

Travellers' tales – making journeys safer

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Executive summary

People with sight problems have the right to travel in safety and without fear of accidents or hazards. Unfortunately many feel that travelling alone is not safe for them. Without the confidence to travel they can be isolated and denied opportunities to participate fully in society.

The Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) asked blind and partially sighted people to explain, in their own words, how they felt about travelling and how they could be made to feel more secure. They were asked to give their views on the main areas of everyday travel – walking, bus travel and train travel.

This report voices their concerns.

Changes can be made to lessen these fears and to remove the barriers that people with sight problems face. The recommendations made in this report will make a difference to people's lives and RNIB is seeking their immediate implementation.

The scale of the problem

The Government estimates that there are two million people with a significant sight problem in Great Britain (Grundy et al, 1999). Sight problems are most prevalent among older people – 1 in 5 people over the age of 75 has a significant sight problem – and many blind or partially sighted people have additional disabilities.

Almost two thirds of older blind and partially sighted people never go out alone because they encounter difficulties when moving about the pedestrian environment or when accessing public transport. They frequently consider themselves to be isolated and excluded as a consequence.

Many factors influence a person's level of safety when travelling:

- There is the very real danger from accidents in the physical environment, such as trips, knocks or crashes.
- If the level of service is poor, for example if there is a lack of appropriate accessible information, this can result in an accident or can leave people feeling more vulnerable and less confident about travelling.
- Heightened perception of risk due to stories of accidents, experience of problems and general anxiety can deter people from travelling even if they have never suffered an accident themselves.

People with sight problems are among the most socially excluded in society. An accessible travelling environment is a key building block towards greater social inclusion.

Findings

Every journey is made up of a number of links in a chain, including walking and using public transport. If any link in the journey is considered dangerous it can deter people from travelling, even if other parts of the journey are safe and fully accessible. Tackling the “weakest links” is vital if blind and partially sighted people are to have the chance to travel independently and in safety.

The physical environment and infrastructure are fundamental links in any journey and they must be accessible – at street level, stations and bus shelters – so that people with sight problems can navigate their way safely and make full use of public transport.

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA) prevents service providers from discriminating against disabled people and requires them to make "reasonable adjustments" to their service to enable disabled people to use it. In its report "From Exclusion to Inclusion" the Disability Rights Taskforce (DRT) (1999) recommended that in principle, civil rights legislation should extend to all functions of public authorities. This would enable people with sight problems to have rights to non-discrimination in the way in which the highways authorities carry out their functions. Although the Government accepted this recommendation, as yet it has not set a date for its implementation.

In addition, the DDA specifically excludes any service "so far as it consists of the use of any means of transport" from the goods, facilities and services provisions of the Act (s.19(5)(c)). Thus although services to the public at, for example, rail stations, are covered by the Act, once a blind or partially sighted person steps on to a bus or a train, they have no basis on which to bring a claim of discrimination in relation to their treatment. The DRT recommended that the exemption for transport operators from the 1996 and 1999 phases of the DDA "access to service" duties be removed (DRT, 1999). (These duties include both "direct" discrimination and the duty to make adjustments, other than to physical features, so that the service can be used). The Government stated that it would consult on this recommendation but there has been no such consultation so far.

Legislation on transport safety is a matter of urgency and RNIB is keen to work with Government ministers, civil servants and MPs to address the concerns raised in this report. RNIB recommends that the Disability Rights Commission should use its investigatory powers to look at transport safety issues. Local authorities, and bus and train operators also have a vital role to play in improving the physical environment for travellers with sight problems.

Recommendations

Walking is an integral part of any journey as well as a journey in itself. A third of all journeys and 80 per cent of all journeys under a mile are made on foot. However, all too often people with sight problems feel that the pedestrian environment is so unsafe that it puts them off making any journey at all.

- **Mobility training, which helps people with sight problems to navigate around the street environment, is a vital service but one which too few people receive. Local authorities should ensure that adequate funding is available to promote the usefulness of such training, and should provide training on request.**
- **Local authorities should recognise the importance of the street environment to people with sight problems, and should invest**

more in its design and maintenance. Local authorities should ensure that street activity and furniture is organised in a way that does not compromise safety, and should ensure that this issue is addressed in the walking strategy of their Local Transport Plans.

- **The Government should implement the recommendations of the DRT, including ensuring that all functions of public authorities are covered by the DDA.**
- **Members of the general public should consider the needs of people with sight problems. They should not leave obstacles such as wheelie bins or rubbish bags in unprotected areas; they should make sure that displays or tables are not causing an obstruction; they should cut back overhanging vegetation; and they should consider other people's needs when they choose where to park.**
- **Controlled crossings are crucial to pedestrian safety. The Government should promote and develop good practice in the installation of accessible crossings. Local authorities should consult with local people and disability organisations on the priorities in their areas.**
- **Level crossings need to be properly designed and equipped with crossing facilities so that they are not a danger to pedestrians with sight problems.**
- **Shared facilities with cyclists are extremely unpopular. Shared facilities should only be introduced in exceptional circumstances and only after a full and effective consultation with local users. The Government should review existing guidance and regulations regarding shared facilities to ensure that they address the needs of pedestrians with sight problems.**

Buses are a common form of transport for most people with sight problems. However, for many, getting on and off a bus is a dangerous venture.

Accidents happen when buses do not pull up close to the kerb causing people to trip or even forcing them into the road. Accessible design of entrances, exits and interiors, can minimise accidents and enhance passenger confidence.

Information is important before travelling, at the bus stop and on board the bus, because it makes people feel secure and confident when travelling. In addition, staff assistance can be the key to a stress-free journey.

- **Local authorities should designate all bus stops as clearways and enforce parking restrictions to prevent obstructions.**
- **Local Transport Plans should encourage the provision of more accessible buses through the development of bus strategies and partnerships with operators.**
- **Bus operators should ensure that buses comply with the Public Service Vehicles (PSV) Accessibility Regulations under the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). New accessible vehicles should be introduced on key routes rather than spread thinly over the whole network. Accessible vehicles and routes should be promoted to older and disabled people who stand to benefit from the changes.**
- **Audible announcements and visual information systems are needed and the Government should include them in the PSV Accessibility Regulations as a matter of urgency.**
- **The Government should implement the recommendation of the DRT and ensure that all bus operators are covered by the duty not to discriminate and to make reasonable adjustments, other than to physical features.**
- **Guidance on accessible transport infrastructure is essential, including design of bus stops, access to information and the use of new technology.**

- **Disability awareness training should be a key component of staff training and not restricted to frontline staff. It should be mandatory and not merely an optional component of training courses.**

Travelling by train is becoming easier because more accessible trains are in operation. However, travellers with sight problems still need to contend with hazards and difficulties on a regular basis.

Getting on and off trains is the most common cause of accidents. Gaps between trains and platform edges or between carriages pose potentially deadly risks.

Design and layout of stations is important because it affects the safety of passengers with sight problems.

Information is essential for all passengers before and during travel so that they can make informed decisions and keep themselves safe. Information must be prompt, reliable and accessible.

Staff assistance can alleviate a host of safety issues.

- **All train operators should ensure that their trains meet the Rail Vehicle (RV) Accessibility Regulations, which demand audible destination announcements on trains.**
- **The Government should implement the recommendation of the DRT and ensure that all train operators are covered by the duty not to discriminate and to make reasonable adjustments, other than to physical features.**
- **The Government should ensure all refurbished vehicles are covered by the RV Accessibility Regulations and that there is an end date, of not later than 2017, by which all vehicles have to be accessible.**

- **Audible announcements on the size of the gap between train and platform and which side of the train to alight from should be included in the RV Accessibility Regulations.**
- **Tactile edges to platforms should be installed as a priority and in a uniform fashion.**
- **An inclusive “design for all” approach is needed so that the mobility needs of blind and partially sighted people and other disabled people are addressed.**
- **Accessibility of information on platforms should be improved through clearer visual information and more audible announcements.**
- **Staff assistance must be provided when it has been booked. Staff customer care training should include disability awareness and, specifically, the needs of blind and partially sighted people.**

Introduction

A traveller's tale

Imagine you have a sight problem. Now imagine your perfect journey – a journey you need not worry about making, and where you feel safe from start to finish. What would such a journey be like?

