

Easing the trip

Meeting the needs of disabled rail users

Foreword

by Suzanne May
Chair of the London Transport Users Committee

Anyone newly arrived from another planet would have no difficulty in finding documentation about the needs of disabled travellers using the national rail network in Britain.

Leaflet racks at stations display copies of the industry's code of practice entitled *Rail Travel for Disabled Passengers*. All licensed passenger train companies are required to publish and abide by *Disabled People's Protection Policies*. Railtrack has consulted on its *Disability Strategy*. And the Strategic Rail Authority (in its new-found role – inherited from the Rail Regulator – as a protector of consumers' interests) is about to promulgate its code of practice on *Train and Station Services for Disabled Passengers*, taking account of the report of the Regulator's seminar entitled *Towards an Accessible Railway*.

So why has the London Transport Users Committee added to this already extensive array of literature? Surely there are words enough in print, and what is now needed instead is action to give effect to them?

Of course, this is true. But some of the policy statements cited are stronger on voicing lofty sentiments than they are on identifying priorities and stumbling blocks. Progress is being made, but it is maddeningly slow. As a body set up to give voice to the concerns of users themselves, my Committee has been keen to find out exactly how rail travellers who are disabled view the existing facilities, and what they regard as the most urgent areas for improvement.

And, at the same time, we have recognised that no strategies or codes, however admirable, are worth the paper they are printed on if those responsible for implementing them in practice are uncommitted to these policies, or are unable to carry them into effect. So we commissioned a survey to discover the opinions, experiences and priorities of these two key constituencies : disabled rail travellers themselves, and rail staff who cater for their needs.

This report documents our findings. We commend it to the industry, to its regulators, and to policy makers in national and local government. And we will welcome comments from any source – because we believe that this is an aspect of policy which is central to the future success of a truly inclusive railway, at the heart of Britain's transport system, and geared to meeting the needs of *all* its passengers.

Executive summary

This report records the findings of a survey conducted by Disability Matters Ltd, a consultancy commissioned by the London Transport Users Committee in co-operation with the Association of Train Operating Companies (ATOC). The Committee has a long-standing interest in promoting accessible travel, and has been concerned to ensure that policies are framed on the basis of a proper understanding of the needs and priorities of disabled passengers themselves.

Part one, the introduction, describes the genesis of the project and the manner in which it was conducted, drawing upon ATOC's database of holders of Disabled Persons Railcards - a special discount ticket facility offered by the National Rail companies to passengers with a range of physical and sensory impairments.

Part two records the messages emerging from focus groups conducted with Railcard holders, who were invited to discuss their rail travel experiences (both positive and negative) in relation to each stage of a trip : pre-journey information, access to stations, ticket purchase, access to platforms, waiting facilities, access to trains, services on board, in-journey information, etc. It includes their vision of what the future might be like, if and when the needs of disabled passengers are properly met.

Part three reports the findings of a larger sample of Railcard holders, who completed questionnaires covering a similar range of topics. It confirms and complements many of the observations made in the focus groups, but also gives an insight into the age and disability profile of Railcard holders, and into the frequency, timing and purpose of the journeys they make.

Part four covers the results of two further focus groups, this time composed of a cross-section of railway staff, working for two train companies operating in different areas and different sections of the travel market. It confirms many of the observations made by the passengers surveyed, and reveals a high level of awareness of their needs. But it also identifies a number of the practical challenges they face in attempting to meet these needs, which can sometimes prevent them from doing so as fully as they wish.

Part five, the conclusions, puts forward some suggestions for consideration by the industry (and its regulators) about how this work should be taken forward. This includes the changes which may be required to ensure that full expression is given to the needs of disabled passengers, that there is proper awareness of these by staff at all levels of decision-making, that the industry has a clear strategy for improvement, and that progress is quantified and tracked.

Comments on this report will be welcomed. They should be addressed to :

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Part one : Introduction

- 1.1 The London Transport Users Committee (LTUC) is the statutory body set up under the Greater London Authority Act 1999 to give voice to the concerns of London's travelling public. Its remit embraces all modes of travel (other than by air) in and around the capital, including the train and station operators who provide the main line railway network now known collectively as National Rail.
- 1.2 LTUC (like its predecessors under earlier legislation) takes an active and positive interest in the particular needs of passengers with disabilities of any kind. These may include impaired mobility, poor sight or hearing, learning difficulties, and/or a variety of medical conditions which can make the transport system more difficult to use. LTUC welcomes the efforts of transport operators to understand and cater for the special needs of such users. But it is well aware (not least from its own caseload of appeals) that their journeys cannot always be made with the ease and convenience they (and we) would wish. So the purpose of the study reported in this document was to gain a better understanding of disabled passengers' own experiences, and of their priorities for improvement.
- 1.3 The study was limited to only one mode of transport : the main line railways. And it covered only those who do currently travel by rail, not those who would like to but are prevented from doing so (or choose not to) because the services now provided are unsuited to their needs. LTUC recognises this limitation, but does not apologise for it, because the Committee's resources are finite and it cannot research every dimension of the issue at once. This is a pioneering study in itself, because to the best of our knowledge, disabled rail passengers have never been consulted directly in this way before. But we recognise that there is much more work to be done, to encompass non-rail users and other forms of travel, and we would welcome the support and partnership of other bodies in building on this initial research and extending it more widely.
- 1.4 The study took place during 2000 and 2001, in three separate stages :
 - (a) focus group discussions with disabled rail users,
 - (b) a questionnaire survey of disabled rail users, and
 - (c) focus group discussions with staff responsible for providing services to disabled rail users.

The findings emerging from each stage are recorded in the subsequent sections of this report.

