



DISABILITY WATFORD

Opening the door to equality
Watford & District's Access Group

Run by people with a disability for those with a disability.
We give information, support and campaign.

Transport Survey Report

November 2015

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This campaign has been supported by:



WATFORD LIONS CLUB
"We serve"



Introduction

Following a strategic review in 2014, Disability Watford decided to change the way it worked. We continue to carry out our access work such as access audits together with our members. to influence local decision making and striving to remove barriers by giving information, Training and campaigning on access but we will now be doing this by working proactively on one major topic at a time culminating in one public forum a year on that subject's results.

But we do stress we still can be contacted on other access issues you encounter.

In 2015 we decided to focus on transport problems as this is the issue we have had the most complaints about from people who have contacted us over the years.

Our transport survey culminated in an open public Forum on 8th October at 2pm at Watford Town Hall.

This was opened by Watford's Elected Mayor (Baroness) Dorothy Thornhill who said that the Transport Survey was well overdue and applauded Disability Watford's positive approach to helping things to change for the better. It was also well attended by local and County Councillors, representatives from Hertfordshire County Council, representatives from the Watford Borough Council's (WBC) Licencing Office, representatives from taxi companies operating in the area and local people with a disability.

Some very positive items and suggestions came out of the Forum that we hope will make a difference for people with a disability in the future.

This report will cover:

- The Disability Watford Transport Survey 2015
- The Survey results and comments from local people
- The Public Forum October 2015
- Next steps

You can find and read the report that will be mentioned, from the Mystery shopper programme on the Taxi service in Watford which was commissioned by WBC and carried out by SRA Ltd, via our website www.disabilitywatford.org.uk on the campaigns page.

The work on the Survey and production of this report has been sponsored and supported by Watford & Three Rivers Trust (W3RT) who has contributed the time of Caro Hart of Franklin Hart Consultancy CIC and The Lions Club of Watford who covered the cost of, the survey, printing of the report and the forum etc.

The Disability Watford Transport Survey 2015

Disability Watford knows from its previous work that public transport is a major, if not the most significant problem, for many people with disabilities and their Carers, family and friends. It can be thought of as follows:

Everyone likes to spend time with family and friends. Most people take this for granted. Imagine if getting together was made difficult, if not impossible, by numerous obstacles including transport if you cannot drive a car! What do you do; use public transport?

Buses

Buses do not always run when you need them. The bus that's too full to take you; the bus that you cannot physically get on; the driver who will not stop because you are in a wheelchair or you were not able to flag down the bus.

What would you do; take a taxi?

Think again! The taxi is suddenly being used elsewhere when you tell the taxi company you have an Assistance Dog with you. If you are unable to transfer out of your wheelchair there are no Taxis available. There are the taxi drivers who flout the law by either refusing to take you or overcharging you. Then there are drivers who drive past when they see you in a wheelchair or with an Assistance Dog.

What would you do; "let the train take the strain"?

Think again! What is the problem with trains? Well if you cannot book The Assistance Service you need days in advance, you can't use it, even if you are in a wheelchair or need help to get on the train and find your seat. If the station lift does not work or the station is not staffed you cannot even get to the platform.

What do you do; take the Underground? By now we think you know the answer! We wanted to get some hard data on these issues and so our message to local people with disabilities, their Carers, friends and families was "We are going to need your help to make a success of this... we need you to start telling us now of any transport problems you have encountered and solutions that have worked for you."

We reached out in person and online to get their opinions. Our survey was tweeted and the online link posted, we attended community events, spoke at day centres and groups and encouraged all of our contacts and supporters to tell us what their experiences had been.

There was anecdotal evidence that quite a few people declined to help with the survey, this was because they feel unsafe or frightened when using public transport and do not actually use it.

We had more than 100 responses to the questionnaire from a wide range of people, 85% of whom had a disability themselves, 5% were Carers and 9% were family or friends of people with a disability.