It could start with walking to the bus stop. You walk on a well-maintained pavement without parked cars blocking your way or overhanging bushes scratching you. You enjoy a quiet walk through the local park without cyclists whizzing past you or knocking you over, because they are not allowed on the footpath. You need to cross the road but there is a controlled crossing that makes it easy. Tactile paving helps you find where to cross and you wait a few moments for the audible and tactile signals to tell you that it is safe to cross.

You find the bus stop easily and use the information displays to check whether your bus is on time. You already checked the timetable by using a telephone helpline before you left home, so you are not kept waiting long. You can recognise your bus from the clear display on the front but the driver doesn't mind you checking that you are on the right one.

The bus lane is clear of cars so that the bus pulls up close to the kerb. The steps are clearly marked, and once you are on board the driver waits for you to find a seat. The bus has handrails and good colour contrast so you feel safe as you move about. You can sit back and relax while you wait for the announcement for your stop.

Before long you are on foot again, getting off the bus in the town centre. The pedestrian area has been zoned so that it is easy to avoid café tables, A-boards and other street furniture. You arrive at the train station and, after buying your ticket from a member of staff, you make your way to the platform. The station has good lighting, colour

contrasting features and tactile paving on stairs and at the edge of the platform. As the train pulls up to the station you realise it is a modern train with easy-to-locate automatic doors. The gap between the train and the platform is slight and you climb on board safely. At your stop you are met by a member of staff who is ready to provide the assistance you had requested that morning because you are unfamiliar with the station. You are helped to make your way out of the station and your journey continues.

An everyday journey without any worries or fears: travelling with this kind of ease and safety may not sound like much to most people, but for many blind and partially sighted people it is a far-off dream. A journey in the real world is one of anxiety, uncertainty and accidents.

Real experiences

The travelling environment is beset with difficulties for blind and partially sighted people. These problems can compromise personal safety and make journeys impossible or unreasonably difficult to make independently.

Many people with sight problems do lead independent, fully mobile lives. This is often due to good mobility training or a greater experience of travelling. But even hardened travellers can suffer knocks to their confidence after frightening experiences.

"I am lucky in that I have a reasonable amount of useful vision and am a fairly experienced traveller, and therefore I do feel that I am reasonably safe when I am out and about. However, there have been the odd instances where I have got off the bus or train in the wrong place or even got on the wrong bus or train completely and these experiences are demoralising, embarrassing and certainly give your confidence a knock. I can only imagine what it must feel like for a person with considerably less sight to be in a similar situation. It often feels like the whole system is working against them."

Making journeys safer

The Government estimates that there are two million people with a significant sight problem in Great Britain (Grundy et al, 1999). Sight problems are most prevalent among older people – 1 in 5 people over the age of 75 has a significant sight problem – and many people with sight problems have additional disabilities.

Almost two thirds of older blind and partially sighted people never go out alone because they encounter difficulties when moving about the pedestrian environment or when accessing public transport. They frequently consider themselves to be isolated and excluded as a consequence. The problems they experience mean that they frequently rely on getting a lift in a car belonging to a relative or friend.

Many factors influence a person's level of safety when travelling:

- There is the very real danger from accidents in the physical environment, such as trips, knocks or crashes.
- If the level of service is poor, for example if there is a lack of appropriate accessible information, this can result in an accident or can leave people feeling more vulnerable and less confident about travelling.
- Heightened perception of risk due to stories of accidents, experience of problems and general anxiety can deter people from travelling even if they have never suffered an accident themselves.

An accessible travelling environment is a key building block towards greater social inclusion.

In the perfect journey described above, the needs of travellers with sight problems had been considered and incorporated in design, planning and staff training decisions. Such actions are fundamental if the difficulties are to be removed and if people with sight problems are to travel with more ease and confidence. If their needs are not met, they will remain excluded from society and without opportunities to participate fully in education, employment, leisure and community life.

The Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) asked people with sight problems to explain, in their own words, how they felt about travelling and how they could be made to feel more secure. They were

asked to give their views on the main areas of everyday travel – walking, bus travel and train travel. This report voices their concerns.

Changes can be made to lessen these fears and to remove the barriers they face. The recommendations made in this report will make a difference to people's lives and RNIB is seeking their immediate implementation.

Walking

Walking is an integral part of any journey as well as a journey in itself. A third of all journeys and 80 per cent of all journeys under a mile are made on foot. However, all too often people with sight problems feel that the pedestrian environment is so unsafe that it puts them off making any journey at all.

The walking environment is fundamental to independent mobility, both for complete local journeys and for accessing public transport services. If this part of the journey is unpleasant or dangerous it puts people off the rest of their journey, regardless of whether accessible bus or train services are in place.

"Things happen everyday, minor skirmishes and incidents, that don't always register because it's a regular occurrence. It does put you off bothering after a while though."

Pedestrians as a whole, and people with sight problems in particular, are not having their needs met. They are second class citizens when compared with motorists and other travellers. They endure obstacles on the pavement, unsafe crossings, inadequate street lighting, poorly maintained pavements and encroachment from other forms of travel, namely cyclists and motorists.

Difficulties such as these are hazards to all pedestrians but people with sight problems are more at risk. Government research (Gallon et al, 1995) surveyed 300 people with sight problems and discovered that all had had an accident while walking and over a half had sustained injuries.

Many blind or partially sighted people have to rely on assistance from sighted guides either regularly or as and when required, particularly in unfamiliar territory. This is why assistance from transport staff can often be invaluable.

Mobility training

Blind and partially sighted people can be empowered to move about more independently if they are given proper mobility training. This involves explaining how to make the most of residual vision and of low vision aids such as magnifiers and monoculars. This training helps people to make the most of auditory clues and to be as aware as possible of their surroundings.

Mobility aids such as white canes and guide dogs are an option too, and can give people more confidence. Both types of aid are most helpful on well-known routes. However, on unfamiliar journeys their main function is to help avoid hazards on pavements and to cross roads safely. It is a common misconception that guide dogs will automatically be able to direct their owners to any location regardless of whether they have been shown it before. This is simply not the case.

New technology is providing exciting opportunities in this area and we are beginning to see the emergence of products that in years to come will help people with sight problems to get around. For example, many new mobility aids use laser beams or sound waves to identify obstacles in the user's path. However, these products should not be regarded as a substitute for mobility training. Indeed, it may be some time before such devices are within the price range of many blind and partially sighted people.

The future development of electronic wayfinding systems will also help blind and partially sighted people to get around more independently. These systems, such as RNIB React, consist of a message unit mounted on a wall or post and a remote trigger module carried by the user. When the user walks within range of a message unit, it will be activated, and will send information about the surroundings to the user. Systems like this are already in use in some shopping centres, leisure centres and hospitals.

Mobility training is essential if people with sight problems are to travel as independently as possible and make use of any of these techniques

with confidence. RNIB research (Bruce et al, 1991) showed that only 5 per cent of people with sight problems had received mobility training, with many of these being in younger age groups. More recent RNIB research (Baker, 1999) showed that more than half of those registered blind or partially sighted have never received any mobility training at all.

Mobility training is provided through local authorities, with more than a third using external agencies to deliver the service. Local authorities should ensure adequate funding is available to promote its usefulness and provide it on request without delay. Mobility training with the use of a guide dog is provided by Guide Dogs for the Blind Association (GDBA) and the Guide Dog Alliance (GDA).

Planning and design

Mobility training alone is only half the picture. The design of the physical environment affects how easily people can move about independently and safely, even after mobility training. Simple design features such as colour contrast, tactile paving, appropriate signage, and adequate street lighting can all make a big difference.

Many people with sight problems feel that their needs are not considered when local amenities are designed.

"As I was walking along the road I accidentally walked underneath a concrete staircase leading to a car park. There was no barrier to block the way and I had no idea until my face hit the staircase full on. I lost three top teeth and needed extensive dental treatment over two years to repair the damage."

Town planners should consider the needs of blind and partially sighted pedestrians in their designs and layouts of local neighbourhoods. Investment is shifting towards specific "trip generators" – for example, around town centres and away from local neighbourhoods – to the detriment of people with sight problems who are less likely to access these routes because they cannot move about in their immediate neighbourhood safely and independently.

"Round where I live the paths on the estates have no names and so if you ever get lost it's impossible to ask for help back to where you need to be. I suppose this is a town planning issue but it certainly makes life harder for me."

