assisted passenger rail service—the people who man the phones—have not been given disability training, and they sometimes provide the wrong information. For example, I know of someone who booked a train from Cardiff, and when the disabled person got there, the train was old rolling stock and it was not disabled accessible. The staff managed to get the person in the wheelchair on, but the person in the wheelchair did not have use of an accessible toilet and could not access the buffet car, because that person could not move. So, it is good that there is the service, and it is good that the train companies realise that disabled people need assistance, but it does not always work. There is a communication breakdown between the people manning the phones and the train stations. Often, there is not smooth communication, and that needs to be sorted out.

[49] **Mohammad Asghar:** Thank you. It is a real concern. It is alarming that people trying to travel are suffering in this way. It is a public transport system that is not suitable for the disabled community. To give another example, a few weeks ago, I booked a train to travel to Swansea on a Thursday. It was paid for by credit card and confirmed on the Monday. On the Tuesday morning, the meeting in Swansea was cancelled, so I went to the station that evening, and would you believe, Chair, that they would not refund my money? I am able-

bodied. You make a note of this. If a disabled person booked a seat for a return journey and then had to cancel, they would not have their money refunded. I know that this question does not relate to you; I will put it to the railway authorities. However, you should know that if, for any reason, including your health, you change your mind about travelling, you will not get a refund.

[50] **Ann Jones:** That is the same for all of us, however. Many of us have been caught out, having booked tickets, when we find that we need to change the train that we catch. You then have to pay the full fare again. Turning to Rhyon again, I think that you said that you can book assistance only from the station where your journey begins. What if you have to change trains to meet a connecting service? Does the assistance follow you down the line, or do you have to start the whole process again at that connecting station?

[51] **Ms Berrigan:** You have to start the process again.

[52] **Mohammad Asghar:** You recommend that improvements should be made to communication, which is very important, between APRS booking staff, railway staff and train company staff. Please tell us about these problems and how you would like to see them addressed.

[53] **Ms Berrigan:** First, getting the correct information would be good. Say you want to catch the 9 a.m. train from Cardiff to London. The person on the phone might say that the train will be accessible, that it will have disabled toilets and so on, but when you arrive you might find that the train does not have those facilities. Sometimes that is unavoidable, because trains break down and so on, but if it is a regular service, information should be up-to-date so that the disabled person has the right information from the people on the phones, who need to be in contact with train stations and train companies so that they know exactly what type of trains are running.

[54] **Mohammad Asghar:** Finally—I think that I know what your answer will be—how common a problem is it for disabled people to feel that station staff have been unhelpful or rude?

[55] **Mr Wiggins:** Perhaps I could comment on that. I must be truthful and say that I do not use the train as much as I used to, and that is because you cannot be spontaneous. You must find out exactly where you are going, whether the station you want to arrive at is manned, and what the access is like. I was going to say that I tend to jump in my car, but I do not do that very much now either. However, I drive more than I would like to drive. I enjoy using the train; it is a good mode of transport. However, as I said, you cannot be spontaneous, because you must find out what the facilities are in advance. In fairness, I always found most of the staff to be quite helpful and quite kind. Obviously, there will be the odd one or two who are unhelpful. Some people see a wheelchair and feel a bit intimidated. They will not go to offer help, because they think that they might do something wrong. However, in truth, I have always found most of the staff to be quite helpful.

9.30 a.m.

[56] **Ms Berrigan:** I will read the comments of one of the members of Disability Wales on the point of how rude the staff can be. She has been put off travelling alone by train, because she was treated as an inconvenience to society. She had booked assistance in advance, and asked a guard for help with her luggage, but the reply was ‘What do you think I am—social services?’ On another occasion, she asked for help with her luggage, and was told ‘Sorry, madam, we do not have porters any more’, and was left alone to juggle the heavy luggage. That is quite a common occurrence judging from our members’ comments.

[57] **Ann Jones:** We are looking at accessibility at railway stations for people with a disability, but I have seen mothers with prams struggle to get off trains while guards or ticket collectors stand and watch. We must put this issue into context. I agree with you, Mr Wiggins, that bad members of staff are very few in number and that the majority of staff are very helpful, but, as Rhyan was saying, those who have not been given equality awareness training sometimes feel that they do not want to help in case they say or do something wrong. Travellers in general could relate to the last few questions. Oscar talked about problems with booking tickets; if able-bodied people are experiencing problems, it is going to be twice as difficult for somebody with a mobility problem, a hearing impairment or a lack of understanding. That is the issue that we are trying to tease out, and these are the concerns that we will put to the railway companies on your behalf.

[58] Sorry—I have gone on. We now come to Joyce's questions.

[59] **Joyce Watson:** Thank you for your papers; they were enlightening. What do you think might be done to publicise the assistance that is available for disabled travellers? You have already mentioned that there are issues with this, so what do you think could be done to improve the situation?

[60] **Mr Wiggins:** As alluded to in the tale of my trip with the BBC, the lady from Arriva Trains Wales said that the company had a care line, but, when asked for the number, replied that she did not know it. She knew that she was coming to meet me and the BBC, and I would have thought that she would have been prepared. I went there for answers; if I meet somebody from a rail company I would expect them to know who I am, to know what my condition is and whether I need assistance. I found it amazing that they could be unprepared. Arriva Trains Wales, Network Rail and the other companies—the leasing companies—need to publicise the assistance that they offer, as they do not seem to be doing so. Disabled people, and those with hearing difficulties, tend to be pushed to one side; we are a bit of an inconvenience. The companies do not do the things that they should, or the things that they are required to do.

[61] **Ms Berrigan:** Many disabled people buy their tickets online these days, but thetrainline.com has no information about the assisted passengers reservation service. The only information that I could find online was from the disabled persons transport advisory committee; I do not think that many disabled travellers have heard of it. I had to go specifically to that site, as it is not included on mainstream sites such as the National Rail Enquiries website; I had to go to a specialist disabled site to find that information. Not all disabled people can access the phone for information, as they might have speech impediments or are hard of hearing. I do not think that there is a specific minicom line for that number, but do not quote me on that. It is not mentioned when you book a ticket, and it should be—you should not have to find it somewhere else.