- 1.5 The study was conducted for the Committee by Disability Matters Ltd, a specialist commercial consultancy whose mission is "to help organisations profit from the potential of disabled people." LTUC warmly acknowledges the work of Ian Townsend and Nick Morton-Smith, who (respectively) facilitated the focus groups and analysed the questionnaires. The statistical analysis and the selecting of comments recorded in the report are theirs, but responsibility for the document as a whole rests with the Committee.

- 1.6 The rail users who took part in the focus groups and to whom the questionnaires were sent are holders of Disabled Persons Railcards. To qualify for such cards, their holders must be registered as visually impaired or deaf, or suffer recurrent attacks of epilepsy, or qualify for specified benefits (such as attendance allowances, disability living allowances and service disablement pensions), or be buying or leasing a vehicle through the Motability scheme. Holders are entitled to a discount of one third off the cost of most rail tickets, other than season tickets and discounted advance purchase fares such as Apex. The cards are valid for a year, and cost £14. They therefore offer savings to travellers in the qualifying categories who make journeys costing more than £42 in a year, except those making a journey sufficiently regularly and frequently to obtain greater savings by buying a season ticket.
- 1.7 The significance of this scheme to the rail industry is evidenced by the fact that there are around 54,000 Disabled Persons Railcards in use, generating direct income from sales of around £750,000 a year. They are used to make about 1.4 million journeys annually, producing ticket revenue of about £7 million.
- 1.8 Discounts on a more restricted range of fares are available, without purchasing a Railcard, to visually impaired passengers holding a document confirming their disability issued by a recognised institution, and to wheelchair users who remain in their own wheelchairs for rail journeys. These discounts also apply to a travelling companion. Some categories of disabled passenger are therefore not necessarily covered by the Railcard scheme. But, in practice, sufficient people with visual impairment and wheelchair users do choose to take advantage of holding such cards for the database of cardholders to include an adequately representative cross section of disabled rail users for the purposes of this survey. The object of the exercise was not to achieve a precise statistical sample of the total population of such users, but rather to reflect the views of a group of actual travellers with a variety of disabilities which may affect the ease and convenience with which they can travel by rail.
- 1.9 The passengers who took part in the survey were drawn from the Association of Train Operating Companies (ATOC) database of cardholders, and have addresses in postcode areas served by the Committee – a region stretching from Bedford to Gatwick and from Bicester to Dartford. Those who took part in the focus groups each received a free replacement Railcard when their current cards expired. Those who returned questionnaires were entered in a draw for ten such replacement cards. The free replacement cards were generously provided by ATOC, and the Association also undertook the (unexpectedly complex) work of extracting names and addresses of cardholders, and of mailing invitations/questionnaires to them. Although the passengers surveyed were drawn from the London area alone, this area accounts for half of all the journeys made on the national rail network, and the issues raised were not specific to individual companies or localities. So there is no reason to believe that the findings are not valid in relation to the network as a whole.
- 1.10 LTUC is most grateful to the Association for its help and co-operation in this exercise (and in particular to John Yunnie, its Commercial Policy Adviser). ATOC's support also secured the involvement of two of its member companies (Connex and Midland Mainline) in arranging for their personnel to participate in

the staff focus groups. Without this practical and material help, the study could not have been undertaken, and the commitment of the rail industry to the study's objectives which this represents is warmly acknowledged. Rail consumer bodies and train operators have a shared interest in improving the quality of travel for passengers with disabilities, and their partnership in sponsoring such a study is a practical demonstration of this fact.

- 1.11 Advice and encouragement in the initial planning phases of this work was provided by Alice Maynard Lupton (from Railtrack), Iryna Terlecky, Diane Ross, Moira Paternoster and Simon Joyce (all then at the Office of the Rail Regulator), and Alec McTavish (from ATOC). We are grateful to all of them, and to the individual passengers and railway personnel who volunteered to take part and whose contributions are recorded here.

Part two : Passengers speaking

2.1 The groups

2.1.1 Two focus group sessions were held with Disabled Persons Railcard holders. Each lasted two to three hours. There were 27 participants in all. This section of the report records the key messages emerging from the discussion (as listed by the expert facilitator who conducted them).

2.2 Strengths

2.2.1 The main strengths of the railways' existing services for disabled passengers were seen to be that the Disabled Persons Railcard scheme covers the entire network, and that assistance can be pre-booked by phone. Favourable mention was also made of announcements on platforms.

2.2.2 But in each case, there were qualifying comments. For example, pre-booked assistance does not always materialise in practice, and it is not always available (e.g. for journeys at 0930). Platform announcements can be drowned by the noise of passing trains, but if they are made remotely the announcer is unaware of this.

2.3 Opportunities

2.3.1 It was suggested that the eligibility criteria for the Railcard should be widened, as this would be consistent with the Government's policies for enhancing social inclusion. "New Deal" policies to bring people out of long-term unemployment are negated if they cannot afford to travel to work.

2.3.2 There could be a fast-track sales service for Railcard holders, e.g. a swipe-card which could be used in automatic ticket machines.

2.3.3 Favourable mention was made of interactive information points on stations, similar to those found in the London Underground.

2.3.4 There was some support for (but also disagreement about) the idea of free travel for disabled people. First class travel at standard class fares was also suggested.

2.3.5 It was argued that disabled passengers could be (and are) helped if they are willing to make themselves known in advance. But this was contentious, with other participants arguing that spontaneity should be catered for.

2.4 Weaknesses and difficulties

2.4.1 A wide range of concerns surfaced under this heading. They have been grouped according to the stage of the journey at which they are encountered.