Investment in the local neighbourhood as well as in high demand routes is needed if blind and partially sighted people are to benefit. Major new developments too often overlook the needs of people with sight problems.

"Vehicles are allowed to access pedestrian areas in Newcastle for loading and unloading outside shops. It definitely puts me off going there. It's a modern shopping centre so why couldn't they have designed it so that cars and vans didn't have to come into the pedestrian area?"

Where pedestrians are a low priority people with sight problems are deprived of access to local facilities and become increasingly dependent on others for assistance.

Local Transport Plans

Local Transport Plans (LTPs) are the new mechanism by which local transport authorities are required to set out their policies and plans for changes to the transport system over a five-year period. The LTPs aim to ensure implementation of integrated transport policies. LTPs should include measures to reduce social exclusion and address the needs of different groups in society, including disabled people.

RNIB welcomes the Government's commitment to draw up a National Walking Strategy which aims to put walking and the needs of the pedestrian further up the agenda. Guidance on LTPs already advises that the main elements of a local walking strategy should be included in any LTP. Local authorities must set targets for improvements in the pedestrian environment in areas such as pavement maintenance, falls or accidents, and increased walking routes (DETR, 2000).

Government advice to local authorities on disability issues (DETR, 1999) states that: "Local authorities and transport operators will have to consider the needs of disabled people from the start to the finish of their journey. Getting the design of the pedestrian environment right is just as important as ensuring disabled people can get on and off the vehicles."

RNIB welcomes this advice and the higher priority given to walking in transport planning. However, the latest review of the LTPs that were published in 2001 shows considerable variation in the coverage of disability issues. Few local authorities have a comprehensive walking strategy or a dedicated walking officer. The Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions (DTLR) is tackling this by issuing new guidance, but unless more effective resources are targeted at walking it will remain a low priority for local authorities.

If people are to be encouraged to walk, the environment must be designed to create favourable environments, and walking must be integrated into the overall transport plan. A partnership approach is needed to involve the key players including local authorities, town planners and transport companies. Any strategy should include information on the existing pedestrian environment in the area and how it is used. Access and mobility audits can be useful in evaluating the accessibility of the pedestrian environment.

Legislation should ensure that walking strategies adhere to enforceable standards and that consultation with disability organisations takes place before the strategies are drawn up. Too often the needs of people with sight problems are only considered at the facility level rather than in the environment as a whole. This can result in people effectively being excluded.

Recommendations

- **Mobility training which allows people with sight problems to navigate around the street environment is a vital service but one which too few people receive. Local authorities should ensure that adequate funding is available to promote the usefulness of mobility training and should provide the training on request.**

- **Planning and design of the street environment should address the needs of pedestrians with sight problems.**
- **Local authorities should outline in their LTPs how the needs are to be met. Full and comprehensive walking strategies with dedicated staff and measurable targets are essential. Consultation with disabled groups must take place before the strategies are drawn up.**

On the pavement

If people are to feel safe and confident when walking then the pavement needs to be maintained to a high standard.

People suffer injury through falls caused by broken and poorly maintained pavement, obstructions on the pavement and inadequate street lighting. There are no official estimates of the costs to society of pedestrian accidents. However, Government research indicates that ten times as many people go to Accident and Emergency departments because of pavement falls compared with road traffic accidents (DTI, 1990). Falls lead to major health costs for the National Health Service and increased insurance claims.

Government research (Gallon et al, 1995), which surveyed 300 blind or partially sighted people, reported that all had had an accident walking and over a half had sustained injuries.

Pavements that are in disrepair, with holes or buckled paving, are consistently complained about by people with sight problems, and came out top in a survey by the National Consumer Council (1995) on problems for pedestrians. Poorly designed and maintained pavements constitute a grave risk to pedestrians and occasionally have been the cause of fatalities.

"My mother in law died after tripping on broken pavement and she was fully sighted – what chance do I have?"

Ice on footpaths, wet leaves underfoot and overhanging branches all contribute to the poor state of the pavement and are causes of accidents.

Local authorities' spending on pavement maintenance has fallen in recent years and is not sufficient to ensure that pavements are safe and without risk for pedestrians with sight problems.

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA) prevents service providers from discriminating against disabled people and requires them to make "reasonable adjustments" to their service to enable disabled people to use it. In view of previous cases taken under similar provisions (Race Relations Act), it is unclear whether a highways authority would be covered in its regulation of paving. In its report "From Exclusion to Inclusion" the Disability Rights Taskforce (DRT) (1999) recommended that, in principle, civil rights legislation should extend to all functions of public authorities. This would enable people with sight problems to have rights to non-discrimination in the way in which the highways authorities carry out their functions. Although the Government accepted this recommendation, as yet it has not set a date for its implementation.

Obstacles and obstructions are a major hazard. The main concerns are described below.

Illegally parked cars

Illegally parked cars block the footway causing people to knock into them and often force pedestrians out into the road to get past them, which can be a frightening and daunting undertaking for people with sight problems.

"Cars on the pavement are a nightmare. There is a short-cut away from the busy main road which I prefer to take but with all the parked cars it's impossible for me to negotiate. My mobility officer has advised me not to even try and to go along the busy road instead."

In addition, illegally parked cars cause extensive damage to the pavement itself, resulting in buckling and cracks. Police officers are able to issue parking tickets but it is often left to the discretion of the individual officer. RNIB wishes to see parking offences enforced more effectively and more regularly. Decriminalisation of parking offences has given some local authorities powers of enforcement and this option should be encouraged if it allows more resources to be made available. The Government is also proposing to extend the police family by introducing community support officers and accredited community safety organisations. Any extension should be accompanied by powers of enforcement.

A-boards and wheelie bins

A-boards, which are commonly used as advertisements for shops, are often placed in the centre of pavements to attract attention. Unfortunately they serve as a real obstacle to people with sight problems. If the shop owns its forecourt it has the right to place an A-board in that area, and the local authority can only act if it receives sufficient complaints that it is a safety risk.

Wheelie bins also cause problems because there is no telling where they might be until someone walks into them: sometimes they are left by the wall, sometimes by the roadside. Combined with their dark colour they are very hard to spot and therefore hard to avoid.

"Wheelie bins are my pet hate. You never know where they are going to be until you walk straight into them."

The policy of some local authorities to only collect bins from the pavement rather than from the garden or yard exacerbates this problem. Bins at commercial premises should always have a designated space away from the pavement. Local authorities can take action to reduce the risks from this kind of street furniture. For example, in Bristol, the council promoted the message, "Obstructing the pavement restricts access and keeps customers away!" and also provided instructions describing clearly where and how they should be positioned.

Outdoor café tables

The increasing popularity of outdoor café tables, especially in the summer months, has brought problems for blind and partially sighted people. Inadequate barriers have resulted in people walking straight into tables, causing embarrassment and distress along with the potential for real injury.

“Cafés with only a ribbon barrier are a real nuisance. Once as I was walking my cane went under the ribbon and then under the chair. By the time my body came into contact with the ribbon it was too late because I had already hit somebody with my cane and spilt coffee down them – luckily it wasn't a child or else it could have been more serious.”

Effective management of the area can mitigate many of the dangers to pedestrians. In Leeds, the council took control of unwanted clutter and by following RNIB guidelines successfully streamlined street furniture. The pedestrian streets have been zoned, with zones defined with changes in colour and texture. One zone is for street furniture (café tables, seating, litter bins and so on) and the other zone is kept clear for people to pass along without obstruction.

Bus stops

Bus stops and shelters can also be a pavement obstacle. Their design and location are critical. Some have transparent panels that are difficult to see in advance and avoid. Furthermore, shelters are often installed directly in the line of travel along the pavement creating a large and permanent obstacle. Bus shelters with transparent panels should have appropriate manifestations that are colour contrasted from the background from whichever direction people approach.

Streetworks

Utility companies and other contractors undertaking maintenance work are often the cause of dangers on the pavement. While work is underway adequate barriers need to be installed to protect pedestrians and once work has been completed the pavement must be left in a fit state, as detailed in the New Roads and Street Works Act 1991. More

coordination is needed between highways authorities and companies to ensure that pedestrians are protected.

These obstacles are the most common complaints. Other notable offenders include lamp posts, street signposts and bollards, all of which contribute to a hazardous and stressful walking environment.

