

Equality of Opportunity Committee

EOC(3)-14-10 : Paper 5

Inquiry into the impact of Welsh Government policy on the accessibility of transport services for disabled people in Wales – Evidence from Deafblind Cymru

Deafblind Cymru (part of Deafblind UK is a registered charity that provides support and specialist services for people with combined sight and hearing loss.

It is estimated that there are at least 3,000 people in Wales with severe to profound levels of deafblindness that affects their mobility as well as their ability to communicate and access information. Recent figures released by Sense indicate that this figure is underestimated and that the Deafblind population is higher and likely to increase in future mainly as a result of an ageing population.

In addition, there are many thousands of people with mild to moderate progressive deafblindness. Many of these need help with communication and accessing information and some may have issues with mobility.

Deafblind Cymru provides 12 peer support groups as well as a number of smaller activity groups in North and South Wales using funding from a Big Lottery 'Stepping Stones' grant. Around 120 deafblind people regularly attend these groups each month. We also have around 300 members in Wales, many of whom access our one to one casework service for support on a range of issues connected to their deafblindness, for example, transport issues.

Our groups hold regular discussions to identify key issues for our members and problems with public transport are raised frequently. We would argue that this is the main issue for most of our members. The unsuitability of public transport is mentioned as the key reason by those who say they are unable to attend peer social groups. The impact of being unable to access public transport is that many people feel isolated in their own homes or neighbourhoods and this affects their overall health and well-being.

We have listed some case examples and issue raised by our members below.

1. Initially raised at our Bridgend group but since mentioned in many of our other groups across Wales is that destination and bus number displays are very hard to read especially when the bus is approaching a stopping point. Some mentioned that these displays are supposed to be lit up but often are not making them more difficult to see. Also the 'pixel dot' display used by many is hard to read from distance. Some felt that front displays sometimes contained too much information and that a simple destination and number would be sufficient. Most buses have a side display which could be used to include additional information such as key stopping points.

2. Many members also mentioned that pocket and public display timetables used print that is too small to read. Also timetables and information accessed via the Internet can be difficult to read as many websites do not include accessibility tools such as font, colour and contrast options as well as audio and BSL formats.

3. Members from all of our groups have suggested giving on-board information in audio-visual formats, announcing next stop and any changes to times/destination. Assistance from drivers in terms of helping them identify when they have reached their intended destination would also help where audio-visual information was not suitable.

4. Members from all groups have suggested that at main bus and train stations staff should be available to assist Deafblind people with information enquiries and to guide them to correct stands/bus where necessary. Staff would need to be trained in Deafblind awareness and communication tactics in order for this to work. Deafblind Cymru could provide suitable training, information and advice.

5. Many group members welcomed the introduction of buses with lower boarding steps at kerb level which are a great help to those using wheelchairs, mobility aids, guide dogs, etc. Deafblind people find it easier to get on and off these buses. However many raised the issue that drivers generally do not wait for them to find a seat before driving away from the stop causing them to fall and in some cases injure themselves.

6. Many group members have raised a problem specifically with railway stations. Often platform changes, cancelled and delayed trains are announced over tannoy systems. Most Deafblind people are unable to hear these announcements and often have to rely on help from strangers as staff are often not available to help. Many members report having missed trains or boarding the wrong one because of missed information.

7. Many group members have commented that bus and taxi drivers often have a negative attitude towards them, although most recognise that some drivers are courteous and helpful. A common occurrence that was mentioned by many was the response to the question, 'Where are you going please?' Some responses mentioned include 'Look at the front of the bus' or 'Look over there'.

8. Many members mentioned that early morning, evening, Sunday and Bank Holiday bus and train service provision was poor. Many commented that they were unable to attend early and late afternoon hospital appointments as transport was not available at the right time. Many Deafblind people are unable to travel to places of interest or shopping centres on Sundays or Bank Holidays because of poor service availability on those days. On some public holidays such as Boxing Day no trains or buses are available meaning that people cannot attend Sales or Christmas shows on those days.

9. Most of our members make great use of concessionary rail travel and free bus passes. As many Deafblind people are isolated by poverty as well as disability the concessionary and free travel options enable them to travel and play a vital part on helping them engage their communities and increase the prospects of independent living. Many are worried about the impact of the current economic climate on bus travel in particular. One

negative point raised by some members is the automatic card readers that require them to place the card the right way up on the device as they board a bus. Many have had difficulty in doing this because of their poor sight as well as age. Whilst many drivers are helpful with this, there are still many who do not help.

10. Members in our Rhondda and Caerphilly groups felt that improvements could be made to scheduling so that trains and buses were better connected to help people get to their destinations more quickly. One member gets off the Cardiff to Bargoed/Rhymney train at Caerphilly and needs to catch a bus to his home but often has to wait a long time before it arrives.

11. A member in our Bridgend deafblind group mentioned that buses often pull into wrong stand e.g. stand number 3 is normally used for buses travelling to Maesteg. However buses going to other destinations often pull into that stand. As a result Deafblind people often board the wrong bus and this often causes major upset and embarrassment.

12. Some people are concerned that lack of staff on board crowded trains means they sometimes feel unsafe if there is rowdiness especially after sporting games when passengers may be under the influence of alcohol.

13. Some members have difficulty reading automatic ticket vending machines due to in accessible fonts, colours and contrasts. Also ticket barriers at train stations are criticised as members find it hard to use these as they need to locate the correct exit point, find the correct ticket and insert it in the correct place. Glass barriers at ticket offices make communication difficult as well as lack of working induction loop systems.

14. If buses, trains and taxis were fitted with induction loop systems many Deafblind hearing aid users would be able to access some tannoy announcements or converse with taxi drivers. Induction loop devices help to minimise background noise from other passengers and the sound of vehicle engines.

Deafblind Cymru are able to provide training, information and advice to help transport providers improve the accessibility of their service and vehicles. We are also willing to work in partnership with other organisations and groups interested in accessible public transport. We encourage our members to get involved in consultations and can help organisations reach Deafblind people to include them in service planning and delivery.

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