2.4.2 *Tickets*

- The Railcard gives no additional benefit when travelling on discounted tickets or those sold as special offers.
- A larger discount rate should be offered to make rail travel more competitive with the alternatives.
- Different cards and times of validity make travel in and via London complicated. There should be uniform discounts on all tickets.
- Railway staff are not always clear about where and when discounts are available.

2.4.3 *Pre-journey information*

- There is no single information point, e.g. about accessibility of stations.
- The fragmented nature of the service means that it is necessary to repeat information.
- There can be long delays in the process of obtaining advice and information. The help line is not always answered or, when it is, the information given is not always correct.
- Some train companies require as much as 48 hours' prior notice of disabled passengers' intention to travel. And if the time of their return journey is not known in advance, no help is offered.

2.4.4 *Stations and platforms*

- There is insufficient car parking reserved for disabled people (who are less able to walk to the station entrance), and it is expensive to use.
- There is a general absence of help to reach platforms, to carry luggage, and to obtain information.
- There is a lack of consistency in provision across the system, e.g. in the availability of help and of lifts (Stevenage and Manchester were cited as examples of good practice).
- There is a lack of colour contrasting to highlight the edges of steps.
- Platforming of trains is liable to be changed at short notice (or without any notice being given).
- There are excessive gaps between platforms and trains (both vertically and horizontally).
- Absence of ramps and lifts, and insufficient hand rails, makes platform access difficult.
- Distances from taxi ranks to station entrances, and from entrances to platforms, can be excessive.
- There is a shortage of seating on platforms. Some seats are vandalised, making them dangerous to passengers who are unsteady or visually impaired.

- Escalators are a problem for passengers with guide dogs.
- Signing to lifts is inadequate, and they can be in obscure locations.
- Train indicator boards are too high to read easily.
- Public address systems have poor acoustics.
- More information could be conveyed by the use of pictograms (e.g. to indicate where induction loops are fitted to assist passengers with impaired hearing, or for the benefit of those with learning difficulties who may be unable to read).
- Too many stations are wholly unstaffed or effectively so (because of staff shortages).
- There is a lack of station toilets.
- Poor waiting facilities create problems for sufferers from lupus (a skin condition) which is exacerbated by exposure to sunlight and to cold.

2.4.5 *Trains*

- There is insufficient leg room between seats.
- The use of the guard's van is unsafe and unpleasant.
- No special provision is made for disabled passengers unless they are travelling in wheelchairs.
- Handrails at carriage doors are badly sited/ designed and difficult to hold.
- Seats reserved for disabled passengers are often taken by other people.
- Failure to provide advertised refreshment facilities can be problematic for passengers with some disabilities (e.g. diabetes).

2.4.6 *Staff*

- Some staff show discrimination, and do not offer help, if disability is not apparent. There is insufficient training of staff in the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act (and the deadlines set in this Act are too long to wait for its provisions to take effect).
- Staff are often unaware of where reserved seats will be located.
- There is a general lack of helpfulness, and an attitude of indifference.
- Ticket staff are unclear about the discounts available to disabled passengers.

2.5 **A vision of the future**

2.5.1 Participants were invited to describe what the ideal rail service for disabled passengers could be like – in (say) five years' time – if the railways really wish to meet the needs of this group of their passengers. Their suggestions were prioritised into "quick wins" (i.e. changes that could be made now, at little cost) and those which would be desirable in the longer term, and/or were of lower

benefit. Not all of what was suggested is in the realm of fantasy, because City Thameslink station was cited as a model to which others should aspire (though even this relatively modern station has very poor interchange with buses and taxis). It is noteworthy that much of what was suggested does not have a unique disability dimension, but consists of improvements to which passengers in general might (and do) aspire.

2.5.2 *Quick wins*

- There will be much greater surveillance to give personal security.
- Fares will be lower.
- Trains will be cleaner, and there will be no graffiti anywhere.
- Fare dodgers will be caught.
- There will be buttons to summon help whenever it is needed.
- There will be through booking between all stations, including those on the Underground (this facility exists for journeys ending at Underground stations or passing through them, but not for those starting there).
- There will be clear directional signs to and on all platforms.

2.5.3 *Essential improvements*

- The Disabled Persons Railcard will take the form of a swipecard usable in all ticket machines.
- Seats will be higher, and therefore easier to get out of.
- There will be more parking spaces for disabled users.
- There will be new carriages with adequate legroom.
- There will be moving walkways (travolators) along and between platforms.
- All platforms will be accessible thanks to the provision of lifts, escalators and ramps.

2.5.4 *Longer-term aspirations*

- The railways will themselves employ staff with disabilities.
- Disabled passengers will travel free (not an idea universally supported – some felt it would cause resentment and reinforce negative perceptions).
- Trains will have level access from platforms.
- There will be complete clarity about the discounts available.
- There will be “meeters and greeters” available at both ends of each journey.
- New trains will have facilities for disabled passengers in a fixed location aligned with a clearly marked point on the platform.
- There will be more priority seats for the (primary) use of disabled passengers.

- Disabled passengers will be able to travel first class at no additional cost.
- All parts of the system will be fully accessible.
- There will be much greater levels of staffing.
- Disabled travellers will enjoy parity of treatment with other rail users.
- There will be greater clarity regarding the service standards which rail operators are obliged to meet.
- Levels of achievement will be systematically tracked, and operators will be contractually incentivised to do better.
- Rail travel will offer a safe environment for all.