[62] **Mr Carter:** I will echo that point: it should be there. As I said earlier, the information is on the Arriva website, but it is difficult to find. It takes some digging to find it, but it should be there. Within its stations, Arriva has clearly spent a lot of money on its own marketing—it has amusing posters on Rush Gordon and so forth—but you never see any posters advertising disabled access. As Tony said before, there is a sense that disabled people are not Arriva's core customer group and that they are, therefore, not a priority, while so-called able-bodied commuters clearly are. That suggests that disabled people are regarded as second-class citizens. The company could do more on its own site and on other sites, like thetrainline.com, but it clearly does not. We know already that very few stations have staff, but you would expect the ones that are staffed to have the information to hand, so that if someone turned up spontaneously for a journey, which is their right, they could be given the information there and then. However, that is not the reality. That goes back to training, as you mentioned before, Chair.

[63] **Eleanor Burnham:** Would you like to see some leaflets being produced? Some people are online, but some people are not. When I go to Wrexham station, there is often a queue of people booking in advance. There are leaflets available on all kinds of things, but I have never seen a leaflet about anything to do with disability access. Would that not be something that you would like?

[64] **Mr Carter:** That is a very good suggestion, Eleanor. Obviously, they would have to be in a variety of different formats to please everyone. Those are things that cost money—paper print does tend to cost money—but would help a lot of people who turn up at the station, particularly those who have become increasingly disabled due to age, who are not very technically minded and not very good with computers. As the Chair alluded to previously, this is not just about disabled people; it is also about parents with pushchairs. That is something that I have found out about over the last eight months. You do not think about these things until the baby arrives, and suddenly you realise that they are very difficult.

[65] **Ann Jones:** Babies bring a lot of pleasure but also a lot of headaches. Joyce, would you like to carry this discussion forward?

[66] **Joyce Watson:** Yes. We have talked about publicising the assistance and about information that is available. What other information that is not currently publicised or available, but that might affect the accessibility of railway stations to disabled travellers, should be included?

[67] **Ms Berrigan:** This is something that was not broadly advertised, but in the last six months or so, Network Rail has added Stations Made Easy to its website. That allows disabled passengers to map out their journeys and to see the setup of a particular station. That is for the whole country, not just for Wales. That is good because you get pictorial information for a certain area, and you can navigate around a certain spot or a particular station. I found that very useful. However, this was not advertised broadly; it just appeared. I also found that it was not immediately obvious on the site, but it is there. It is a good step in the right direction, but you would not know about it unless you were looking for it.

[68] **Joyce Watson:** Okay. Do you have any other suggestions?

[69] **Mr Wiggins:** It is difficult. As I said, I cannot be spontaneous when I use the train, so I tend to use the train from a manned station to a manned station. I do not use the train as much as I would like to because of that reason. I cannot imagine Network Rail or the train companies increasing the amount of personnel that they use at the stations, because of costs. That is the reason that a lot of disabled people do not use the rail network; they should use the rail network, because it is a far better way of travelling than using the car.

9.40 a.m.

[70] **Mr Carter:** We have already touched on the fact that core information is available, but is difficult to find. If it were available in paper form, that would be quite useful. There is one thing that is not currently available that could perhaps be provided. Arriva's main publication on disabled access covers the entire network and is all encompassing. Perhaps when there are publications on specific routes—such as the Merthyr line, the Rhymney line, the Heart of Wales line or the Cambrian line—information could be provided on which stations are accessible and which are not. Disabled people could then pick up that information; the publications currently exclude them, because they do not state which stations they can or cannot use. If a simple reference was made to the accessibility of each station in those publications, that would allow disabled people to use these publications and use the service.

[71] **Joyce Watson:** You have called for the Welsh Assembly Government to produce an action plan to prioritise the railway stations that are most in need of accessibility improvements. What might such an action plan achieve, given the limited nature of devolved powers in this area?

[72] **Mr Carter:** I take the point that this is not a devolved matter as such, but, since 2006, the UK Government's 10-year strategy, 'Railways for All', has been passporting money in the direction of Wales. It is a £370 million scheme. Most of that money is for large infrastructure projects, and, obviously, the nature of Welsh stations is that they are not particularly large, except for Cardiff, so it was clear most of that money would not come in our direction, but there was a £7 million-a-year pot for small stations, and Wales is full of small stations. We felt that without the Welsh Assembly Government having a strategy to set its own priorities and lobby on behalf of the nation it was difficult to see how we would compete with the hundreds of stations across England. Some research was, very kindly, commissioned by an Assembly Member not in this room via a request to the Members' research service, and it showed that, in the first three years, only £400,000 was spent on Welsh stations. We estimated, on a population basis or Barnett-formula basis, that you would expect that £1 million would be spent in Wales, but in the first year, 2006, the spend on Welsh stations was as low as £45,000. Clearly, there are improvements and some of this money is flowing in the direction of Wales—it certainly got better in 2009—but the point of the strategy was that the Welsh Assembly Government is the Government that has its eyes and ears on Wales, and knows what needs to be done with Welsh transport, so it would be better for it to have a strategy to fight the corner for Welsh stations.

[73] **Joyce Watson:** How could disabled people play a part in improving the accessibility of railway stations?

[74] **Mr Carter:** Through consultation, mainly; that would be my thinking, from an MS Society perspective. The Welsh Assembly Government, like the National Assembly for Wales, is very good at consultations—we are often asked to contribute, predominantly on health issues. Although rail is not a fully devolved issue, the Minister works closely with Arriva Trains Wales on an operational basis, so we feel there should be a greater role for disabled people as part of that. Passenger Focus Cymru has a role in this, but there should also be a specific role for disabled people through a large, pan-Wales disabled group—not necessarily a charity such as the MS Society, but a large group such as Disability Wales or the Wales Council for Voluntary Action.

[75] **Ms Berrigan:** I do not think that consultation is enough. I think that you need to actively engage with local disabled people. I know of a local access group that is involved in the planning improvements at Newport train station. Something similar also happened in Aberdyfi, where the local disabled access group assisted in improvements. Access groups are under utilised; their opinions are listened to, but I do not think that they are fully understood. It is about more than paper-based consultation; it is about visiting local access groups, and not ignoring them, because they have a wealth of access information. They should be used more. At the moment, they are not being used enough.

[76] **Joyce Watson:** Is there a role for disabled groups, whether access groups or other fora, to help with staff training and raising staff awareness?

