

Equality of Opportunity Committee

Inquiry into the impact of Welsh Government policy on the accessibility of transport services for disabled people in Wales

Response from RNID Cymru

1. About us

1.1 We're RNID Cymru, the charity working to create a world where deafness or hearing loss do not limit or determine opportunity and where people value their hearing. We work to ensure that people who are deaf or hard of hearing have the same rights and opportunities to lead a full and enriching life. We strive to break down stigma and create acceptance of deafness and hearing loss. We aim to promote hearing health, prevent hearing loss and cure deafness. RNID Cymru represents over 480,000 people in Wales who are deaf or hard of hearing, that's one in seven people in Wales.

1.2 Our response will focus on key issues that relate to people with hearing loss. Throughout this response we use the term 'people with hearing loss' to refer to people who are deaf, deafened and hard of hearing. RNID Cymru is happy for the details of this response to be made public.

1.3 This response has been cross endorsed by NDCS Cymru (The National Deaf Children's Society). NDCS is the leading charity dedicated to creating a world without barriers for deaf children and young people.

2. Comments

2.1 RNID Cymru welcomes the opportunity to comment on the National Assembly for Wales's Equality of Opportunity committee's inquiry into the impact of Welsh Government policy on the accessibility of transport services for disabled people in Wales. RNID Cymru welcomes the steps that have been taken by the Welsh Government to improve accessibility to transport for people with hearing loss, but RNID Cymru believes much more needs to be done.

2.2 Transport is essential for providing access to employment, social events, health services, education and leisure pursuits. However, passengers with hearing loss face many difficulties when travelling on public transport resulting in unnecessary stress and anxiety. Three thirds

(61%)¹ of people with hearing loss in Wales believe that being deaf or hard hearing makes it harder for them to access public transport, this rose to 66% for using public transport alone. Comments raised in focus groups as part of research² conducted by RNID Cymru reflects this:

“I don’t like to travel alone now, not with my hearing gone.”

Female, over 60, hard of hearing, north Wales

“Sometimes I am really nervous on my own on a bus or train so I ask someone to come with me.”

Female, 20-30, BSL user, south Wales

2.3 This is largely due to inaccessible forms of communication and access to information, a barrier raised by over a quarter (28%)³ of those surveyed. Public information is often relayed by audible means only, leaving passengers with hearing loss without access to relevant and up-to-date facts about their journey. This is also a significant safety concern with a lack of visual alarms and real time visual emergency announcements. Communication with staff is often difficult due to a lack of deaf awareness, a barrier that was identified by nearly two thirds (65%)⁴ of people with hearing loss.

2.4 RNID Cymru aims to ensure the barriers currently faced by people with hearing loss when travelling on all modes of transport are addressed and removed. RNID Cymru believes that every stage in the journey should be accessible for everyone.

2.5 The Welsh Assembly Government’s public transport policy has a vision of ensuring that “our transport system enables people to access healthcare, education, employment, shopping and leisure facilities.”⁵ RNID Cymru agrees with this vision, but feels that this is currently not happening as many people with hearing loss still struggle to access public transport in Wales.

2.6 In addition, there is very little mention of access requirements for people with disabilities to buses, trains or taxis in the Welsh Government’s National Transport Plan⁶. Whilst RNID Cymru agrees for the need for a better integrated transport system, we are very disappointed that the plan does not include more focus on accessibility to public transport.

¹ RNID Cymru (2010) Open to all?

² RNID Cymru (2010) Open to all?

³ RNID Cymru (2010) Open to all?

⁴ RNID Cymru (2010) Open to all?

⁵ Welsh Assembly Government (2010) <http://wales.gov.uk/topics/transport/PublicTransport/?lang=en>

⁶ Welsh Assembly Government (2010) National Transport Plan

2.7 We are therefore disappointed that many of the transport policies implemented by the Welsh Assembly Government don't include more focus on accessibility and the accessibility of public transport in particular. Without a focus on the accessibility of public transport for all, many of the Welsh Assembly Government's policies will not be realised and achieved.

3. Open to all- Bus accessibility

3.1 "Open to all?" was a substantial piece of research conducted by RNID Cymru into the inclusion barriers facing people with hearing loss in Wales. One chapter of the research focused upon access to public transport for people with hearing loss. This part of the consultation response will focus upon the research conducted as part of "Open to all?"

3.2 70%⁷ of respondents to "Open to all?" noted that they had used bus services in the past; of these nearly a fifth (18%)⁸ said it was difficult to find information before travel, this rose to over a quarter (28%)⁹ during the journey. RNID Cymru believes this shows the need for up-to-date visual information systems in bus stops and on buses.

3.3 One person who is hard of hearing commented on their experience of using bus services,

"When I was in college I used the bus service. The bus drivers I find very annoying because they're facing away from me and they don't understand me, they just point and I find it very belittling, very rude."
Male, 20-30, hearing aid user, north Wales

Another person who is hard of hearing said,

"When I get my local bus the person at the front doesn't look at me. They keep looking down. I try and get their attention. I think they don't know about deafness. Some are ok. But there are some that aren't. It really depends."

Female, 20-30, hearing aid user, south Wales

3.4 RNID Cymru believe strongly that these experiences show the need for all staff in front line bus services in Wales need to be deaf aware. The comments show a lack of understanding of how to communicate with people with hearing loss. In addition the comments show the frustration and isolation passengers with hearing loss can experience by travelling by bus.

⁷ RNID Cymru (2010) Open to all?

⁸ RNID Cymru (2010) Open to all?

⁹ RNID Cymru (2010) Open to all?