The demographics are as follows where monitoring information was given:

30% men	4% African Caribbean
70% women	19% British Asian
	75% White British
	2% Other

Some 20% of our respondents used a walking stick and 5% a walking frame or similar, 12% used a wheelchair, 10% could only go out with a Carer, 4% had an assistance dog and 4% used a white cane.

The survey results and comments from local people

The most stunning result was that 60% of the people who responded to our survey said that they sometimes feel isolated and socially excluded because of difficulties with transport. Almost 14% of people living in Watford have a disability so this affects a lot of people across Watford & District.

People chose to tell us about various forms of transport with 42% choosing buses, 24% choosing Taxis & Mini-cabs, 16% Trains and 16% Community Transport of various kinds (the detail of which is not given here as there were fewer specific comments).

We asked about common problems which people with disabilities have with transport and 55% of people said that they had problems getting on and off, 34% found difficulties reaching the boarding point and 19% identified problems when they did, 21% identified problems with access while on board, including the attitude of other users.

Specifically about using buses, people commented:

On getting on and off:

“Bus drivers not allowing you to sit down before they drive off, I can't move quickly because of the pain. I'm always getting thrown forward as I have no brakes on the (walking aid) trolley”

“Driver not lowering the step and starting off before I sit down.” This comment was made several times.

“The bus drivers should wait for older people so that they may not fall down and be taken to hospital. Some bus drivers could be more aware of disabled passengers and let us be seated before they drive off.”

“Some buses don't have ramps to enable me to board. Buses don't lower down enough to the kerb”

“I am slow getting on and off, but can currently manage.”

“On several occasions, I have been unable to get off the bus as the electronic ramp will not go down. I suggested it should have a manual over-ride handle to insert and manually wind down the ramp (not a person having to physically lift me off!).”

On the boarding point:

“There are many bus stops that don't have seating and I cannot stand for long periods of time. I also can't walk far when I have a bad day so it is hard to actually get to the bus stop.”

“The bus stops have all been moved. It is a problem not being able to hail the bus in good time for it to stop, as I can't see it until it's at the stop”

“I do not know which bus stop I am at as they do not have any braille on them to tell the (sight-impaired) person which stop they are at. There is no voice announcement (at the terminus) to say which bus is coming in next or how long.”

"I live on a hill - bus does not now go up hill - I have to take a bus to go further away to get the right bus and walk back"
"The terminus is too far from hospital to walk"
"I sometimes find it difficult to walk as far as the bus stop. I have multiple sclerosis and the severity of my symptoms varies from day to day, and even during the course of a day. If the bus is early I certainly can't run to catch it!"

On board:

"At night I cannot see out and where I am going and can't see driver - can't always sit on priority seat as people don't move. Some buses you have to get on and off at the same end and the poles are not luminous"
"Very busy & cramped always"
"Rude people push into me, women with prams who think they have priority in disabled section and push into me or argue with me"
"Having to stand up because of lack of seats and an inability to ask people to stand is a real struggle. Bus drivers are not always helpful"
"If crowded, people can be inconsiderate sitting in front seats Luggage and shopping can obstruct and people won't move their bags from the seat"
"The front seats are usually taken by young able-bodied people so more often than not, I have to struggle to a seat near the back sometimes having to go up a steep step"
"Crowded buses can be difficult and sometimes other passengers do not realise that I really need to hold the handrails when I get on and off the bus."

On taxis, the comments were mostly about getting in and out:

"No step to assist getting into cab"
"Black cab drivers are unwilling to re-park cabs nearer the kerb to enable me to access the swivel seat safely. The swivel seat doesn't work or they have forgotten how to operate or it swivels but won't lock in place which means it swings from side-to-side during the journey. Cabbies resent delay in getting me in the cab and then folding my rollator and lifting it in. Cab drivers (not black cabs) often turn up in 4x4s, SUVs, MPVs which are unsuitable, despite my requesting an ordinary low car. I struggle to walk, cannot climb up one step therefore cannot climb in those vehicles." "The driver did not get out of the taxi to show me to the car or to the door"

But also, getting a taxi in the first place:

"When I tell them I want to book a cab for a powered wheelchair, I'm told they can't carry me."
"Twice ... a driver did not want to take me because of my assistance dog being with me."