[77] **Mr Wiggins:** That is a reasonable suggestion, because who knows the needs of disabled people better than disabled people themselves? We work with care homes to help train some of their staff with regard to the needs of certain disabled people. As the Chair alluded to earlier, it is about staff involvement, and staff are not being trained fully to deal with disabled people. So, it is about staff involvement. As I said, you sometimes come across

a member of staff who will back away from you because he or she is not sure what to do to help you.

[78] **Ms Berrigan:** Disabled people are the best people to advise on access issues. However, many access groups are folding due to a lack of funding, which is a shame because their wealth of knowledge is disappearing. If they were funded adequately for the information services that they provide in relation to accessibility, then they would be able to do more. They would have a bigger input and say if they had more money to do it.

[79] **Eleanor Burnham:** Do we need to help society in general to ensure that our youngsters are much more aware of disabilities and how to cope with them? Should we guard against what I call 'elf and safety', because people sometimes lurk behind that? You said that you felt that people are sometimes intimidated or scared of doing things wrong. Is that to do with attitudes?

[80] **Mr Wiggins:** It is definitely about attitudes, because many people are scared by disabled people. I used to play a lot of rugby years ago—not much now, mind you—and when I went to a local rugby club I saw a chap, a school teacher, who I had not seen for a long time. I was using my walking stick at the time, and when he put out his hand to shake mine he asked, 'What's wrong, Tony? Have you hurt your leg?' I replied, 'No, I've got MS', and he pulled his hand away. He was intimidated, so we need more awareness training.

[81] **Mr Carter:** It is a very good suggestion to raise awareness at school level, because people's perceptions, stereotypes and prejudices are built at an early age. A lot has been done across the board in Wales to improve issues with regard to racism and sexual discrimination in particular, so getting children to come face to face with disability is a good idea. The Newport branch of the MS Society goes into sixth-form colleges in the area, which are very good at welcoming groups. Teenagers then come face to face with them and learn about the condition at first hand so that they can, as Tony said, try to get past the fear of some conditions being contagious, when they are not, and get past the fear that disabled people can break if you touch them, and realise that they are real human beings.

9.50 a.m.

[82] **Ms Berrigan:** I agree totally. If you catch them young, the fear would disappear, and disability would just be seen as a normal part of everyday life. I can give you an example. I have a little cousin, and I have visited her ever since she was born. To her, I am just someone who happens to be deaf. She is now two years old and she knows that I have to follow the subtitles on the television and that is normal to her. Children do not think, 'You're deaf and that is negative'. It is just part of who I am. If you catch them when they are small, then it is seen a part of everyday life. It is as normal as having brown or blue eyes. It is about understanding. If you catch them when they are small, they are not prejudiced. Once people become prejudiced, it is difficult to change that.

[83] **Ann Jones:** That brings us nicely to the end of your session. We are just about on time. I thank you for your papers and for your oral evidence. You will receive a written copy of the transcript to check for accuracy. You have given us a lot of information to look at for our report. Thank you for coming here this morning. I know that you will follow the development of this inquiry with interest. Thank you, Rhyan, Joseph and Tony, for coming in today.

[84] We will now have a 10-minute break.

*Gohiriwyd y cyfarfod rhwng 9.51 a.m. a 10.01 a.m.  
The meeting adjourned between 9.51 a.m. and 10.01 a.m.*

[85] **Ann Jones:** I remind Members who have turned on their mobile phones during the short break to switch them off again, please. We will carry on with our inquiry into the accessibility of railway stations. It is a pleasure to invite Andrea Gordon, the policy manager for Guide Dogs for the Blind, John Welsman, the transport policy officer for Guide Dogs for the Blind, and Norman Moore, the director of the Wales Council for Deaf People. You are all very welcome.

[86] We had an interesting session this morning with Disability Wales and Multiple Sclerosis Society Cymru and we intend to carry on our inquiry. We have had papers from you, so, if it is okay with you, we will go straight into questions. I would like to start with the first one, if that is all right. Perhaps you could tell us about the impact that the inaccessibility of railway stations has on your members and the way in which it affects their personal and working lives. Andrea, do you want to start, or John?

[87] **Ms Gordon:** I am happy to start.

[88] **Ann Jones:** Fine.

[89] **Ms Gordon:** There were a number of quotes in the paper that we gave to the committee—and thank you for the opportunity to come to speak to you this morning. In discussing the main issues for blind and partially sighted people, I am talking about guide dog owners and people who do not use guide dogs. It is probably worth saying at this stage that guide dogs work with all visually impaired people, so whenever we discuss these issues with you, we are talking about people who use a guide dog for mobility purposes, but also people who use a long cane and who may choose to have a sighted guide on certain journeys. So, there are a number of options.

[90] With regard to the impact of the difficulty that we have in accessing rail stations, it is hard to put into words how intimidating some rail stations can be—either because they are extremely busy, like Cardiff or maybe Swansea, or because they are extremely quiet. So, there can be problems at both ends of the spectrum. If it is very busy, then the environment is more difficult to negotiate; if it is quiet, it is extremely difficult to find help. So, both of those extremes present a problem to visually impaired people. We have tried to reflect that in the evidence that we have submitted to you.

[91] **Mr Moore:** Thank you for allowing us to give evidence in this committee. First, I would like to explain something. You see with me today a lip speaker because my first language is spoken language; that is, spoken English, not British Sign Language. If I say to you, 'I am deaf', you say, 'I will provide an interpreter'. That is not what I want. I have to explain to you that there are over 400,000 people in Wales who, like me, have a hearing disability and, like me, whose first language is spoken language. That means, therefore, that when we interface with public services we have a problem understanding what is going on. With regard to the accessibility of railway stations, the problem is interfacing with personnel. They do not know how to talk to us; they do not know about our disability. It is invisible, and that brings the problem.

[92] **Ann Jones:** Thank you for that. We are talking about the accessibility, or inaccessibility, of railway stations. Could you highlight the difficulties that your members find in getting to the stations, such as getting off a bus and across a concourse, and how they manage that?

[93] **Ms Gordon:** Myself or Norman?

[94] **Ann Jones:** Would you like to go first on all of the questions, Andrea?

[95] **Ms Gordon:** Yes; that is fine. I just did not want to interrupt.

[96] **Ann Jones:** If you go first on all of the questions, and John comes in behind you, we can then go to Norman. Is that all right?