Part three : Passengers polled

3.1 The numbers

- 3.1.1 A total of 500 questionnaires were issued by post, with a freepost envelope for replies. Recipients were invited to telephone their answers, if they preferred. In all, 119 replies were received (including six by phone), a response rate of 24 per cent. This is a very high response rate for a survey of this kind, and reflects the clear relevance of the survey's subject matter to those polled. It helps to ensure that the range of replies is likely to be representative of Railcard holders in general.
- 3.1.2 Respondents were asked to indicate the nature of their impairment, their age range, their frequency of rail travel, the purpose of their journeys, and the times at which they usually travelled. The following analysis of the replies cross-tabulates age categories against other attributes (*italicised figures on a tinted background are percentages*).

QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONDENTS	Age group			Total	Total %
	16-34	35-54	55+		
<i>% of total in age group</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>46</i>	<i>42</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>100</i>
Nature of impairment					
Restricted mobility	8	25	27	60	<i>50</i>
Wheelchair user	1	7	8	16	<i>13</i>
Impaired vision	1	6	7	14	<i>12</i>
Impaired hearing	2	9	7	18	<i>15</i>
Reduced manual dexterity	0	2	0	2	<i>2</i>
Other	2	6	1	9	<i>8</i>
Frequency of rail travel					
Once a month or less	5	24	24	53	<i>45</i>
Between once a month and once a week	4	14	11	29	<i>24</i>
Once a week	0	10	7	17	<i>14</i>
2-3 times a week	1	3	6	10	<i>8</i>
Over 3 times a week	4	4	2	10	<i>8</i>
Main journey purpose					
Pleasure/shopping/social	12	50	36	98	<i>59</i>
Commuting/business travel	4	8	6	18	<i>11</i>
Personal business (e.g. medical)	6	21	18	45	<i>27</i>
Other	1	1	2	4	<i>2</i>
Time of travel					
Weekends	11	38	27	76	<i>31</i>
Weekdays	8	36	27	73	<i>29</i>
Peak hours	5	19	6	30	<i>12</i>
Off peak periods	7	28	35	70	<i>28</i>

- 3.1.3 This sample is not necessarily an accurate cross-section of all Disabled Persons Railcard holders. But it does give a profile of those who chose to participate in the survey (and who may therefore be regarded as relatively committed rail users).
- (a) Almost half were aged between 35 and 54 (inclusive), with almost as many aged over 55. This is as expected, because disability tends to increase with age (and because social surveyors report that young people in general are much less likely to be willing to take part in such exercises).
 - (b) Easily the most common impairment was restricted mobility – i.e. those who can walk, but have some difficulty in doing so. Substantial (and roughly equal) minorities were wheelchair users, people with impaired vision, and people with impaired hearing. The data do not show multiple impairment, nor degrees of impairment.
 - (c) Almost half travelled by rail only once a month or less, with another quarter travelling less than once a week. Only a handful travelled more than three times a week (there are disabled passengers who do, but they are likely to hold season tickets rather than Railcards).
 - (d) Their journeys were almost all made for recreational, shopping or social purposes, or on personal business, rather than to/from or in the course of work (again, as expected).
 - (e) Their travel was equally split between weekdays and weekends, but was more likely to be off-peak (consistent with non-work journeys).
- 3.1.4 Overwhelmingly, these Railcard users are above average age, and are using their cards to make discretionary journeys. Both of these are important growth markets for the rail industry, because the proportion of older people in the population (many of whom have both the time and the means to travel more) is rapidly increasing, and because such journeys are mostly made off-peak when the network already has spare capacity to carry them. So implementing measures to make rail travel simpler and more attractive to them is not just a social obligation (and, under the Disability Discrimination Act, a legal duty) – it is also a commercial opportunity.
- 3.1.5 Respondents were asked how they rated the quality of service currently offered to disabled rail users, on a four-point scale ranging from “poor” to “very good”. Seven distinct facets of the service were listed, producing the results tabulated on the next page (*italicised figures on a tinted background are percentages*). Not all respondents were users of all of the service elements listed, so the totals do not necessarily sum to the same figure – there were 101 responses regarding “face to face information” but only 65 regarding car parking.
- 3.1.6 Most retail service providers would expect most aspects of their activities to be rated as “good” or “very good” in a survey of this kind. So the fact that the “poor” and “adequate” ratings accounted for more than a half of those for each of the facets of service listed shows serious dissatisfaction on the part of respondents

(who are Railcard holders, and therefore committed rail travellers – not casual users who may be even more easily deflected by perceptions of poor service).

SERVICE QUALITY RATING	Poor		Adequate		Good		Very good	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
Information								
by phone	22	23	31	33	26	28	15	16
face to face	20	20	31	31	33	33	17	17
Staff service or assistance								
at stations	34	34	22	22	31	31	13	13
on trains	18	19	34	35	33	34	12	12
Physical/structural features								
car parking	23	35	24	37	14	22	4	6
stations	28	34	37	45	12	14	6	7
trains	24	27	37	42	20	22	8	9

3.1.7 The highest ratings were for information provided face to face (50% rating this “good” or “very good”) and for information by telephone and assistance at stations (both 44%). The lowest rating was for physical design of stations (only 21% rating these “good” or “very good”), followed by car parking (28%). There is a clear call for improvements across the board, and this represents a major challenge to the industry in improving both the “soft” (i.e. human) elements of its service and its physical infrastructure.

3.1.8 In interpreting these results, it should be noted that currently many respondents evince fairly low expectations. For example, if a wheelchair ramp is booked and it turns up on time, this is still likely to be regarded as “very good” service, rather than simply the norm. But as service standards rise, passengers’ expectations will also tend to increase – partly because the standards of service offered by other organisations generally are rising, and partly because the growing application of the Disability Discrimination Act to the provision of other goods and services is fanning the expectations of these users in particular. So the industry “must try harder” merely to maintain current (depressingly low) levels of satisfaction.