4. Open to all- Train accessibility

4.1 Access to train services is essential to access some far reaching destinations for many individuals, and this is no different for people with hearing loss. Over a quarter (27%)¹⁰ of people with hearing loss in Wales said they found it difficult to access information about train services prior to their journey, this rose to three thirds (59%)¹¹ for people who use British Sign Language (BSL) or Sign Supported English (SSE).

4.2 However, during the train journey these figures rose considerably. Over two fifths (42%)¹² said it was difficult to access information during a journey, whilst nearly three quarters (72%)¹³ of BSL or SSE users.

4.3 In addition to this, many people with hearing loss have raised the issue of audio announcements in train stations. Background noise and poor quality sound systems often make announcements difficult to understand.

4.4 Several people with hearing loss commented on this issue in train stations,

“PA systems that lack clarity, cause echoes and or are masked by excess background noise (e.g. engine noise).”

Male, 65-74, hard of hearing, north Wales

“Tannoy messages, which are difficult enough for people with good hearing to hear, impossible to hear with my hearing loss. I know they are saying something, but I have no idea what.”

Female, 25-44, hard of hearing, south Wales

“Quite often there are announcements over a tannoy system, changes to platform, changes to connections what have you, but we always miss out. And it’s only when you notice everyone else getting off the train that you realise something is going on here.”

Male, 40-50, BSL user, north Wales

“What happened to me once was that I followed everyone else, thinking that there had been a change. When the train took off, I realised it was going in the wrong direction, but I’d followed everybody else and done the wrong thing in the end because I’d got on the wrong train.”

Male, over 60, BSL user, north Wales

4.5 RNID Cymru believe these experiences show that there is a clear need for audio visual announcements on all trains and stations, which include

¹⁰ RNID Cymru (2010) Open to all?

¹¹ RNID Cymru (2010) Open to all?

¹² RNID Cymru (2010) Open to all?

¹³ RNID Cymru (2010) Open to all?

any changes in services. The experiences noted from people with hearing loss demonstrate that audio announcements isolate people with hearing loss from receiving, in some instances, important information that can alter their travel. People with hearing loss have very differing communication needs including, and not limited to; BSL and SSE interpretation, written language, as well as access to sound and oral communication. Both improved audio announcements and visual displays are required due to different communication within the hearing loss and deaf population.

4.6 In addition, the worry of having to rely on other passengers' reactions can lead to further difficulties, proving further that only real time audio visual announcement systems can work for people with hearing loss.

5. Open to all- Taxi accessibility

5.1 Currently in Wales, accessible taxi policies are the responsibility of individual licensing authorities, in many cases the local authority itself. One fifth (20%)¹⁴ of people with hearing loss find it difficult to access information about taxis prior to the journey, this rose to over quarter (28%)¹⁵ during the journey. For BSL and SSE users, 48%¹⁶ said it was difficult to access information before travel, whilst this rose to over half (52%)¹⁷ during the journey.

5.2 People with hearing loss need to communicate directly with the taxi driver regarding journey destination and a lack of deaf awareness amongst taxi drivers can make this difficult for travellers with hearing loss:

"With taxi drivers you know you get in the back of a taxi and they start a conversation they've got the back of their head to you and I don't know what they are saying so I ignore them, I find that difficult."

Male, 20 – 30, hearing aid user, south Wales

5.3 In another example, people with hearing loss noted that in the past year a taxi driver had assumed a group of people who use BSL were drunk and refused to pick them up. Another taxi driver had picked them only as a result of personal awareness of deafness and the use of BSL.

5.4 RNID Cymru believe that there is a clear need for local authorities to ensure that as part of the licensing process that all taxi licence holders are trained in deaf awareness, to ensure a hassle free journey for people with hearing loss.

¹⁴ RNID Cymru (2010) Open to all?

¹⁵ RNID Cymru (2010) Open to all?

¹⁶ RNID Cymru (2010) Open to all?

¹⁷ RNID Cymru (2010) Open to all?

6. Recommendations

6.1 Following the evidence submitted in this paper, RNID Cymru recommends the following:

6.2 Recommendations for the Welsh Assembly Government

- Bid for a proportion of the £300 million budget set aside by the UK Government to update railway stations, and use the fund to ensure that railway stations are accessible to people who are deaf or hard of hearing.

6.3 Recommendations for rail and bus companies

6.3.1 Ticket Booths

- Review the design and use of ticket booths, and remove barriers to communication where possible.
- Ensure induction loop systems fitted in ticket booths.
- Ensure all induction loop systems clearly advertised, maintained and regularly tested, and all staff trained in their operation.

6.3.2 Visual and real time information

- Ensure real-time, visual information displays in vehicles, carriages, stations and stops, notifying passengers of next stops, final destinations, as well as any voice announcements made by staff.
- Ensure that audible announcements are as easy to hear as possible, replacing systems that have poor quality sound.
- Ensure all audible announcements are spoken by someone who has been trained and is clearly understandable.

6.3.3 Staff Training

- Ensure all frontline staff receives accredited deaf awareness training. Deaf awareness training should be included as part of staff's induction and continuous training.
- Ensure that training is tailored to the specific roles of staff members, helping them to identify barriers that people who are deaf or hard of hearing face on transport networks.

6.3.4 Taxi or Mini Cab Firms

- Ensure all frontline staff receives accredited deaf awareness training. Deaf awareness training should be included as part of staff induction and continuous training.

- Ensure visible taximeter so that the cost can easily be seen by the passenger.
- Install loop systems in taxis where possible to enable easier communication between hearing aid users and drivers.

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