

TRANSPORT COMMITTEE, CORONAVIRUS: IMPLICATIONS FOR TRANSPORT, CALL FOR EVIDENCE

COVID-19 has exacerbated the pre-existing problem of the limited accessibility to active travel for Disabled people, while simultaneously increasing its importance. Prior to COVID-19, opportunities for active travel for Disabled people were limited by lack of full accessibility on many public transport networks,¹ lack of inclusive cycling infrastructure, and the prohibitive cost of e-bikes and adapted cycles.²

Active travel has multiple social and environmental benefits. It helps individuals stay physically fit and healthy, supports mental wellbeing, and helps cut air pollution. This is especially important for Disabled people due to the impact of lockdown. Disabled people are more likely to have been shielding or self-isolating, with a detrimental impact on their mental wellbeing and physical fitness. They need the opportunity to restart physical activity and socialise while maintaining a safe distance. Increasing the general health of the population and improving air quality will also help reduce the impact of any future outbreaks of COVID-19.

However, COVID-19 and the need for social distancing has led to people being discouraged from using public transport. The difficulties of using public transport are particularly acute for Disabled or elderly people: many of them are more likely to require assistance directly from transport staff, which has become a challenge due to the need for physical distancing. The Government has taken steps to encourage alternative modes of active travel – predominantly cycling and walking – and has provided some funding for local authorities to introduce temporary cycling and walking infrastructure.

While we welcome the Government’s support for temporary cycle infrastructure, we are concerned at the lack of consultation with the Disabled community and the potential for changes to street space to hinder their mobility. If poorly designed, cycling infrastructure can act as a barrier to Disabled people – or, indeed, anyone using a non-standard cycle such as a cargo-cycle or handcycle – forcing them to rely on private cars or taxis, neither of which are necessarily affordable for Disabled people nor desirable during the pandemic.

Reports on the impact of COVID-19 and lockdown measures have demonstrated that Disabled people fear that they are being abandoned and their needs ignored, adding to the mental health burden.³ There is a real danger this could be exacerbated further by hurried changes to transport provision as lockdown measures are relaxed.

We urge the Department of Transport to ensure that any new transport schemes and infrastructure are fully accessible. We support CyclingUK’s contribution to this call for evidence,⁴ and in particular their demand for high-quality cycling infrastructure design guidance, alongside measures to ensure

¹ *Fair access: Towards a transport system for everyone*, Centre for London report (2019) <https://www.centreforlondon.org/reader/fair-access/>

² *Experiences of Disabled Cyclists Survey Report, 2019-20*, Wheels for Wellbeing (2020) <https://wheelsforwellbeing.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/WFWB-Annual-Survey-Report-2019-FINAL.pdf>

³ *Abandoned, forgotten, and ignored. The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on Disabled people*, Inclusion London (2020) <https://www.inclusionlondon.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Abandoned-Forgotten-and-Ignored-Final-1.pdf>

⁴ *Coronavirus: Implications for Transport*, Written evidence submitted by Cycling UK (CIT0175) <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/7557/pdf/>

that local authorities adhere to them, with the proviso that the designs are fully accessible. Our *Guide to Inclusive Cycling* provides details of accessible cycling infrastructure design; we suggest that these design principles should be adopted for all cycling infrastructure.⁵

We also demand that the Government continues to provide vocal and financial support for local authorities to develop and maintain temporary infrastructure. A recent Guardian report has demonstrated that many temporary schemes in London boroughs have been abandoned or reversed,⁶ highlighting the need for more consistent and explicit Government support for temporary measures. It will also be necessary to continue to provide financial and technical support for cycling and active travel infrastructure, on a par with current provision for motor vehicles, to ensure that high-quality, accessible active travel provision is maintained into the future.

Additional notes:

- Wheels for Wellbeing is led by Disabled people and fights for equal rights to enjoy the wellbeing benefits of wheeling & cycling.
- 19% of the population are over 65 and 21% of UK adults are Disabled. The NHS has advised 1.8 million people who are extremely vulnerable to COVID-19 infection (who have conditions including blood cancer, MS, or severe chest conditions) to practice 'shielding' and remain at home.
- Being isolated indoors for prolonged periods leads to a greatly increased risk of ill health, and greater care needs. The Chief Medical Officer recommends that every adult, including Disabled people, should aim for a minimum of 150 minutes per week of moderate intensity exercise to improve their mental and physical health. Even before lockdown Disabled people were 50% less likely to achieve this. For all citizens, restrictions on the ability to exercise and on social interaction may cause or worsen key medical conditions, leading to an increase in the incidence of disability and higher economic costs.

⁵ *A Guide to Inclusive Cycling*, Wheels for Wellbeing (2019) <https://wheelsforwellbeing.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/FINAL-v3.pdf>

⁶ *English councils backpedal on cycling schemes after Tory backlash* The Guardian, Wednesday 15th July 2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/15/english-councils-backpedal-on-cycling-schemes-after-tory-backlash>