3.1.9 Narrative comments suggested that in relation to information, respondents had problems in obtaining information about

- accessibility of stations
- platform numbers and train times
- late changes (poor information about these had led to several respondents missing their train or boarding the wrong one).

- 3.1.10 It is noteworthy that although the combined “poor+adequate” rating for staff service and assistance was broadly the same for both stations and trains, the “poor” component was much higher for stations. This may reflect lower (or non-existent) staffing levels at stations, or a greater need for service and assistance off-train, or that station staff are less willing/able to provide the help needed. Whatever the reason, it is a weakness that needs to be addressed. Proof that such service and assistance *can* be provided is offered by the one-third of respondents who rated it as good or very good. A more detailed survey than this would be needed to discover why some respondents rated their experiences much more highly than others, but it almost certainly reflects differing levels of achievement at different places and different times. This inconsistency is a problem which bedevils the railway in general. The fascias of well-known retail chains raise consistent (and legitimate) expectations on the part of prospective purchasers as to the nature and standard of the goods and services available inside. The double-arrow logo which denotes a National Rail station carries no such promise.
- 3.1.11 Since some staff and some stations are clearly doing better, there is a clear opportunity to improve service by promoting best practice through increased training for station staff (e.g. in disability awareness). Other benefits from addressing such training as a priority are :
- When applied, it can help to overcome many infrastructure problems (e.g. poor information displays).
 - It can be implemented quickly, and is inexpensive relative to infrastructure works such as ramps and lifts.
 - It can be offered on a relatively uniform basis for all staff, whereas infrastructure solutions have to be tailor-made.
- 3.1.12 Much the lowest ratings were for physical or structural features of the railway – which in the case of stations are often the legacy of its Victorian designers (and in the case of car parks too, since these are often converted goods yards not sited with current requirements in mind). Although the trains themselves are not of the same antiquity as the stations, their physical dimensions may well be the same, so that today’s vertical and horizontal stepping distances are as great as those which were tolerated more than a century ago. Improved standards now apply, but they are not retrospective, and unless (unusually) the railway companies can find a commercial justification for such expenditure, modifying existing platforms, buildings and staircases depends on the availability of public funds for which there are many competing calls.
- 3.1.13 Regulations made under the Disability Discrimination Act will eventually ensure that all new trains are better suited to meet the needs of disabled travellers than their predecessors, but change comes slowly because of the long life-expectancy of railway rolling stock. Mid-life renovations can, however, offer an opportunity to achieve useful improvements in the shorter term, at little or no incremental cost. Good design and maintenance benefits all passengers, not simply those formally regarded as “disabled” but also (e.g.) those encumbered by luggage or other

possessions, those who are frail or pregnant, and those who are accompanied by small children.

3.1.14 It is noteworthy that the newer trains which have recently appeared on some lines have not yet fully met the aspirations of all disabled travellers, as the survey still recorded references to poor access, a shortage of designated seating, and little apparent consideration of the need for contrasting colours in the décor to assist those with impaired vision.

3.2 **Good practice**

3.2.1 The questionnaire invited respondents to give examples of particularly good practice. Although the overall gradings for service quality for poor, there were many examples offered of excellent service. A selection of such comments follows :

- “Railways have come a long way in the service of disabled rail users although there are still pockets of ignorance and bad practice.”
- “Staff generally responsive to a visible disability, such as a wheelchair or sticks.”
- “Staff helpful and write things down for me” (a hearing impaired passenger).
- “Assistance always given – thank you.”
- “A member of staff approached me to offer assistance – it was a delight not to have to ask” (Loughborough station).
- “Staff at Broxbourne station are very helpful, helping me on to trains with a ramp and without even being asked.”
- “Few problems. A very helpful service.” (comment on pre-booked mobility assistance service)
- “The assistance at Paddington was superb and disabled facilities on the train to Bath were perfect.”
- “The special needs office at Waterloo ensures that someone takes me to my train and helps me on.”
- “At Liverpool Street station all of the staff issuing tickets go to endless lengths to give me the best information for my journey.”
- “I was met at Victoria Underground station and escorted to my platform.”
- “Some on-train ticket inspectors ask if help is required at station changes or final destination.”
- “Telephone renewal of railcard prompt and excellent service.”

- “I am especially impressed by the courtesy I have received whenever I have telephoned the National Rail Enquiry Service.”
- “It varies too much and depends on the station, but very good at St Albans and Kings Cross good too.”
- “Sometimes extremely obliging and helpful staff on trains – check I’m OK, help me on and off, etc” (Virgin Trains).
- “Phones answered promptly. Help and advice given with politeness.”
- “We have always had very good service at Wigan” (with similar comments about Kings Cross and Tulse Hill).
- “Hastings station re-routed a train to a platform that had disabled access in order that I could board.”
- “You are doing a very good job ... but the personal touch is also needed for people who need help.”
- “The help is there, if asked for.”
- “Taken to train prior to general passengers, seated close to exit and toilet.”
- “Thank you. A very helpful scheme” (i.e. Railcards).

3.3 Problems encountered

3.3.1 Respondents were invited to identify the particular difficulties they had encountered, by virtue of their disability, when making rail journeys. In this section of the report, their answers have been listed according to the stages of the journey, and - if relevant - to the nature of the disability. But many difficulties are common to more than one category. For example, poor signage and inoperative information screens are obstacles for both sight-impaired and hearing-impaired people (and for non-disabled travellers too). Numbers in brackets indicate multiple reports of the same problem.