Street lighting

Inadequate street lighting can exacerbate all of the dangers already mentioned. Dark streets are often intimidating and unattractive. They enhance people's perception of risk from crime, and act as a deterrent to confident movement.

Some local authorities are taking steps to tackle this. Leeds City Council, for example, has invested £0.4million in street lighting improvements – 86 per cent of all streets have benefited from new or improved lighting.

Bourne and Pope (1999) cite an example of what can be achieved: "Improving the street environment and encouraging people to walk can contribute to more use of public transport. Nottingham's Safer Bus Routes project introduced a full package of improvements to the experience of walking to and from the bus stop. This included improved lighting, pavement maintenance and traffic calming measures along with regular bus times, new bus shelters located away from trouble spots and customer care training for bus drivers. It produced a 6-8 per cent increase in bus use."

Recommendations

Local authorities should:

- **undertake audits of the street environment and identify barriers for pedestrians with sight problems**
- **invest more in pavement maintenance to maintain and upgrade the quality of footways**

- **ensure that street activity and furniture is organised in a way that does not compromise safety**
- **recognise the importance of mobility training to enable people with sight problems to feel more confident about moving in their environment**
- **improve street lighting, with the needs of pedestrians as a priority**
- **work with utility companies and contractors to ensure adequate protection of road and street works.**

In addition:

- **The Government should implement the recommendations of the DRT, including ensuring that all functions of public authorities are covered by the DDA.**
- **Parking offences need to be enforced more regularly and effectively either by the police, community support officers, accredited community safety organisations, or by local authorities after decriminalisation.**
- **Shops and café owners need to ensure that their displays or seating areas are not an obstruction to pedestrians and are suitably defined and protected.**
- **Bus operators should ensure that their shelters are highly visible and not an obstruction. If they have transparent panels they should have appropriate manifestations and are colour contrasted from the background, from whichever direction people approach.**
- **Members of the general public should consider the needs of people with sight problems. They should not leave obstacles such as wheelie bins or rubbish bags in unprotected areas; they should cut back overhanging vegetation; and they should**

consider other people's needs when they choose where to park.

Crossing the road

For many people fear of crossing the road is the main factor that deters them from walking. The absence of safe, controlled crossings means that everyday journeys are too much of a risk. This fear prevents people from making journeys on foot or from walking to other forms of transport such as the bus or train.

Research by Living Streets (2000) (formerly known as the Pedestrian Association) showed that this fear and frustration is a widespread problem among the general public too. They heard from almost 300 people, over half of whom were aged 60 or over and almost one in ten of whom had a sensory problem. People reported places that were difficult to cross because of non-existent or inadequate crossings, high traffic speeds and heavy traffic. These are serious problems for all pedestrians but have a greater impact on people with sight problems. Government research (Gallon et al, 1995) showed that blind or partially sighted pedestrians have more, perhaps up to ten times as many, accidents than sighted people.

"I think on the whole pedestrian crossings (ones that beep when the traffic has stopped) are fairly accessible and there are more about than there used to be. Having said that, there are always roads that are a nightmare to get across – often because there isn't any crossing at all."

Lack of any sort of crossing is a common problem. Often this occurs at a busy intersection, for example at a roundabout. This inevitably means the route is out of bounds for people with sight problems because there is no way to be sure they will be safe.

It is not always safe to ask another pedestrian for assistance either.

"I asked for help getting over a crossing and I ended up being assaulted by the man. Cars passing hooted at him but no-one stopped

to help me. He was charged with assault. You can't imagine just how awful that was for me."

Even where there are crossings these are often not designed to take into account the needs of pedestrians with sight problems. Good design features include tactile paving and visual and audible signals. In addition, a rotating cone should be installed. This turns to indicate when to cross.

All these signals contribute to a safe crossing. Unfortunately there are simply not enough safe, controlled crossings that incorporate all the necessary design features.

"There's a busy multi-junction crossing but without any audible signals or rotating cone. We've been told it's too expensive. But it's a new site next to a new multi-storey car park – why couldn't they have included it in the budget at the start?"

Tactile paving can be invaluable in locating a crossing point but if it is not applied correctly the consequences can be serious.

"Tactile paving is useless if it's put in the wrong way, for example on the corner of a road. But it's never safe for a blind person to cross on the corner because you could find yourself out in the middle of the road. Having that there actually increases the danger for me."

Crossings that have been fitted with tactile paving are useful in locating the crossing but if there is no signal to indicate the safe time to cross pedestrians are left to judge for themselves. Many will find this far too risky to attempt.

The increased prevalence of zebra crossings, without any signals whatsoever or any requirement for the driver to stop, is alarming. Most people with sight problems consider these crossings to be pointless and would not attempt to cross them in any circumstances.

"There is a zebra crossing that our local Access Group has recommended should have been a puffin crossing (which uses infra red to detect when people need to cross to save time) but this was rejected by the council. So now we have a crossing with no tactile marking, no

symbol to stop drivers and no audible signal to tell pedestrians when to cross. It's just too dangerous to use."

More worrying is that the installation of accessible signals and features can be faulty, causing great anxiety and confusion.

"I don't trust crossings – I always listen for car traffic even if the audible signal is bleeping. I have to cross the A6 which is one of the busiest roads in Europe. There is a tactile cone at the crossing but it's been put in wrong – it turns when traffic is going past rather than when it is stopped, as it should do. Well, that's worse than it not being there at all because it's giving the wrong information but most people would just trust it."

This extreme example shows how important it is to install new access technology in a standardised, uniform way so that people can benefit rather than endangering them even further. Another typical example is where the cone has been placed on the left rather than the right hand side of the crossing, which is standard practice. This can make the cone difficult to locate or even confusing for pedestrians at double crossings where it could be thought of as the cone for walking in the opposite direction. Further complaints are often raised about how the cone's position is inconvenient or out of reach, often not directly at the crossing point, or behind railings.

Pedestrians are not given enough time to cross the road, as the priority is to keep the traffic moving. Combined with higher volumes of traffic and traffic speeds this is not conducive to a pleasant or safe walking environment. Another example of pedestrians' needs being ignored is where audible signals have been switched off following complaints about noise pollution from local residents.

The Government's guidance on local walking strategies in "Encouraging walking" (DETR, 2000) states that the "general aim should be to provide crossings which are safe, convenient and where people want to cross". Local authorities must make safe, controlled crossings a priority and inject more money into this area. The Government has increased funding for transport investment, including improvements for pedestrians. RNIB welcomes this move but until this translates into more controlled crossings, blind and partially sighted

people will be at risk and will be deterred from going about independently.

Recommendations

- **The Government needs to promote and develop good practice on the installation of controlled crossings through the increased use of tactile paving, and pelican and puffin crossings, which incorporate audible, visual and tactile signals, which allow enough time to cross the road in safety.**
- **Crossings should be installed according to strict guidelines on the standard usage of new access technology.**
- **Local authorities should consult with local people and disability organisations on the priorities in their area and install controlled crossings wherever possible.**
- **Where controlled crossings are installed, effective promotion needs to take place to ensure that residents with sight problems are aware of them and how they should be used.**
- **Complaints about noise pollution can be addressed by reducing the volume during quiet hours rather than switching off altogether. "Bleep and sweep" units adjust the sound level automatically according to the level of traffic noise.**

Level crossings

The problems faced by blind and partially sighted people at level crossings fall into three broad areas:

- knowing when they have arrived at a level crossing
- knowing when it is safe to cross
- once crossing, knowing that they remain safe and are following the correct line of travel.

Knowing when they have arrived at a level crossing is increasingly difficult for blind and partially sight people because half barriers are now used. If a person is walking on the right hand side of the road there is nothing to physically stop them from walking onto the tracks. In addition, it is difficult to judge the safe time to cross. Audible signals are generally no longer used to signify that a train is approaching and there are no pedestrian crossing facilities.

Once crossing, people cannot tell if they are safe, and following the correct line of travel is not easy. A directional path– either tactile or visual – is necessary to guide people, and audible clues could also be used for this purpose.

"I don't know when I am approaching a level crossing, whether it is safe to cross, or while I am crossing whether it remains safe. Therefore, although I am a reasonably confident guide dog owner who usually travels on my own I need assistance to use level crossings."

Although there are many possible solutions to these problems, including full barriers, tactile paving and audible clues, more research needs to be done on how these can be linked to signalling. Implementing solutions will require a partnership approach between local authorities and Railtrack, because level crossings cover both highways and railway track.