[97] **Ms Gordon:** Yes. In terms of accessing the approach to railway stations, I will use Cardiff as an example because it is probably a station that you are all familiar with. There are a number of bus lanes—for the want of a better word—across the front of the station entrance. They are an absolute nightmare for a visually impaired person to negotiate. It is very difficult to know which direction the buses are coming from and are going to. There is inconsistent use of tactile paving. At some points, there is a tactile indicator to tell you that you are stepping out into the road, but at other points there is no such indicator. It is quite misleading. There are also a number of different buses going in different directions. You would have to be taught by someone, which would be a rehabilitation officer who works with visually impaired people, if you had the fortune to eventually get that support from someone in that profession. You would have to be taught how to manage that situation. If you arrive by taxi, it is slightly easier, but the whole frontage of Cardiff station is quite wide. If you can imagine it, there are a number of doors that you can go through. Depending on which door you use, you then have to find the ticket barrier. It is a very wide, open concourse, and there is no navigational aid, even to find help. By the way, the customer helpdesk is only open for restricted hours in Cardiff, as we mentioned in our paper. The whole approach to the station, and how you get to the point where you might get help is, in a sense, very tricky. It is a good example.

[98] **Mr Welsman:** I think that we have to put journeys for blind or partially sighted people into a context, where we use the whole journey experience so that you, as a committee, are not only thinking about when a blind or partially sighted person arrives at a station. It starts with planning to depart the house, getting from the house to the station, getting from the station to where they have to go, and getting to the other end. That builds up a degree of anxiety and stress, which then obviously is exacerbated by some of the concerns that Andrea has mentioned. The other point to take into consideration is that no two stations are alike. If I turn up at a station in Wales, which I may be less familiar with, I do not know what the layout will be like. I do not know where the platforms are in relation to the car park, and I do not know where the booking services are in relation to where I am stood at the moment. The third part of that is the uniformity of things such as blister paving, which Andrea pointed out, and which we might use for kerbsides at some station platforms, but not at others. For example, you may be very familiar with platform 2 at a station, for example, but there may be the odd exception when you have to come in on platform 3, which may be less used and the tactile warning strip across the platform has not been implemented. The danger then is that you think that you are familiar with the environment, and you are suddenly in a completely alien environment because you have not been prepared for the change of platform use.

10.10 a.m.

[99] **Mr Moore:** Normally, a person with a hearing disability has no problem accessing the railway station itself. It is when you get to the booking office that you have a problem. They do not understand you, you do not understand them and they do not know how to deal with it. You want to get somewhere, but they will not let you.

[100] **Ann Jones:** I am sure that you never get stopped anywhere, Norman—you are a very forceful man.



[101] **Eleanor Burnham:** Why can we not have a Braille station plan? Would that be a feasible notion at stations? I had not realised quite how difficult it is until you described it so eloquently just now; it must be terrifying.

[102] **Ms Gordon:** You cannot underestimate the impact of anxiety on a blind or partially sighted person, so you are spot on there. The difficulty with tactile plans is how accessible they are to vision-impaired people, so it is about how they are produced, disseminated or given out to people. What we would be looking for would be more consistent use of tactile indicators of the infrastructure. For example, in Cardiff station, there could be a tactile guidance strip from the entrance, which does not have to cost a lot—it could be laid in the form of tiling. There are indicators and technical guidance for this, even for inside buildings.

[103] **Eleanor Burnham:** Like a yellow brick road.

[104] **Ms Gordon:** Yes, but in a tactile format and a coloured format, so that it would stand out for someone with some sight. So, even those sorts of things would be of great help.

[105] **Mr Welsman:** The other thing to realise is that, statistically, 80 per cent of the blind and partially sighted population are of retirement age or over, so it is a degenerative condition. Unlike Andrea and I, who have come through the system and who are blind from birth or from near birth, and who have learnt all the methods of being blind, as it were, those older persons have to acquire those methods. For example, many people think that tactile maps are fantastic, and I do not underestimate the importance of tactile maps in some environments where people may be very familiar with the environment, and it is just an aide memoire. The difficulty faced by many blind and partially sighted people is that they have no concept of depth and distance, and the inter-relationship of environmental cues. So, if you give them a tactile map, it means nothing to them until someone has explained that to them. So, you would not only be giving them a tactile map at the station, but you would also need someone to walk them through it to give them some idea of the inter-relationship between the map and what they are doing. The difficulty then is that if I was coming into Swansea station and I only come in there once or twice a year, I do not remember that and I am back to square one again once I have come back to that map. So, for someone who is doing a regular journey, that map is fantastic and may be a good aide memoire, but for someone who is making an irregular journey, it would help, but if you are rushing for a train as you may do in the morning with five minutes to go, you are not going to spend the next half hour trying to interpret that map just to work out that you need platform 2.

[106] **Ms Gordon:** It is about that infrastructure stuff, really, and the consistency of approach. In Wales, it would be excellent if we had a policy that would mean that when money is spent on the station improvement plan, part of that spend would be committed to not only ramps—which we also support, as they provide access for people with physical disabilities, and we would never want to take away from that—but to ensuring that all platforms have a tactile edging strip in an appropriate format because platforms are so dangerous. That would be a huge step forward.

[107] **Mr Welsman:** As difficult as it might be, a degree of uniformity is needed across stations in terms of some infrastructure elements. They would ease the difficulties quite a lot, as would the analogy of the yellow brick road, tactile indicators on the edge of platforms, safety indicators, help points being in the appropriate places on each platform so that they are easy to find, and audible announcements to give people plenty of notice if they need to change platforms. So, there are many things that are very difficult because, as we have made clear before, stations are not all the same, and we have an infrastructure that has been in place for 150 years; it is not going to change overnight. However, if any improvement to stations and platforms were done with that degree of uniformity, it would make things easier. It would not solve the problems, but it would go some way towards helping.

[108] **Eleanor Burnham:** Brilliant. You have answered my first formal question. Would you say that you should be involved in any design changes? I remember that they spent about £8 million on Chester station, and then they spent about another £15 million, but I do not think that anything was done to improve accessibility for disabled people.

[109] **Ms Gordon:** Yes. On Swansea, I saw from the Deputy First Minister's response to questions in the Enterprise and Learning Committee that the changes to Swansea station were commended for being excellent. Again, I would not want to take away from any of the changes that make life better for people who have physical disabilities; we are not about that. However, I am involved very much with the disability community in Swansea, and we were not consulted on those changes. So, visually impaired people in Swansea were not asked what they wanted to happen in that station. Spend the money, but let us spend the money well.