On trains people said:

On getting on and off:

"Gap between platform & train inconsistent and some are very high"

“Again, getting on and off can be a problem, but most trains seem to have good rails by the doors these days. It is more difficult when the trains are very busy.”

On the boarding point:

“Lifts are unreliable and poorly lit, too big a gap between train and platform edges” “Flights of stairs, long walks, finding the nearest loo.”

“Getting from Car Park to booking hall using a wheelchair is impossible as access path is too narrow. I pre -arrange assistance but there is no way to contact station staff to tell them I am in the Car Park. I travel alone and it needs a deal of trust to wait patiently for assistance to arrive.”

“I sometimes have difficulty walking as far as my local underground station, about half a mile, and I'm very slow on the stairs at the station.”

“Accessing the platform as you have to go over the bridge to access the relevant platform and there is no lift. There is another egress point to get onto platform 1, which for us is a longer route to take, but you have to bump ... up 4-5 steep steps and there is not a big turning circle in which to manoeuvre on to the platform.”

On board

“Not enough seats available Unable to stand when train is moving”

“If seat not booked in advance, issue with allocated seating, on your own on the train, issues with the train station ...big step up to the train - don't know which carriage to use”

“After asking for assistance (the staff at the station) alert them I'm coming - don't know lay-out of seats and get confused - it's difficult if announcements are switched off”

We asked respondents how things could be improved and they made some excellent suggestions. The main one, however was more training for drivers on both taxis and buses. One respondent said:

“The taxi licensing office needs to make sure that all existing drivers have had disability awareness training, put in place an agenda to get more wheelchair accessible taxis and make an example of a driver who breaks the rules and will not take a assistance dog or strap in a wheelchair user, so the message goes out to the other drivers they may lose their license.”

Similarly, several people commented on bus drivers:

“Better training for drivers to lower buses; Training bus drivers to have patience and use the equipment to lower step”

“If bus drivers are trained to ask people to be more considerate and keep aisles and seats free of objects, it would be better”

“Better ... trained staff; proper training for the drivers on disability awareness”

But there were also some practical suggestions in addition to the luminous flashes on poles and hand-holds in buses noted above:

“An audio visual system installed at the stops and on the buses so the person knows where they are. Braille needs putting on all stops.”

“Better laid out buses for people with trollies or walkers”

“More disabled seats & wheelchair spaces. Larger area for chair”

“More illuminated destination boards so I know what bus is coming”

And again; “Some other form of operating ramp when it fails and you are stuck on bus. Ramp worked fine when I got ON the bus”

“Get all taxis to fit step”

“An in-station contact number would be helpful.”

“Make it easier to find out which stations have lifts or stairs so avoiding escalators”

“Re gaps between platform and train, providing a mobility access platform as already exists at some London tube stations.”

“It would also help if train carriages were all the same design - some carriages have narrow isles whilst others are wider depending on the seating configuration. If there is an area on the train for wheelchairs, you don't know which carriage it is in and so could be at the other end of where you are waiting”

“To have ‘guardian angels’ to help people”

The public Forum October 2015

A well-attended forum at the Town Hall received some opening remarks from Watford's Elected Mayor (Baroness) Dorothy Thornhill, followed by a presentation from Caro Hart on the results of the survey, particularly around using buses. It then listened to a Three Counties Radio interview featuring Leigh Hutchins, Chair of Disability Watford and Mr Butt of the Hackney Carriage Association about the recent "Secret Shopper" independent report commissioned by Watford Borough Council and compiled by SRA LTD on Taxis and passengers with disabilities.