Level crossings are likely to increase due to renewed interest in trams as a means of transport. The installation of tramlines must include safety features such as effective level crossings so that blind and partially sighted people are not put in danger.

Recommendations

- **The Government should undertake research and develop guidance on how level crossings can be made safe for unassisted people with sight problems.**
- **Railtrack and local authorities should enter into partnerships to address the safety needs of people with sight problems at level crossings.**

Shared facilities with cyclists

In recent years there has been a dramatic increase in the number of places where pedestrians and cyclists must share facilities. This is linked to a resurgence in interest in cycling and walking as transport modes for economic, environmental and health reasons. The National Cycling Strategy is committed to doubling cycling by 2002 (from 1996 levels) and to doubling again by 2012. At the same time the Government is encouraging walking and routes which are "pleasant, safe and convenient as possible to walk" (DETR, 2000). However, the increased conversion of footways and footpaths to shared use by cyclists and pedestrians has created an environment which is often not attractive or welcoming and often too dangerous for both parties to use.

Shared facilities are overwhelmingly unpopular with blind and partially sighted people and other pedestrians. The main concern is that fast moving cyclists cause accidents, falls and heightened anxiety. Recent research by RNIB (Thomas, 1998) showed almost universal condemnation for shared facilities by people with sight problems, with 96 per cent thinking it either essential or desirable that there were no shared pavements.

"I used to have to walk to work along a footpath that doubled as a cycle track, with cyclists hurtling out of nowhere with very little warning – I've had a fair few misses."

The perception of danger may be higher than the actual risk, but all too often this will have the effect of changing people's behaviour and making them feel less secure in their environment.

Research by the Cycling Touring Club (2000) showed how widespread these concerns were among the general public. Half of all pedestrians and cyclists surveyed feared crashes.

Concerns raised about shared use include:

- no physical separation of cyclists and pedestrians
- uncertainty over which side of the path to use
- lack of tactile paving or accessible signs
- no warnings from cyclists of their approach
- lack of lights on bicycles
- difficulty in judging cycle speeds and direction of travel
- frightening for guide dogs.

All this adds up to shared facilities being a no-go area for many people with sight problems, thus restricting their mobility and independence.

"Cyclists on footpaths cause a lot of problems. They don't just cycle on shared paths for a start but even where they do they don't seem to have bells and lights to warn us, or brakes."

In addition, the lack of standard designs means that it is impossible for people with sight problems to make sense of the signs or tactile paving which sometimes exist or to predict how other users will behave.

"There are eight shared routes in Northumberland but none of them follow the same guidelines. Some just have painted symbols to separate out the cyclists and us. There is one where it crosses the road and there is no tactile marking or a dropped kerb to indicate this – I avoid these routes because they are just not safe. You just can't trust them or know what others are going to be doing. Cyclists belong on the road not with pedestrians."

"There is one shared path near me where the markings change sides part way along it – not clear why this is so I avoid it."

A knock-on effect of more shared facilities is the increase of illegal cycling on pedestrian-only footways. It would appear that some cyclists have got the message that it is acceptable to use all pavements as cycling routes, thereby making all pavements more dangerous to use. The lack of enforcement by police and local authorities compounds the problem. The decision to prosecute is usually made by the individual police officer concerned and there appears to be no policy to uphold the law rigorously.

"In my local area I found out that in one month the police issued 40 cautions for riding on the pavement. Only two were processed and no fines were given because you need two cautions before a fine. It's far too easy to get away with it."

The use of skateboards and, in recent years, scooters, has caused similar problems for pedestrians.

"Children on scooters hurtle up and down the pavement. They never call out to say they're coming – so you are aware of something approaching and then have to hope they don't knock into you as they fly by."

Recommendations

- **RNIB recommends that priority should be given to a re-allocation of the road space to cyclists along with addressing road design and traffic speed as the cause of safety problems before consideration of shared routes. Shared facilities should only be introduced in exceptional circumstances, and only after a full and effective consultation with local users. Detailed guidance can be found in the policy statement on shared facilities published by the Joint Committee on Mobility of Blind and Partially Sighted People (JCMBPS, 1996).**
- **The Government should review existing guidance and regulations regarding shared facilities to ensure that they address the needs of pedestrians with sight problems. In particular, segregation must always be maintained either through a level change of kerb height or a (minimum) 1-metre-high barrier.**
- **Where shared routes are installed, guidelines must be adhered to to ensure uniformity of design and the safety of all users.**
- **Local authorities should seek alternatives to the introduction of shared facilities by reallocating road space or by improving traffic safety.**

- **Higher priority must be given to the enforcement of regulations on cycling on shared facilities and illegal cycling on the footway. Police and local authorities should work together to produce Crime and Disorder strategies that address activities considered unsafe by local people, such as pavement cycling.**
- **Cyclists should consider the needs of pedestrians with sight problems and behave responsibly.**

Bus travel

Buses are a common form of travel for blind and partially sighted people, especially for those who do not have access to a car. Many people use buses on a regular basis without too many difficulties. However, some encounter problems which can deter them from using buses.

Recent RNIB research (Baker, 1999) found that a third of blind people surveyed, and almost half of those who were over 60 years old, felt that using the bus was either "very difficult" or "quite difficult". Almost half of those questioned reported difficulties getting information about buses and in using bus vehicles (46 per cent).

"I can't be bothered to use buses – too many things to think about and too many things that could go wrong."

Government research (DETR, 1995) showed that accidents involving buses and people with sight problems all occurred either on the bus or while boarding or alighting. These aspects of bus travel cause the most safety problems and can be the most daunting for people with sight problems.

The DDA specifically excludes any service "so far as it consists of the use of any means of transport" from those provisions of the Act that refer to goods, facilities and services (s.19(5)(c)). This means that although services to the public at, for example, a bus terminal, are covered by the Act, once a blind or partially sighted person steps on to a bus, they have no basis on which to bring a claim of discrimination in relation to their treatment. The DRT recommended that the exemption for transport operators from the 1996 and 1999 phases of the DDA "access to service" duties be removed (DRT, 1999) (These duties include both "direct" discrimination and the duty to make adjustments, other than to physical features, so that the service can be used). The

Government stated that it would consult on this recommendation but there has been no consultation so far.

RNIB is urging the Government to implement the DRT's recommendations and to ensure that all transport operators are covered by the duty not to discriminate and to make reasonable adjustments, other than to physical features.

On board

Getting on and off

Getting on or off the bus can be dangerous for a number of reasons. If the bus cannot pull in at the bus stop because cars are blocking the way then it will have to stop in the middle of the road. This forces people with sight problems out into the road, which can be a frightening experience. This problem could be removed if all bus stops were designated clearways to prevent any cars from parking on them.

"Buses often don't pull up to the kerb so I have to get into the road and trail the side of the bus to find the door. Getting off is a problem if they don't pull up because your foot can get trapped between the door and the kerb. I have twisted my ankle a few times with that kind of thing."

However, some bus drivers don't even bother using the bus stop, which can subject passengers to a terrifying ordeal.

"The bus did not stop at its final stop; it stopped somewhere else. The doors opened and the driver said something I could not understand. I asked the driver where I was. The driver did not answer me. I told him that I was blind, showed him my white stick, and asked him to help me out of wherever I was back to the bus stop. He made a gesture and said it was "over there". He would not help. I got off – it was more scary than driving an ambulance in the Blitz. It was only when I had to put out my hand to stop an oncoming car that I found that I was in a car park. Only then did the driver get off the bus and take me to "safety". I was very shaken."

Newcastle City Council in partnership with bus operators has drawn up a strategy to improve access to bus stops. The measures include protecting bus stops with 24-hour clearway orders, reviewing parking legislation, improving pavement parking and clearway enforcement and promoting a change in attitude among people parking in bus stops.

London Transport allows parking attendants to travel free of charge on buses to target illegal parking in bus lanes. This initiative is being used in conjunction with cameras on the roadside and on board buses.

For many people with sight problems managing steps at the entrance or exit of a bus is a problem if there are no appropriate markings to highlight their position.

"I can't see the edges of steps and if they're not properly marked I often trip up. I've hurt my wrists a couple of times as I've fallen."