[110] **Mr Welsman:** As a national organisation, that is our general experience quite a lot of the time. We are often asked at the last moment, after the budget has been spent. People think that they know what accessibility is about—putting in accessible toilets, lifts and so on—but they do not think about some of the more basic things. Consider something such as lighting. Better lighting not only helps partially sighted people, but makes people feel safer generally on the platform. Better signage helps partially sighted people because those who can see it can read it more easily, but it also makes it easier for everyone to see the information. Simple things such as those have a huge impact on wider society. It is almost a matter of stepping away from disability and realising that these are things that help everybody.

[111] **Eleanor Burnham:** Absolutely. You have answered most of my question. I am sorry, Chair, as I have wandered over into someone else's question. I apologise profusely. However, you mentioned signage and so on. Does Norman agree that even those of us without hearing impairments cannot always understand some of the garbled announcements? Does he agree that that is a very difficult situation for him particularly?

[112] **Mr Moore:** Yes. There tend to be issues like that. You want people around you if you are deaf, because you can see people's ears prick up, so you know that an announcement is being made. Once, I was on a train in Paddington station and I was waiting for it to go. On the next platform, there was a train that was also going to Cardiff that was due to leave half an hour later than the one that I was on. It left first, and I could not understand why. I was watching people and I could see that they were paying attention to announcements, so I went to the restaurant car to ask what was happening. The engine had broken down so they had to repair it, but I did not know. So, we have to deal with situations like that. I went onto a platform on the London underground once and there was not another soul on the platform. I could not understand it. One of the workers came up to me and asked me what I was doing there, and I said that I was waiting for a train. He told me that there had been an announcement because there was a bomb scare. That sort of thing happens to us a lot. Those are extreme examples, I admit, but they give you an idea.

[113] **Mr Welsman:** Norman raises an important point. I have been in the same situation, where there is suddenly a bomb scare or some other reason why people are asked to depart. Even if you can hear and you know that the train has been evacuated, often there is not a member of staff around to help you, and everyone else has disappeared. If you are lucky, a member of the public may be helpful and take you with them, but then you are in an alien environment because you have stepped off a train that you might be familiar with and gone into another part of the station that you have no clue about, or you may have started a journey that you are not prepared for and you are back to square one.

[114] **Eleanor Burnham:** My last question is about buying tickets using a touch-screen machine. We heard earlier that the height of the machines means that they are not accessible

for someone in a wheelchair. Do you have any pearls of wisdom to offer in that regard?

10.20 a.m.

[115] **Ms Gordon:** Touch screens of any kind present us with quite a lot of problems, for obvious reasons. The option to buy your ticket on the train is essential, as we may not have been able to get a ticket because of the touch screen. We have not yet managed to refer to staff training, but it is absolutely crucial for people to recognise that touch screens present problems for quite a lot of people. That is not just for visually impaired people, but for many others. So, this is about doing things that are better for the majority of our community, and there are concerns about touch screens when they are the only option, particularly in unmanned stations, of which we have a lot in Wales.

[116] **Mr Welsman:** Another difficulty is that, in the UK, we often lead on technology, infrastructure design, and the implementation of elements that are meant to improve travel, or whatever it happens to be. Often, because we have done that, Network Rail will have invested however many millions of pounds in the current automatic touch-screen systems, but the rest of Europe has come along with a fully accessible system that not only has a touch screen but also speaks to you and has tactile buttons—it has all the elements needed to provide us with a fully interactive system. Of course, we have now spent the money and it will be another 15 or 20 years before we can change the infrastructure here to reach the same level as that in the rest of Europe, which took perhaps five years out to look at the systems available.

[117] **Ms Gordon:** In the Deputy First Minister's response to the rail infrastructure report, I saw a request for better dialogue between the Welsh Assembly Government and Network Rail, which is absolutely essential. I am very disappointed to note that that was not taken on as a commitment by the Government. That would be desirable, because this is about how we spend that money.

[118] **Eleanor Burnham:** Sometimes, if you buy a ticket on the train and not in the station, there are issues regarding higher prices or difficulties because the staff are apparently not supposed to issue tickets on the train. Have you come across that?

[119] **Ms Gordon:** Yes. It would be our wish to buy a ticket in the station, using a completely accessible ticket-purchasing machine, but we have come across issues. Occasionally, it works in your favour if you accidentally happen to get into a first-class carriage. [*Laughter.*] You sometimes get the luxury of being in first class, which is very useful for a visually impaired person, because then you do not have to negotiate your way down to the buffet car and try to carry a cup of coffee through the train.

[120] **Mr Welsman:** The implication of that is that you can often buy a ticket online at a significantly reduced price, but online purchasing is a significant problem for many blind and partially sighted people. So, there are advantages for the sighted population, or for the able-bodied population, that blind and partially sighted people might be denied purely by how the infrastructure works for them. I do not know whether you would say that that is a case under the Disability Discrimination Act 2005. I doubt it somehow but, to some degree, you can see where the inequalities lie. However, as you rightly pointed out, if I could buy a ticket once I got on the train, it would possibly not be at the discounted rate that it would have been had I purchased it through the Network Rail website three days before.

[121] **Ms Gordon:** On the use of online booking, as John pointed out, many blind and partially sighted people are in the older age group and, among the many challenges of sight loss, another challenge to overcome is how to use a computer when you have so many other things to deal with. You have to think about the cost of the equipment, the software that you would need, and the training to use it, all of which makes that a difficult option.

[122] **David Lloyd:** On accessible toilets—and I am sorry to bring this up, but I have to follow the script—what difficulties do people who have hearing or visual impairments experience as a result of the lack of accessible toilets at railway stations? Andrea, would you like to kick off, followed by John and Norman?

[123] **Ms Gordon:** There was a quote in our evidence to you about a lady who had had some help or wanted help from a member of staff to find a toilet. Being in this position myself, I know that if you happen to be fortunate enough to get help from a member of staff, you might have had to book that in advance. You may be able to get someone to show you where the toilet is but, for blind and partially sighted people, locating facilities such as toilets and cafes often depends on the help of other people. To be totally honest, if there is no-one around, because either the help that you have booked has not turned up—and that does happen—or the person helping you does not stay with you, and you are waiting for a train for some time, you are on your own, really, and so you end up asking a member of the public to help you to find the facilities. That is the real world. That happens to a lot of blind and partially sighted people. There is no standard approach to siting toilets or cafes. The final point is that the accessible toilet is sometimes inside the main group of toilets; it is not separated and, even if it is, it is often used to store the cleaning equipment. So, there are a number of issues there.