3.3.2 *Pre-journey planning*

- It is not always easy to obtain information about wheelchair access at stations. There is no web-site listing these details. [wheelchair user]

3.3.3 *Buying tickets*

- There can be excessively long queues at ticket offices. [mobility impaired passenger and those easily fatigued]

3.3.4 *Platforms and station facilities*

- There is a severe shortage of seating on concourses and platforms. [mobility impaired passenger] (10)
- Announcements about train departures and about changes/delays to services are not made or are unintelligible. [hearing/sight impaired passenger] (10)
- There are no (or too few) monitors at entrances and on platforms, and/or they are not working. [hearing/sight impaired passenger] (10)
- The audibility of public address systems is poor. [hearing/sight impaired passenger] (9)
- The monitors at station entrances and on platforms are too small or too high to be read. [hearing/sight impaired passenger] (4)
- Insufficient advance notice is given of the numbers of the platforms from which trains are to depart. (3)
- There are too many stairs. [mobility impaired passenger] (2)
- Excessive distances are involved when changing trains. [mobility impaired passenger]
- Tiled surfaces on concourses and platforms are often slippery for those using walking sticks. [mobility impaired passenger]
- The provision of handrails on slopes and stairs is inconsistent. [mobility impaired passenger]
- Toilets on stations are often not accessible. [mobility impaired passenger]
- Lack of colour contrast makes steps and handrails impossible to see. [visually impaired passenger]
- Clutter on platforms makes them hard to navigate safely. [visually impaired passenger]
- There is a lack of assistance available on platforms. [visually impaired passenger]

3.3.5 *Boarding and alighting from trains*

- Trains are not designed to be easy to board or alight from. [mobility and visually impaired passenger] (4)
- There are excessive gaps between trains and platforms. [mobility and visually impaired passenger] (4)

- There is inadequate colour contrast between train steps and platform edges. [visually impaired passenger]

3.3.6 *Train design*

- There insufficient seats designated for the use of disabled passengers. (7)
- Other passengers refuse to give up seats designated for the use of disabled people. (3)
- Some passengers have disabilities which require them to have frequent access to a toilet but are not provided with seats close to this facility. (3)
- More leg room is needed by some disabled passengers. (2)
- There is a lack of provision for wheelchair users (“I have to sit in the guard’s van”). (2)
- There is a lack of visual displays on-board about the next station to be served. (2)
- Insufficient use is made of colour contrast when designing train interiors. [sight impaired passenger]

3.3.7 *Staff awareness*

- Staff lack training in and awareness of the needs of passengers with impaired hearing. (6)
- Staff wait to be asked for assistance rather than volunteering it. (3)
- Staff lack training in and awareness of the needs of passengers with hidden disabilities such as epilepsy. (3)
- Staff should be better trained in ways of assisting visually impaired passengers, e.g. by always handing them the ticket for the outward leg of a journey first.

3.3.8 *Mobility assistance (pre-booked)*

- More staff are needed to help wheelchair users and others when boarding or alighting from trains. (6)
- Promised assistance does not always materialise in practice. (5)
- There is a lack of assistance with luggage, especially where steps are involved. (5)
- Staff assistance is not provided at all at some stations. (5)

- Pre-booked ramps are not always available in practice. (3)
- Available staff could be more pro-active in offering assistance. (2)
- This service is “seldom available, never promoted.”
- The system fails when trains are cancelled and an alternative service has to be used.
- Sometimes there are two guard’s vans and it is not clear which one the user is expected to go to.
- The need to book ahead to obtain any assistance with luggage is a nuisance.
- Reserved seats may be at the far end of the train from the platform entrance or waiting room, resulting in unnecessary extra walking.
- Having to give advance notice means that passengers requiring help cannot travel spontaneously.
- Help is not available if the time of an intended return journey is not known in advance.

3.4 **Priorities for action**

3.4.1 Respondents were asked to list the single most important improvement the railways could make in order to assist them when travelling. In the event, most offered several answers. In the following summary, they have been grouped according to the stage of the journey and the nature of the problem. Different suggestions are often, in practice, simply different ways of tackling the same underlying difficulty. Numbers in brackets indicate multiple instances of the same suggestion. In some instances, the improvement suggested does (or is intended to) exist already, but these are included as evidence that knowledge of them has not been adequately disseminated and/or that they have not been fully implemented in practice.

3.4.2 *Promoting rail travel*

- There should be cheaper (or free) travel for disabled people, who are often on lower incomes and are more dependent on public transport. (3)
- More leaflets/information should be available about services offered and their accessibility. (2)
- The survey should be repeated periodically (say, annually) to gain fresh ideas and additional feedback. (2)
- Disabled people should be consulted more often about their needs. (2)
- A newsletter should be produced with special offers for Railcard holders - along the lines of the Disabled Drivers Association.

3.4.3 *Buying tickets*

- Discounted tickets should be available on-board to allow Railcard holders to avoid long queues and to buy discounted tickets when ticket offices are closed. (3)
- There should be fast-track queueing at ticket offices for passengers with disabilities.
- Tickets should be available by phone or by post.

3.4.4 *Accessing stations and platforms*

- More lifts should be installed. (14)
- Better use should be made of tapes and display units to announce trains and platform changes and delays. This would benefit both those with impaired sight and those with impaired hearing. (9)
- There should be accessible toilets on all stations - and these should not be locked. (4)
- Existing lifts should be better maintained, and signing to them should be improved. (3)
- There should be smaller luggage trolleys. (3)
- Waiting rooms should be improved, especially at smaller stations. (3)
- There should be wider use of ramps in place of stairs. This would benefit not only passengers using wheelchairs but also those with pushchairs and wheeled luggage. (2)
- There should be better access to stations for taxis collecting or dropping off disabled passengers. (2)
- There should be adequate car parking for disabled passengers at stations. (2)
- There should be more seats on platforms. (2)
- Access between platforms should be easier.