Another problem is that buses often pull away too quickly before people on board have had a chance to find a seat or before those leaving are a safe distance from the bus. This can cause falls and knocks or even worse.

"It's hard to climb down some of these buses with high steps. I have to take it slow so I don't fall but the driver often doesn't give you enough time. I always feel rushed."

"I had an awful experience with a bus driver which caused me to lose my new guide dog. The bus driver firstly pulled away before we had found our seats so we were thrown into them. Then he drove so recklessly that it frightened my dog to the point where she was trembling, panting and sweating and couldn't sit still. The bus driver was abusive too when asked to slow down. After that experience she was unable to work because she had such a fear of buses and all other transport including trains, taxis and cars. The dog had a nervous breakdown and had to be retired. All because of one bus journey. GDBA sued the company for loss of a dog."

Increasing competition between bus companies has contributed to this problem, with the pressure being put on drivers to complete more journeys in shorter times often in conditions of understaffing.

Moving inside the bus

Once aboard, the layout of the bus interior can cause safety problems.

Moving about to find a seat or to exit the bus can be potentially dangerous due to the lack of sufficient handrails – especially at the front of the bus and at the exit.

"There aren't enough poles to help you to a seat or they always seem to be in different positions."

The PSV Accessibility Regulations require new buses from 2000 to meet accessibility standards and all buses to comply with these standards by 2017. The standards include specifications for tactile marking, colour contrast, low-rise floors, handrails at entrances and exits, and clear route displays. These vehicles represent a significant improvement over previous designs in terms of accessibility for older and disabled people. RNIB welcomes the guidelines but recommends that existing vehicles aim to meet the same standards.

For the moment, the problems of getting on and off and navigating around the bus are exacerbated by the variety of bus designs. Too many different designs on the same routes cause confusion and uncertainty.

"Bus layout is a huge problem since no two buses are the same in Leicester."

People are concerned about the mixing of older style and newer more accessible buses on the same routes because this means they cannot be confident about being able to use the bus. Increased uniformity of design on bus routes would be a step in the right direction and would improve user confidence.

Some bus operators have tackled this problem by inviting people with sight problems to take a tour around new buses. This is useful and also improves the dialogue between users and service providers.

Recommendations

- **All bus stops should be designated as clearways by the local authority and enforcement of parking restrictions is crucial to ensure that obstructions are not in place.**
- **LTPs should encourage the provision of more accessible buses through the development of bus strategies and partnerships with operators.**
- **Bus operators should ensure that new buses comply with the PSV Accessibility Regulations and that existing vehicles meet those standards too.**
- **New accessible vehicles should be introduced on key routes rather than spread thinly over the whole network.**
- **Accessible vehicles and routes should be promoted to older people and those with disabilities who stand to benefit from the changes.**
- **Staff need to recognise that certain passengers need more time to board, find a seat or alight.**

Information

One of the most worrying aspects of bus travel for people with sight problems is ensuring that they get off at the right stop. Most people ask the driver to tell them when their stop is reached and often this works well, especially if they use the route regularly. However, there are times when the bus driver does not inform them and they have to rely on other passengers for assistance. This puts people in a vulnerable position and could lead to them being misled or preyed upon by other travellers. In cases where people miss their stop the experience can be frightening and very disorientating if they are left in an unfamiliar area.

"No idea what stop you're at. I do ask the driver but they never tell me. Have to rely on other passengers but that's not always possible or desirable. Having an automatic announcement would just make it so much easier. I often overstay past my stop and then feel anxious about how I'm going to find my way back."

"My sister is registered blind and will not use buses as she finds them totally inaccessible. Knowing where to get off the bus, especially in the dark, or in an area you don't know, is a huge stumbling block."

The use of audible announcements and visual information systems on board would solve this problem. The PSV Accessibility Regulations do not include a requirement for audible and visual announcements. RNIB believes this is a missed opportunity and will continue to press for the inclusion of announcements on buses, on a similar basis to those required on trains.

Trials are currently taking place on the use of audible and visual information. Unfortunately these trials have met with some resistance from other travellers.

"We were part of the trials of bus announcements in Leicester – they announced each stop as we approached and it was fantastic. But would you believe that sighted people have complained that it's distracting! So bus drivers often switch it off and we're back to where we were. I'm so disappointed and angry – sighted people obviously don't understand our difficulties at all."

This unfortunate situation demonstrates how a lack of awareness and understanding on the part of sighted people has jeopardised vital improvements to the safety and independence of those with sight problems. Ironically, announcements would also benefit tourists, night-time travellers and those unfamiliar with the area.

Information such as timetables and routes is also required before travel, but local bus information is often poor and incomplete.

The Government's White Paper "From Workhorse to Thoroughbred: A better role for bus travel" (DETR, 1999) set out the commitment to better public transport information at both local and national level.

Traveline is the new national public transport information system, which began operating in 2001. Its aim is to provide information through a telephone helpline on timetables to stops for bus, train, underground, coach, tram and ferry. Information about fares and accessible vehicles may be provided at a later stage. RNIB welcomes this project and recommends that every effort be made to publicise it effectively to people with sight problems whom it would benefit a great deal.

Information about changes in services, in particular the route, is essential too and should be available prior to beginning the journey. Where this is not possible or where a sudden change is required as much information as possible should be given to help passengers continue their journey, and personal assistance should also be on hand to enable passengers to do this.

"Once the route changed without any notice and I found the bus stopping on a three-lane highway on the opposite side of where I wanted to be. I had no idea where the crossing was and the driver had no time to help me. Obviously if I'd known about it I wouldn't have got on the bus or I would have got off sooner."

Many people with sight problems have difficulties in locating the bus stop and identifying which bus they need to stop.

"First you've got to locate the bus stop and then you've got to stop all the buses to find the one you want if no-one is waiting as well to help you."

Being able to read the number and route of the bus would enable more people to use buses confidently without having to rely on others. Stopping each bus that passes to ask the driver is not a popular option either.

"The numbers and signs on the front of buses are often too small to read so I have to stop every single one to check."

The PSV Accessibility Regulations (DETR, 2000) cover the presentation of destination and route number displays on buses. Specifications include the size of characters, good colour contrast and the height of the display. Particular care needs to be taken with LCD

displays, or other electronically generated characters, which can be less legible than traditional roller blind forms.

New technology is currently used at some bus stops to give passengers more information. Electronic display boards can inform people which bus is due next and its expected time of arrival. This is a welcome development, but concerns have been raised over poor colour contrast of text, screens being too high to be easily read and the lack of an audible announcement.

"It's a good idea to have more information at the bus stop about the next bus and such but I can't read the new screens and there isn't an announcement."

The Government is currently looking at the access issues in relation to transport infrastructure such as bus stops. Guidance on appropriate design of bus stops and ways of improving access to information are essential and RNIB urges that the needs of blind or partially sighted passengers are taken into consideration.

Recommendations

- **Audible announcements and visual information systems should be included in the PSV Accessibility Regulations. Bus operators should install them as a matter of good practice. In all circumstances drivers should make use of existing equipment to make announcements for stops.**
- **Traveline should ensure that it can supply the information that is essential to people with sight problems, such as the type of vehicle, the accessibility of bus stops or stations and staff availability. Publicity for this new initiative needs to be targeted at blind and partially sighted people who could otherwise miss out.**
- **Guidance on transport infrastructure should include better designs of bus stops and improving access to information. The use of new technologies involving electronic display screens is**

welcomed but screen text must be legible, positioned at a suitable height and be accompanied by audible announcements. Legibility of printed information at bus stops must be improved.

- **Staff training should ensure that all drivers recognise that passengers need information about changes to routes, and that they need bus stops to be announced. Drivers should know how to use existing public address equipment to offer this.**

Staff assistance

A common complaint is that drivers do not understand the safety issues relating to blind and partially sighted travellers. Problems experienced through a lack of awareness include driving off before the passenger has sat down, not pulling in close to the kerb to assist boarding and alighting, and not stopping when they see a white stick or orange mobility permit cover.

"Bus drivers when asked for assistance are more often than not surly, rude and unhelpful."

"I have tried asking bus drivers to tell me when to get off. Invariably they don't and the response is that it's not their job or that I should have someone out with me if I can't manage."

"Bus drivers need to understand that not all blind people have a cane or a dog – they try and chuck you off for using a blind person's bus pass."