[124] **Mr Welsman:** Just to add to that, I often travel with my wife, but if we go to a place where we have to go into the single-sex toilets to find an accessible toilet, of course, she cannot come in with me. My experience is that if you ask a member of the public out of the blue to take you or guide you to the toilet, there is a bit of trauma that goes on there. Toilets are not something that we find easy to deal with, and so people wonder what it is you are going to ask them to do to help you to go to the toilet. *[Laughter.]* That is genuine. As a youngster going to pubs with friends, they were horrified that I needed to be guided to the toilet. So, there is some social reality to that.

[125] Another issue is to do with the layouts of toilets, because toilets are sometimes unhygienic. For me as a blind person, I often have to use my hands to locate what I need to do in the toilet. Colour and contrast is an issue for people who have some degree of useful vision. Often, the toilets are sparkling white with no contrast between the fixtures and the walls, so it is difficult to see what is where. Often, as Andrea quite rightly says, they are littered with bins, baby-changing equipment or other things, which all have their purpose and use, but which sometimes make the whole process difficult.

[126] **Mr Moore:** Most stations in Wales do not have toilets anyway. That is a big issue, but there is something else here. In some of the manned stations, the mainline ones, the toilets are locked and you have to go to ask for the key in a booking office. So, the same issue applies as with buying a ticket. There is a problem with that.

[127] **David Lloyd:** The next question is to Norman only. What improvements would you like to see in the provision of visual information for rail travellers?

[128] **Mr Moore:** At the moment, we have visual indicator equipment. Most stations have them, but they are not always up to date and sometimes they are broken. The big issue is when there is a delay. The indicator may be able to tell you that there is a delay, but not how long it will be. You might be waiting and someone may shout out, 'Are you okay?', but you do not know. There is nothing like that at all. However, as I said, most stations are not manned anyway, so I suppose that everyone else is in the same boat as we are. To be honest, we are talking about equality. It does not matter whether you are deaf or hard of hearing in this situation. They need to improve the visual indicator equipment. We have missed the point here.

10.30 a.m.

[129] You asked what improvements I would like to see. It is about visual indicators and contact with people. If we do not believe what is on the indicator, we want to ask a member of staff, and we believe that all people who work in the public sector, all people who provide services to the public, and all front-line staff who integrate with the public should have compulsory communication tactics training. It is not about learning another language; it is about being able to communicate effectively. That is the important thing.

[130] **Ms Gordon:** I support that completely. We would agree with that.

[131] **Mr Welsman:** I remind the committee, though, that it is not only deaf people, such as those Norman represents, who would benefit from visual information. Quite a significant proportion of the blind and partially sighted population can still see information boards, so it is as important for them as it is for deaf people.

[132] **David Lloyd:** Moving on, I have a similar question on a different sensory perception to that which Andrea and John have been talking about. What improvements would you like to see in the provision of audible information for travellers with visual impairments?

[133] **Ms Gordon:** On stations, to ensure that it is clear and accurate, which I would say is perhaps generally the case at mainline stations. There is a whole piece of work to do around unmanned stations, however—there are huge safety issues there. If you happen to get on to the wrong train, which happens to most blind and partially sighted people at some point in their lives, once you are on it, you cannot get off, so you are reliant on that information. In Wales, we have been talking about the quality of on-board train information as well, and trying to ensure that the message is loud and clear, and that there is a consistent approach to the provision of audio information on our quieter lines, especially rural services, and particularly late at night, which is when you need it even more. Even with the First Great Western service, if you are on a train coming back to Wales from London at 8 p.m., 9 p.m. or 10 p.m. at night, the announcements get quieter and less consistent the further west you go—absurdly.

[134] **Mr Welsman:** The only thing that I would add to Andrea's comments is that those announcements need to be timely as well. A lot of blind and partially sighted people's anxiety and stress comes from announcements being made 30 seconds before the train comes in. I appreciate, from a technical standpoint, that sometimes the train operator or Network Rail have no option but to make that announcement when they do, but they then possibly need to allow more time before the train departs.

[135] The second point, which is really important, and I would think would also apply to people with a combined sight and hearing loss, is that sometimes the announcements are made by people who are not competent with microphones, and either speak too close to them or too far away from them. My last experience of announcements at Crewe involved a lady with a lovely local accent, but this was a mainline station, and she was barely intelligible to anyone who did not speak the local dialect. That is no exaggeration. It was problematic, because I was desperate to hear what she was announcing, and which platform she was talking about, and it was really difficult. On my local train service there is a fantastic Nigerian train manager, but, again, his accent is so strong that it is difficult for some people with a hearing impairment to understand what he is saying. I am not saying that he should not be doing that job, but possibly that he could use more of the automated train announcements, rather than feeling that he has to announce something on the microphone, and maybe he could learn to speak more clearly and precisely so that the announcements are more understandable.

[136] **Eleanor Burnham:** Has anyone been on a train where it is announced that the next stop is something or other, but you are already there? Or the other way around.

[137] **Ms Gordon:** Yes, and it is a particular problem if you are trying to get out of your seat, picking up your coat and everything else—and perhaps with a guide dog, as well. You are trying to find your way to the door, and physically opening it yourself—these are all part of the experience.

[138] **Mohammad Asghar:** I thank the panel, and especially Andrea. I met you a few months ago in Llandudno, and you can rest assured that I have already tabled your question to the Minister. I mention that because we are talking about railways, and Andrea was concerned that, in Wales, there is no system in the buses to help guide dog travellers with where to drop off and where to pick up. She put that question to me, and it is definitely in the system. An answer will come from the Ministers.

[139] As you have already said in your answer, we know that some stations in Wales are unstaffed and that some are staffed. Can you tell us about the difficulty that this causes for people with hearing or visual impairments?