3.4.5 *Boarding and alighting*

- Every platform should have a portable ramp. (2)
- There should be self-managed ramps on each train. (2)
- Equipment should be installed for lifting wheelchairs from platforms to trains (similar to that found on specialised road vehicles). (2)
- Wheelchair ramps should be better designed.

3.4.6 *Train design*

- Seating for disabled passengers should be near toilets (and an upgrade to

first class should be offered if no seat is available near the toilet in standard class). (3)

- Doors and aisles in carriages should be wider. (2)
- Slam-door trains should be replaced by those with sliding doors.
- There should be integral ramps in some carriages.
- Train doors should be level with platforms.
- More carriages should have wheelchair accommodation.
- There should be more space for wheelchairs to manoeuvre.
- There should be a buzzer to alert on-board staff if there is a problem.

3.4.7 *Information on board*

- There should be information on visual display units in each carriage. (3)
- Clear information should be provided in train windows about the destination and each intermediate stop. (2)
- Clear announcements should be made before trains arrive at and leave stations.

3.4.8 *Railway staff*

- All staff should have disability awareness training, especially about hidden disabilities. (4)
- Staff should be more proactive in offering assistance, especially to passengers travelling alone.
- Staff should show more awareness of the needs of disabled passengers (i.e. training is not enough - the lessons must be practised).
- There should be regular consultation with disabled passengers.

3.4.9 *Mobility assistance*

- Assistance should be provided both on- and off-train, especially with luggage. (4)
- There should be dedicated staff and/or a point of contact to call on at each station. (3)
- There should be easy access to assistance at all times, preferably 24 hours a day. (3)
- Stations should have “mobility assistance vehicles”, similar to those used at airports.
- There should be better communication between different departments (and operators?) regarding disabled passengers’ travel needs.

3.5 **Bad practice**

3.5.1 Section 3.2 above, under the heading “Good practice”, records a number of broadly favourable comments from Railcards users about service received. The questionnaire also elicited some less friendly judgements, listed here.

- “It’s a nightmare.”
- “One operating company varies from another, and from station to station. It’s not consistent.”
- “We would like to be able to decide to go out on the spur of the moment and travel to town, the coast or elsewhere. This is not possible at the moment because of poor access, organising ramps, etc.”
- “I have given up travel - stairs in all directions. Problems? Hundreds.”

Part four : Staff speaking

4.1 The groups

- 4.1.1 Two focus group sessions were held with railway staff whose duties bring them into contact with disabled passengers, whether by telephone, at ticket offices, on platforms or on trains. One group was nominated by Midland Mainline, which caters primarily for longer-distance, inter-city trips between London, the east Midlands and Yorkshire. The other was nominated by Connex Rail, which caters for shorter-distance trips within London and between the capital and the south coast. Each lasted two to three hours. There were ten participants in all. This section of the report records the key messages emerging from the discussion (as listed by the expert facilitator who conducted them).
- 4.1.2 All stages of a journey by rail were examined, to identify the key problems faced by disabled passengers (as distinct from those common to passengers in general). The participants were honest and open about the challenges facing their industry, and well aware of the issues relating to this category of users - including not only the problems of physical access but also the attitudes of their colleagues, of disabled passengers, and of the public at large. The discussions with passengers had suggested that they underestimated (or gave little credit for) the knowledge that such railway staff clearly possess.

4.2 *Access to stations*

- Too few dedicated car parking spaces are provided.
- Access from car parks to stations can be circuitous and awkward.
- Integrated transport provision is needed (but not always available) to enable disabled passengers to reach the station.
- Information gathering can be difficult, both before the journey and on arrival at the station.

4.3 *Buying tickets*

- Signage can be inadequate.
- The presence of glass between ticket staff and purchasers can cause frustration leading to aggressiveness.
- The height of ticket windows may be a problem for wheelchair users or people of short stature.
- Ticket machines are not designed with the needs of disabled passengers in mind, and do not offer discounted tickets.
- The procedure for obtaining a Disabled Person's Railcard could be simplified (unlike other Railcards, they are only available by post, not over the counter).

4.4 *Accessing platforms*

- The infrastructure of many stations is far from ideal.
- Announcements can be inaudible, ill-timed or simply not made.
- Many stations are entirely unstaffed.
- Refreshments are not always available, or if they are, the facilities are not easy for disabled people to use.
- As a means of access to platforms, barrow crossings raise issues of safety and dignity.

4.5 *Boarding and alighting*

- At intermediate stations, trains may be timetabled to stop for only one minute (or less).
- Gaps between trains and platforms require the use of ramps for some passengers (principally wheelchair users). The ramp gradients can be excessive. There are difficulties for small staff when asked to push heavy passengers.
- The motorised scooters used by some mobility impaired passengers, and electric wheelchairs, can be bulky and difficult to load. Indeed, the former are (officially at least) no longer allowed on trains.

4.6 *Aboard trains*

- Toilets may be inaccessible or poorly designed.
- The presence of disabled passengers creates additional problems if emergency procedures have to be activated.
- Some trains can only carry wheelchair users in guards' vans, which are ill-suited to this purpose.
- If passengers do not make reservations (and many trains have no reserved seats) it is impossible to know their location.
- Some passengers require help at their destination station, but do not request this until they are already aboard, when it may be too late to arrange.

4.7 *The passengers themselves*

- Some passengers do not make sufficient allowance for the extra time needed if help is to be provided.
- Hidden disabilities may not be declared or recognised.
- Extra help may be needed when stations are being rebuilt and modernised, and normal arrangements are disrupted.
- There are variations between train companies in the facilities provided, and thus in passengers' expectations.