Disability awareness needs to be a standard part of drivers' customer care training to ensure that they understand the access problems that disabled and older people face. Blind and partially sighted passengers would warmly welcome such an improvement.

"One local bus company is great. They only do a few routes but the drivers are helpful and polite and the service is reliable. They tell you

when to get off and pull up close to the kerb. It makes all the difference."

RNIB research (Baker, 1999) indicated that while nearly nine in ten companies gave some customer care training to their staff, less than one third included general disability awareness in this training. Training with specific reference to the needs of people with sight problems was only provided by one in seven. Far more needs to be done to ensure that blind and partially sighted people can use bus services in safety and confidence.

The Government has recognised that investing in staff is just as important as investing in accessible vehicles and infrastructure. Its own guidance states that staff need to be able to assist passengers who have sensory disabilities and to recognise the needs of people who may require more time to board and alight or to get to a seat (DETR, 2000)

Recommendations

- **Disability awareness should be a key component of staff training and not restricted to frontline staff. It should be mandatory and not merely an optional component of training courses.**

Train travel

Train travel has been plagued by major accidents and tragedies in recent years. Public confidence in the state of the railways is at an all-time low with disruption, delays and cancellations commonplace. These problems are affecting all travellers but they can have an even greater impact on blind and partially sighted passengers. In addition, there are a host of other hazards and difficulties that travellers who have sight problems have to negotiate on a daily basis

RNIB research (Baker, 1999) showed that almost half of blind or partially sighted people who took part in the study found using trains difficult.

The DDA excludes train services in the same way as it does bus services. Services to the public at a rail station are covered by the Act but as soon as passengers board a train they have no basis on which to bring a claim of discrimination in relation to their treatment.

RNIB is urging the Government to implement the DRT's recommendations and to ensure that all transport operators are covered by the duty not to discriminate and to make reasonable adjustments, other than to physical features.

Getting on and off

The most serious accidents can occur as people attempt to get on and off trains. Government research (Gallon et al, 1995) showed that this accounted for half of all accidents occurring in train travel.

Gaps between the platform and train can be quite large and if passengers are not sure where the platform edge is they may trip and injure themselves. Many choose to jump off the train to ensure they land on the platform, but this in itself can be hazardous. Furthermore, this has been identified as a significant problem with newer rolling stock, which leave a larger gap at the platform.

"I will not travel alone to Birmingham with my guide dog since I know of two guide dogs that have fallen under the train while trying to get on or off. The new rolling stock has made the gap so large that it's a hazard. No announcements are given to warn people of this either. I have to ask my wife to accompany me now – I shouldn't have to do that."

"I am very fearful of slipping between the carriages. Newer trains seem to have a bigger step up from the platform and leave a wider gap between the platform. I never feel safe getting on or off."

Accidents also occur where the gap between the train carriages is large enough to cause confusion and potential disaster.

"I was alone on the platform and when the train pulled in I used my cane to locate the open door. Well I found a gap and stepped out but it was the gap between the carriages. I fell onto the platform and thought I was going to be run over by the train. I screamed for my life and luckily I was heard. Three years on and I am still suffering from the physical and mental after-effects. I have to have continuous physiotherapy, I need a hip operation and I've been off sick from work since then. The Transport Police told me that they often get called because people have fallen between the carriages. Why isn't something done about it?"

People are also worried about getting off the train on the wrong side and ending up on the track rather than the platform.

"I was getting off the train and no one else was about. I opened the door on the usual side and stepped down... to find there was no platform. If I hadn't been cautious I would have ended up on the track."

All these situations could be improved by having announcements warning people about the size of the gap and of the correct side of the train to exit.

Tactile paving at the edge of platforms is also vital to help people judge their position correctly. Tactile paving must be applied uniformly to all platforms to ensure passenger safety.

Appropriate train design should also improve this situation. Better use of colour contrast and tactile marking can help people locate door buttons. This will save people time in getting on and off and give them more chance of doing so in safety and confidence.

"It can take me longer to find the door and the small push button. I should take my time getting off to make sure I don't fall but by then I feel I don't have any time left."

Rail Vehicle (RV) Accessibility Regulations (DETR, 1998), implemented under the Disability Discrimination Act, set the standard for new vehicles entering service from 1 January 1999. They include regulations on accessible design features, which RNIB welcomes. These standards will not apply to older vehicles and so, because of the long life span of trains, it will be approximately 2030 before all trains are affected by the regulations. RNIB is urging the Government to ensure all refurbished vehicles are covered by the Regulations and that there is an end date by which all vehicles have to be accessible. We believe that the end date should be not later than 2017 – the date by which all buses have to be accessible. A date of 2017 would therefore be consistent with the Government's policy of integrated transport.

The RV Accessibility Regulations include requirements for audible announcements on approaching stations but not announcements about the size of the gap between platform and train or the correct side for alighting. RNIB considers this a missed opportunity and urges an amendment to the Regulations to ensure this in the future.

Recommendations

- **All train operators should ensure their trains meet the RV Accessibility Regulations.**
- **The Government should ensure that all refurbished vehicles are covered by the RV Accessibility Regulations and that there is an end date, of not later than 2017, by which all vehicles have to be accessible.**
- **The RV Accessibility Regulations should be amended to include audible announcements about the size of gap between train and platform and which side of the train to alight from.**
- **Tactile edges to platforms should be installed as a priority and in a uniform fashion.**

Design and layout of stations

The design and accessibility of stations and platforms is an important determinant of how safely passengers with sight problems can travel.

Services provided at stations, such as ticket purchasing and access to platforms, are covered by Part III of the DDA. There is presently a duty on such services not to discriminate against disabled people; to alter any policies, procedures and practices which make it unreasonably difficult or impossible for disabled people to access them (such as a "no dogs" policy); and to provide auxiliary aids and services (such as staff assistance) where these would facilitate the use of a service. In 2004, the duty to make physical changes to enable access will come into force.

The main safety concerns for passengers include:

- stairs and escalators
- island platforms
- lighting
- sloping platform edges
- tactile paving

- clear signage.

"Stations are terrible – escalators cause me problems and there are too many stairs without clear markings. Few lifts and usually in inconvenient places."

"Platforms without a wall on one side are really frightening. I like to walk by the edge of the wall for guidance – without it I feel very vulnerable."

"It's harder to find my way around when the lighting is wrong – if it's not enough or too bright."

"I've walked along the sloping edge of a platform onto the track. Luckily there wasn't a train coming and someone saw me and shouted at me. I dread to think what could have happened."

"No announcements, no staff at stations, poor lighting and no tactile edge for platforms. It's a nightmare."

"If there were clearer signs I could make my own way around without having to rely on others."

Many physical features that would fundamentally improve stations can be achieved within the context of general refurbishment and maintenance.

"Building sight" (Barker et al, 1995) contains detailed guidance on how to meet the needs of people with sight problems within a framework of inclusive design for all. The Joint Mobility Unit (managed by RNIB and GDBA) has a transport consultant who can advise designers, operators and managers on how to improve the travelling environment by using the recommendations contained in "Building sight".

The Strategic Rail Authority (2002) issued a Code of Practice on the design of stations in February 2002. This new guidance is welcomed by RNIB and we will be pressing for its effective enforcement.

Recommendations

- **An inclusive “design for all” approach is needed so that the mobility needs of blind and partially sighted people and other disabled people are addressed.**
- **Before any building or refurbishment of physical facilities professional advice should be sought to ensure that obligations under the DDA are met and best practice followed.**

Information

Timely, up-to-date and accessible information is essential for all passengers before and during travel in order to make informed decisions and keep themselves safe. If information is not available, or is unreliable, people are left feeling insecure and more vulnerable.

Information on timetables and routes prior to travel is essential for all travellers but especially so for those with sight problems who may need to book staff assistance or arrange collection at the journey's end. The new information initiative, Traveline, aims to give that information through telephone helplines and this is welcomed.

"I wouldn't dream of going on a train journey, especially on a new route, without being sure of times and connections and such like. I can't rely on finding out later."

A very common complaint is the lack of information given on platforms and on board trains. Audible announcements are essential and platform video screens must be improved – many are useless for most people with sight problems because the print is small and illegible.

"There are also not enough announcements made on stations to tell you what platform you need to be on and when. Worcestershire is primarily a rural area and very often the stations are unmanned. If there are screens with information on, then the print is usually much too tiny to be read which is especially frustrating when there is no one around to ask for assistance. It's not any better at the bigger stations either –

usually large boards high up on the wall with lots of information for dozens of different trains in very small writing."