[140] **Ms Gordon:** The whole issue of unstaffed stations is very problematic. In my paper to you, I mentioned a policy that Arriva Trains Wales has. If you telephone to book assistance and you explain that you have a visual impairment, Arriva has a policy—according to what it tells me—whereby it provides transport. If your intention is to get off at an unmanned station, it will take you to the nearest manned station and then provide transport on to your chosen destination. Does that make sense? It will provide you with transport from the manned station to where you want to be. I think that that is an absolutely superb adjustment, and if it worked I would be delighted. We have done some mystery shopping on this, and we find that responses are inconsistent. It depends on who you speak to. The other day, when I said, ‘I am visually impaired and I intend to get off at Ammanford’, I was told, ‘Ammanford is unmanned. Would you like us to think about another solution?’ However, when we tried the same approach at four other unmanned stations, the visually impaired person was not told of the Arriva offer for alternative transport. There is a policy, which I think is commendable, but it needs to be consistent, clear and known to visually impaired people. It would make a huge difference.

[141] **Mr Welsman:** That is the reality of the APRS. There is no consistency in terms of where you travel. If you are travelling long-distance from Portsmouth Harbour to Cardiff, for example, you may be crossing several boundaries in terms of train operators—although I suspect that it is one train operator that does that—so the APRS may be different, depending on who is operating that service. There is no consistency in the sort of service that a blind or partially sighted person could expect from the APRS in the first place, let alone what local agreements have been made with local train companies.

[142] **Mr Moore:** Could I have the question again, please?

[143] **Ann Jones:** What difficulties do staffed stations and unstaffed stations cause for your members?

[144] **Mr Moore:** We do not have a difficulty with unmanned stations, because there is no physical problem. It is all about communication. In most stations in Wales you cannot guarantee that you will find a train if you step into the station. They are usually few and far between. Sometimes, there is a delay of two hours or more, but you do not know that. So, there is a big lack of information about trains and transport. It is not consistent at all.

[145] **Mohammad Asghar:** Moving away slightly to John’s point about the APRS service, I come from Newport, where you either have to use steps, or take a lift, to enter the main

station. Normally, trains are on platform 3, which is at the other end of the station. Quite often, due to the railway management service or improvement work, there is a last-minute change to the timing for the train arriving at platform 3 and you might have to go to platform 1. I can imagine that the people of your society must be going through a horrendous time there. You may even be missing the trains.

10.40 a.m.

[146] **Mr Welsman:** The difficulty is that the train companies will often encourage us as blind or partially sighted people to use the passenger reservation service so that they make sure that there is assistance there, but, if you are a regular commuter, you do not want to be doing that. If you use Newport station every day, you know it well enough to think that you can get from A to B without that assistance, but that is when you can come unstuck.

[147] **Mohammad Asghar:** How helpful are station staff in providing assistance when a traveller with a hearing or visual impairment has not made a booking in advance?

[148] **Ms Gordon:** You have to book help 24 hours in advance, so there is no real spontaneity there. As John pointed out, many blind and partially sighted people are very competent travellers who do not need help, but if you do need it—I would say that you need it most when the stations to which you are going are not familiar to you—the staff who provide the help, in my experience, are generally helpful. When you make the phone call to book the help, they are generally very helpful. The issue is whether they are always there when you get off the train, because sometimes you can stand and wait and they do not turn up or you wait a long time before they turn up. The other issue is whether they have been trained appropriately in guiding technique. So, how to provide a safe sighted guide to a blind or partially sighted person is another issue.

[149] **Mr Welsman:** The other issue that we face is that you may get a disabled person or another person with what we call reduced mobility—PRM is the current European way of saying things—turning up unannounced. The member of staff who may have been designated to you is suddenly off helping someone else, so you then have the train operator thinking ‘Who do we serve first—the person who has booked it or the person who has not booked it?’ The train operator often has to make those judgments, which can sometimes be quite difficult.

[150] **Mohammad Asghar:** I have a question for Norman. How can the APRS be improved?

[151] **Mr Moore:** What does that stand for?

[152] **Ann Jones:** It means the assisted passenger reservation scheme.

[153] **Mr Moore:** I do not think that hearing impaired people use that kind of service, because the majority do not wave their disability and do not want people to know about it. They feel embarrassed because they cannot understand, and they struggle on. You were talking about buying tickets; I buy my ticket online and I have a disabled railcard, so I get a discount. If I go to a station, I can use that, but I cannot see how you can use it with one of those ticket machines. Given that the majority of hearing impaired people are older—over 60—they would be a bit nervous of using that kind of ticket machine. They fear embarrassing themselves as they get older—it is just acquired hearing loss. They lose it because they are getting older. People think ‘There is this old person’, and it is embarrassing and you fear that you are losing your worth, and you do not like to travel on your own like that because people do not understand the issues. It is difficult and you try to avoid it. I will not go by public transport if I can help it.

[154] So, it is all about training people who work in the industry. They must understand the problems that these people face. It is not their fault that they are losing their hearing, they do not like it very much and they wish they were not, but they cannot help it.

[155] **Mr Welsman:** Chair, if you do not mind, I will answer that last question, because I think that it has a generic influence over all disabled people. The improvements that we would like to see is the consistency that I mooted in my previous answer, namely that it did not matter with the APRS whether you were travelling from or to or in or out of Wales, so that you had a consistent service across all the train operators. I know that the Association of Train Operating Companies is looking at improving the service, and is looking with Network Rail into ways of automating the system. One of Andrea's mystery shopper scenarios involved someone booking a ticket and assistance at the station for 5 a.m.. The information is faxed to the station the night before, but because the first members of staff do not get into the station until 9 a.m., they will not get the fax until then. This is about automating the system and ensuring a degree of autonomy so that I, as a blind person, do not have to worry about where I am going, as I know that I will get a consistent service across the board.

[156] **Ann Jones:** Okay, thank you very much. Joyce, would you like to come in?

[157] **Joyce Watson:** Yes. That leads us on nicely to the next issue. The information published by Arriva Trains on railway stations' accessibility focuses on staffing and wheelchair access. What other accessibility information do you think should be collected and published?

[158] **Ms Gordon:** There are a number of issues there. Let us go back to how blind and partially sighted people get information. Is that what you are asking about, Joyce?

[159] **Joyce Watson:** There is information published by Arriva Trains on the accessibility of railway stations, but it has a narrow focus on staffing and wheelchair access. What additional information do you think should be collected, in the first place, and then published?