- Some passengers become angry when staff cannot comply with their wishes.
- A minority abuse the assistance offered, e.g. by obtaining a discounted ticket for an escort and then re-selling it to someone else.

4.8 *The staff themselves*

- Arrangements are most likely to fail when staff have to respond to temporary, short-notice changes in the operation of the railway.
- Notifying disabled passengers of temporary changes (e.g. to platform access arrangements) which may affect their journeys is difficult if they do not belong to any known groups to whom such notice can be sent, and if they do not check before travelling.
- High staff turnover makes it difficult to provide disability awareness training (and to maintain it).
- Bad experiences with some disabled passengers reduce the confidence of members of staff in their ability to deal with them generally.
- It is not easy to identify passengers who want assistance.
- Some passengers who do not have disabilities are intolerant of those who do and of the efforts of staff to offer help.

4.9 *Suggested solutions*

- Good practice should be shared and promoted, both within each train company, between them through their Association, and with passengers themselves. “Blow your own trumpet.”
- Communication with all stakeholders in the industry must be improved.
- There should be basic disability awareness training at the induction stage for all staff, and more specialist training for those cast in particular roles, e.g. on the “front line”, in call centres, as managers, or in planning and carrying out new building work.
- Better information should be offered in leaflets, through help lines and on the internet.
- The awareness by disabled people of the key role of the train conductor/guard in providing assistance in boarding and alighting, and in the course of the journey, should be raised.
- Public awareness in general of the needs of disabled passengers should be raised.
- Misuse of minicom/textphone facilities (which prevents access by genuine callers) must be discouraged. This occurs when all inquiry lines are busy, and callers attempt to use the numbers advertised for minicom/textphone users instead.
- Carrying all disabled passengers in first class accommodation (where provided) would make it easier to cater for their needs.

- In the interests of safety, travel in guards' vans should be eliminated.
- Upgrading of stations (to make them fully accessible) should be concentrated initially on a chosen set - not more than 15 minutes' travel from each major urban centre - and awareness of these should then be specially promoted.
- Staff must be responsive and proactive, accepting a duty to "own the problem" when they become aware of one.
- Key questions and answers should be available in different formats (and languages) in a booklet designed to enable staff to assist disabled passengers.

Part five : What's next?

- 5.1 The purpose of this report is purely factual : to record what a sample of disabled rail users said or wrote about the services they use (or would like to use), and what a sample of railway staff said about the challenges they face in meeting these passengers' needs. So, in a sense, no conclusions are needed : readers can draw their own. The London Transport Users Committee is glad to have been able to commission this survey (with the invaluable help and support of the Association of Train Operating Companies), and to be able now to pass the baton to the industry – and its regulators – to determine what happens next.
- 5.2 The Committee cannot prescribe exactly what steps they should take, in what order, or how these are to be funded. But the issues raised must be on the agenda for the industry's decision-makers, including Railtrack (via the medium of its annual Network Management Statement) and the Strategic Rail Authority (in its forthcoming Strategic Plan). If they are not - or not seen to be – there, the Committee and its counterparts elsewhere in the Rail Passengers Council network will be vigilant in publicising this deficiency. So, to get the discussion under way, here are some ideas for consideration.
- The rail industry should establish a high-level consultative body under the auspices of the Strategic Rail Authority, meeting regularly in public and representing all relevant interests (on the model of the Health & Safety Commission's advisory committee for the industry), with a duty to keep all issues affecting rail travel by disabled people under active review and to develop policies, procedures and good practice. This body would work in close co-operation with DPTAC, the statutory Disabled Persons' Transport Advisory Committee (which has a wider, multi-modal remit), and could take over the functions of its existing rather low-key rail working group.
 - The rail industry should develop an agreed set of criteria for measuring the "disability friendliness" of its stations, trains, and other services, in order to track progress over time and permit objective comparison between different companies and locations.
 - The rail industry should agree and publicise a series of quantifiable milestones for improvement, and target dates by which these are to be achieved, in order to develop and maintain momentum in the right directions and promote greater consistency in service standards.
 - The rail industry should develop a national programme of staff training and awareness to promote
 - (a) understanding of the nature, range and degree of users' disabilities,
 - (b) disability etiquette,
 - (c) best practice across the industry, and
 - (d) greater understanding amongst decision-makers of the commercial potential of improved accessibility.

- The rail industry should draw up templates and standards (based on access audits of its premises and vehicles) to guide future development and renovation programmes. These should cover such topics as
 - (a) access
 - (b) decor (i.e. use of colour coding and contrast)
 - (c) use of visual display units and public address (including pre-recorded messages)
 - (d) toilet provision
 - (e) seating
 - (f) lighting
 - (g) signage
 - (h) car parking.

[NB : It is anticipated that many of these items will be incorporated in the Strategic Rail Authority's forthcoming code of practice on Train and Station services for Disabled Passengers.]

- The rail industry should publish a newsletter (circulated to Railcard holders and disability organisations, as well as industry decision-makers) reporting service improvements and inviting ideas and feedback.
- The rail industry (in concert with the rail passengers' committees) should convene local focus groups with disabled passengers to identify issues and develop solutions.
- The rail industry should conduct a periodic survey, using "mystery travellers" with a range of disabilities, to assess the quality of their journey experiences.
- The rail industry should report annually on measures taken to improve the travel experience of disabled users.
- The rail industry should commission research into the perceptions and experiences of disabled travellers who are not regular rail passengers, in order to gain a better understanding of the factors which deter them from using its services and the changes which are needed in order to win their custom.

For additional copies of this report, please phone Rachel King on 0207 505 9000. It is also available in large print, or Braille, on request.

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