Even where announcements are made they must be accurate and reliable, especially when the information concerns terminations and change of services.

"I was on my way to work when they announced on the train that we were being diverted to another station in another part of the city. However, five minutes later the train pulled up in the usual station without being diverted at all, which was very confusing. I'm partially sighted and knew the route very well but how would a totally blind person or someone unfamiliar with the route know where they were if the announcements cannot be relied upon to be accurate or consistent?"

Sometimes the lack of information can have serious consequences.

"I was travelling on my usual train and instead of going through the station, it terminated. I waited patiently and then decided to investigate. No one was around to tell me what was going on so I tried to find my way along the platform to the main concourse. I ended up falling off the platform as I was unsure of the correct direction of travel. I broke an arm and a leg and dislocated my shoulder. I ended up in hospital for a month and off work for six months. All because no announcement was made that the train would terminate and no assistance was given to me. Well I sued them and won but it took me a long time to regain my confidence. I wanted to show them that they weren't going to ruin my life."

Some passengers have found themselves left on the train at the end of the journey because they were not sure which was their correct station due to a lack of announcements.

Under the RV Accessibility Regulations all new trains must give audible announcements of route and destinations, the approaching station, delays of more than ten minutes and route diversions.

Recommendations

- **Accessible information prior to travel, such as that provided by Traveline, is essential. This service must be effectively publicised to people with sight problems to ensure they can benefit from it**
- **Accessibility of information on platforms should be improved through clearer visual information and more audible announcements.**
- **All train operators should ensure their trains meet the RV Accessibility Regulations.**
- **The Government should ensure that all refurbished vehicles are covered by the Regulations and that there is an end date, of not later than 2017, by which all vehicles have to be covered.**

Staff assistance

Many travellers with sight problems book staff assistance through the rail company prior to travel. Staff can help alleviate a host of safety issues by offering help in getting on and off the train, in locating the correct platform, in guiding around the station, and by giving information about changes in service.

Many people receive the assistance they request and are satisfied with the level of service. This contributes greatly to their overall feeling of confidence and security when travelling.

"Some are very good at giving staff assistance. It's so easy and they phone through to the station and it's always been there for me. No trouble at all."

There are times when assistance has not been booked but is provided nonetheless to the great satisfaction of the passenger.

"I had an excellent service during the recent time-tabling difficulties. I was advised to get on the first available train but then it was announced we would have to all-change at another station, which I wasn't familiar with. I hadn't booked any assistance because I didn't think I would need it. But the train manager came for me and made sure I was safely transferred. It was such a relief."

However, some companies give the impression that they are not interested in offering staff assistance in any circumstances.

"I asked for staff assistance when booking my ticket. I was told point blank that they couldn't give me any and that I should ask another passenger."

Furthermore, a number of problems can arise for people trying to get assistance. For example, the assistance needs to be booked prior to travel – sometimes up to 24-hours in advance – and this is not always possible.

"Every time I want to travel I have to give at least 24 hours' notice for staff assistance. It doesn't seem fair that a sighted person can just decide to travel and get on with it but I have to plan it in advance."

However, even when assistance has been booked it is not always provided and this can leave passengers in a highly vulnerable position.

"I booked assistance at my local station for help later on to change trains. Nobody turned up so I had to just follow the general flow of people to what luckily turned out to be the exit where I managed to get to the ticket office and get some help."

Many people feel they have to rely on other travellers for help but this is a worry too.

"Following an accident I had when I fell off the platform after staff did not help me I don't trust staff anymore and feel I have to rely on help from other passengers instead. But is that always safe to do?"

"I don't bother to book staff assistance because usually it's not there – I just make do with help from other passengers. I shouldn't have to but what choice do I have?"

Where assistance is given it can lead to other complications if arrangements are not followed through precisely.

"I received staff assistance at my station but they put me in a first class seat rather than the seat I had actually booked which was very kind of them but it meant that later on staff did not know where I was and could not help me get off. There was no one in the carriage to ask for help and since there were no announcements I ended up missing my stop. It was a kind gesture but it totally backfired."

When assistance is provided staff should ensure that travellers are given enough help to undertake the journey in safety. This may mean more than just guiding the traveller to the correct platform.

"I had arranged assistance since I needed to change trains and change platforms in my journey. Staff did help me get to the right platform but then left me to wait alone for the train. There were no announcements on the platform so I wasn't sure when my train arrived. I had to rely on other passengers to get me on the right train."

Staff assistance can also be required unexpectedly, often due to unpredictable events such as delays or disruptions to normal service. Difficulties often arise in locating staff to ask for assistance when it is needed.

"I got very lost at Bristol station with only six minutes to change trains and there being no one around to ask for assistance. I know there is travel assistance available from most of the rail companies these days, but this has to be booked in advance and is not always practical."

"It would help if customer service announcements included the location of staff otherwise it's impossible to know where to find them."

This is particularly the case at unmanned stations, often in rural areas.

"Getting off at an unmanned station is very frightening. I have to ask the guard who usually has no time to help and so I'm left on the platform not knowing how to get outside to the taxi rank."

Additionally, many people report that staff uniform is key to identifying staff at busy stations. Recent changes in the uniforms worn by London Underground staff have made them inaccessible to partially sighted people. Uniforms must stand out from the crowd in order to be easily spotted.

Sometimes it is not the level of service but the quality of staff that is worrying. Many travellers feel that staff do not fully understand their needs and are not prepared to do enough to assist, especially in situations where personal security is at risk.

"I was travelling with my guide dog when some youths sat next to us and started harassing me. They started making loud barking noises at the dog and used abusive language when I asked them to stop. They proceeded to throw things at my dog too. Another passenger went to look for a guard while the youths started lighting matches and waving them near my face. By this time the guard arrived and they denied they had done anything wrong, insisting that I was lying, saying: "What did you see me do, you can't 'cos you're blind so you don't know what we're doing". They were verbally abusive to the guard who told them to get off at the next station. The next thing I knew the guard had left and the youths set off the fire extinguisher and directed it at my dog before disappearing. The guard reappeared and turned off the extinguisher. That was the last I saw of him, and another passenger helped me get off at my station. I had to spend a long time calming my dog down until she could guide me properly home. I am an experienced and generally confident traveller but was left feeling very shaken and distressed by the incident. I was also very concerned that no steps were taken by the guard to ensure that I was all right and was able to get home. As for my guide dog well she never recovered and I had to retire her early – all because of that one incident."

Clearly staff face many pressures, not least dealing with incidents like this example. However, staff should be more aware of the particular effects an incident may have on blind or partially sighted travellers and guide dogs, and should ensure their safety wherever possible.

Recommendations

- **Staff assistance must be provided when it has been booked.**
- **Audit staff skills to identify training needs and areas for improvement.**
- **Staff customer care training must include disability awareness and specifically the needs of blind and partially sighted people.**
- **Staff uniforms should be easily identifiable and consideration should be given to how to make staff more visible to passengers.**

Conclusion

Blind and partially sighted people have the right to travel in safety and without fear of accidents or hazards. Unfortunately they feel that travelling alone is not safe for them. Without the confidence to travel they can be isolated and denied opportunities to participate fully in society.

Every journey is made up of a number of links in a chain, including walking and using public transport. If any link in the journey is considered dangerous it can deter people from travelling even if other parts of the journey are safe and fully accessible. Tackling the “weakest links” is essential if blind and partially sighted people are to have the chance to travel independently and in safety.

Access to public transport vehicles has improved recently. RNIB welcomes this progress but will continue to campaign for further improvements in accessibility. However, as the Government has acknowledged, even with accessible vehicles “potential passengers will be unlikely to travel if the built environment and transport infrastructure are not equally accessible to them”.

The physical environment and infrastructure are fundamental links in any journey and they must be accessible – at street level, stations and bus shelters – so that people with sight problems can navigate their way safely and make full use of public transport.

This report voices the concerns and fears that people with sight problems have about travelling. Changes can be made to lessen these fears and remove the barriers they face. The recommendations made will make a difference to people's lives and RNIB is seeking their immediate implementation.

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If you or someone you know has a sight problem, call the RNIB Helpline on 0845 766 9999.

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