This report says that some hackney carriages do not pick up people with disabilities where hailed and that when hackney cabs were phoned, waits for accessible vehicles could be up to 50 minutes, if they were available at all. Some refused to take, or made a fuss about taking, an assistance dog. At a rank, the drivers, embarrassingly, discussed in front of the person with disabilities who would take the fare.

In just two out of 11 trips were wheelchairs correctly secured, with drivers saying they were too big or implying that strapping it in would be a nuisance. Ambulant disabled passengers had to step into the road to access the swivel seats and got no help with walking sticks, crutches or, indeed, luggage.

Communication was identified as a difficulty in the report; people were taken to the wrong address despite having the address written down, drivers not speaking to the person with disabilities and seeming annoyed or embarrassed or ill at ease. 26 out of the 28 trips taken in this survey did not go as well as they should have.

The first discussion at the Forum about Taxis was most informative.

Several taxi operators spoke of the provision of accessible vehicles which range from one vehicle per shift (day/night) to, in the case of Allied Taxis, 6 accessible vehicles. Some of the problems perceived by passengers, commented one operator, are because the accessible vehicle is occupied in another fare and will have to get back to take the commission. Opinions varied; one driver pointed out that a fare from a person with disabilities can take up to 20 minutes longer for no more money and wondered if there could be a licence fee reduction to reflect that. Another said; "If I didn't drive a wheelchair accessible vehicle, I wouldn't make a living".

The meeting agreed that there were also examples of very good practice; people spoke of companies that they use often and which have helpful and disability-aware drivers. However, the Secret Shopper Report does high-light a real concern as the Disability Watford Survey also demonstrates.

Jamie McKenzie, a WBC licencing enforcement officer, clarified that under the Equalities Act (2010) it is not a criminal offense for a taxi driver to refuse to take a person with disabilities just on its own although it is a civil issue refuse a commission without reasonable cause which the Licencing Office can challenge a driver on. It is a criminal offense to refuse to take an assistance dog. The Licencing Office will support people to take civil action against drivers and firms where an incident has taken place and Jamie urged Disability Watford to encourage people to do so.

However, as delegates remarked and as the Secret Shopper report highlights, often people can't or won't report incidents either because they are too upset when it happens to gather evidence or because they are scared of being black-listed by that taxi firm.

Following a recent Licencing Committee discussion of the issues, a Working Party is to be established to discuss the recommendations of the report which include re-training drivers and raising awareness of both drivers and passengers of what is and is not available. The Working Party will seek to find constructive solutions. Disability Watford has been invited to contribute.

The second part of the discussion, about local bus services was less useful because representatives from Arriva were not able to be present. Discussions touched on how the bus companies interact with people with disabilities, especially those without on-line media, on issues such as route changes or day-to-day cancellations. We spoke of integrating services, while using taxis alone can be too expensive (one Survey respondent wrote movingly of spending £500 to visit her husband in hospital after an emergency admission), if the transport was better integrated, all might become more accessible.

The County Councillors present agreed to raise these issues at County level because the issues identified by the Disability Watford Survey are almost certainly replicated County-wide. It was also suggested to Mayor Dorothy Thornhill that WBC should establish a local Bus Users Group and she offered to talk to Arriva about this. She also commented on the fact that we need to raise awareness amongst the general population saying; "It costs nothing to recognise that someone's struggling and give them a hand; we need to remind people of this."

The forum concluded with a short discussion on possible future topics, including integrating access to transport at Watford General Hospital and the changing parameters of accessible buildings. Physical access, including kerbs, ramps and the camber of pavements was the liveliest discussion.

Next Steps

Disability Watford will be following up on the results of the Forum, particularly with local bus companies, and using this report to stimulate debate on these important subjects.

We will be running another campaign in 2016 to follow up on what people have said in this survey about feeling socially isolated and excluded from taking part in normal activities.

We will be looking at access and safety for people with disabilities whilst using shopping, social and commercial amenities in the Watford area. If you would like to help us with this campaign please get in contact.

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