[160] **Ms Gordon:** I have looked at this issue in some depth with regard to Wales, because I was coming to talk to the committee today. My conclusion is that very little information is available on how accessible stations are, and when I say 'accessible' I mean how accessible a station is for blind and partially sighted people. I had a look at the Arriva website, using access technology. Both John and I have been blind people for a long time and we are pretty clued up on all the tricks of the trade, as it were. We are very experienced computer users. I had to dig for information, even about the assisted passenger reservation service or what Arriva could do to help. That is pretty much all focused on people with physical disabilities.

[161] Having said that, it is difficult. The point that Norman has made more than once is that this is about diversity and equality for all people. We would never want to take that away; we just want things to be more helpful. If you are blind or partially sighted and you want to make a train journey in Wales, who do you talk to and how do you get information? I do not think that there are answers to those questions at the moment. That is a piece of work that needs to be done with Arriva and any other train operators here. It is a challenge.

[162] **Mr Welsman:** To extend Andrea's point, we looked at that section of Network Rail's website that is meant to give you detailed instructions about the accessibility features of any station in the UK. I looked at some stations, and so did Andrea, and we found that a lot of it is pictorial, which was of limited usefulness to us as blind people. Some of it pointed out that there were facilities at stations, but—

[163] **Ms Roberts:** Excuse me, John, but could you just slow down a little?



[164] **Mr Welsman:** Yes. One of the significant features of the site was that it included descriptions of what is available at a station, such as a cafe, accessible toilets, or a help point. However, for a blind or partially sighted person, there was no indication of where those facilities were in a station.

[165] Lastly, going back to some of the original questions about tactile safety strips across platforms and so forth, knowing that a station has been adapted in that way allows me to feel confident that I can stroll into a station and up to the platform edge, knowing that there will be something there to tell me to stop.

[166] **Ms Gordon:** Let us take Cardiff as an example, as it is a large, mainline station and possibly the busiest one in Wales, although Bangor is quite busy too. Cardiff station is a hugely challenging environment for people with sight loss. It is a very difficult station. There is nothing much there to help, unless you have booked help in advance and it turns up. Otherwise, there is no way of finding out what is there. There is nothing to tell you that anywhere; there is no clear source of information.

10.50 a.m.

[167] **Mr Welsman:** It goes back to the original point that a lot of blind and partially sighted people would get that information from the internet, and that is where the fundamental problem lies.

[168] **Mr Moore:** With published information, I would like to see something similar to what happens at banks and big stores, where you will often find a little ear symbol, which shows that you can get support from people who have been trained. This comes back to the training issue. With railways, you can have a training session for people and keep them up to date. You can publish that little ear symbol next to the station's name. That would be helpful for public information.

[169] **Joyce Watson:** To carry on, what could be done to publicise the assistance available to rail travellers, and how might people with hearing or visual impairments play a part in improving the accessibility of railway stations?

[170] **Ms Gordon:** Guide Dogs for the Blind and the Royal National Institute for Deaf People are currently involved in a piece of work that the Deputy First Minister commissioned. It is a report that will set out recommendations for good practice for all public transport providers—rail, bus and taxi travel. This report will contain good practice recommendations for transport providers. It will also contain a section that is aimed at people with sensory loss—I am sorry, I should have said that the focus of the report is people with sensory impairments—so, it will contain a section that will say, 'If you are blind or partially sighted, these are the things that you might want to find out about'. So, the assisted passenger reservation service will be mentioned in it and I hope that, by that stage, we will have sorted out this issue with Arriva so that we will be able to say, 'If you phone and your destination is unmanned, you will be told how they can help you'. I hope that the good practice and guidance in that report will be implemented by rail and bus operators and that it will contain enough material—that might be a slightly thin section—on guidance that will be of value to blind and partially sighted people.

[171] **Mr Welsman:** As Guide Dogs for the Blind is the primary mobility provider for blind and partially sighted people, we are an organisation that the rail operators, train operating companies and Network Rail—this has started happening with Network Rail—can come to talk to us to ensure that any of the provisions that they could be making are made in co-operation with the relevant organisations. Many of us have pan-disability knowledge, so we will not sit there and say, 'Do this for blind and partially sighted people. We don't care

what anybody else needs'. We have expertise that we can bring to the table. We can save money, because we can be creative in how we think about these things.

[172] One of the comments made at a conference that we had last year is that, often, people only know what they know; they do not know what they do not know. Blind and partially sighted people are often in a communication or information wasteland, unless they physically come across what they are looking for. They will not naturally walk along the street and see all the signposts for fast food restaurants, as can be found across the water. They will not walk into a station and see all the information put up about the news and weather or what Sky has on the telly that night and so on. They will only get what they need to know, and they have to actively go and find that information. So, working with organisations such as Guide Dogs for the Blind and RNID would make that process a lot more effective.

[173] **Joyce Watson:** Do you have a comment, Norman?

[174] **Ann Jones:** The question is how you can help.

[175] **Mr Moore:** I do not know about this good practice report as I am not involved in it. Someone just popped in about it. We have been working with the police on emergency and non-emergency text messaging. Where I live in Carmarthenshire, the county council set up a text service. It is not just for deaf people, but deaf people have adopted all of these new methods of communicating, because we cannot pick a telephone up and listen to it. We use text messaging most of the time. Carmarthenshire has this text messaging service, which means that if you want to know why the county council has done something, you can text it for the answer. That is a first in Wales. If the rail operators were to provide a text number, it would give us access to rail information.

[176] **Ann Jones:** That is a good point to finish our questions on. Thank you, Andrea, John and Norman, for coming today and for giving us that evidence. We will send you a copy of the transcript to check for accuracy. I know that you will watch this committee's inquiry with interest. Thank you again for attending. We do appreciate it.

[177] I remind Members that we agreed that there would be no meeting on 4 May. You will know about that. Our next meeting will be on 18 May when we will discuss equal pay with the Minister for Social Justice and Local Government. The second part of the meeting will involve taking evidence from Passenger Focus on this inquiry.

[178] We are still looking to launch the report on discrimination against people living with HIV by healthcare professionals and providers. I know that that is on a Monday, and I know that I said that we did not have a meeting the next day, but given that we are no longer having a meeting on 4 May, we are looking to have that on 17 May. If that causes any problems, could you let the committee service know by the end of today? That brings our meeting to a close.

*Daeth y cyfarfod i ben am 10.57 a.m.  
The meeting ended at 10.57 a.m.*