

Transport Champion Report by Jay Wilkinson



Image credit: Amanda Somers, Fair Buses demonstration, Bristol, 9/9/2023



Above: Reclaim Our Buses petition launch for public control, Bristol, 7/7/2023



Above: Demonstration to prevent ticket office closures, Bristol, 26/7/2023

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Introduction

In April 2023, I was employed for 21 hours a week by Bristol Disability Equality Forum (BDEF) as a 'Transport Champion.' BDEF created the world's first [Community Climate Action plan](#) both by and for disabled people, and one of the recommendations made in the plan was for BDEF to employ a Transport Champion to push for transport in Bristol to be made both fully accessible (good for disabled people) and sustainable (good for the planet).

I have now stood down from the role as in the last months I have faced numerous barriers and challenges, as well as experiencing worsening physical and mental health while in post. I haven't been able to achieve what I wanted to in my role, but while carrying out the work, I have done my best to try and get a handle on the way in which Bristol's varied and complex transport issues impact disabled people (having not worked in the field of transport before), and have supported disabled individuals and local campaigns in taking things forward wherever possible. I'd have loved to be able to draw together a diversity of disabled people, disabled people's organisations, plus carers and allies to form a coalition that would work on a strategy for how best to campaign together for a decent state of transport for disabled people in Bristol. I'm sad that I didn't manage to get this going, but one of the main takeaways from this report is that achieving change is only likely to happen if people come together in such a way.

In spite of stalling in what I found it possible to achieve, I feel it is important to share the key learnings from having undertaken this role, in the hope that others may find some of the material useful. At the very least, I gathered a large amount of information from meetings and conversations with numerous individuals and groups (thank you to everyone who met with me) who are either working on improving Bristol's transport issues, or who are disabled and experiencing a range of transport access issues, or both. From this I have observed various patterns, and can make some recommendations for what may need to happen if there is to be an overall shift. I hope that in reading this document, non-disabled/not-yet-disabled people working in the fields of both transport and sustainability will bring accessibility closer to the heart of their work, and that disabled people who are wanting to take campaigning on accessibility forwards will have some useful background information to work with. I also hope that those with decision-making power will take the time to examine how they approach accessibility and figure out where their own blind spots are.

Working in this role was emotionally challenging, and I hit up against blocks and barriers that disabled people routinely come up against while campaigning for accessibility. I've attempted to avoid language that is blaming or attacking so that those implicated in decision-making processes that aren't working for disabled people don't feel immediately defensive or glaze over while reading. However, the frustration can inevitably come through sometimes, so if you do find yourself getting defensive or starting to glaze over, it'd be great if you could try and recognise that and work on empathising with what's being said.

Also, to be clear, there are many things that I still don't understand about how transport works in Bristol (people I spoke to who have worked in transport for years reassured me that there are still things they don't understand). Many of the points below indicate where I got to in my understanding, but there is so much information that is utterly unclear. If you spot something in this report where you can see that my understanding is limited and you're able to shed some light on the issue, please get in touch and I'll update the document; I've made it a google doc so that it can be kept live with new info. I haven't yet had the capacity to make an Easy Read or Plain English version of this document. If you'd like to have a go at this, let me know.

Finally, this work may continue in some form, so if you're interested in future work on accessible transport or other issues, please keep in touch:

Email accessiblebristol@gmail.com

Thank you to Emma Geen and Colin Mathews for reviewing this document and your valuable insights. Thanks also to Clare Bonetree for initiating my education into the politics of disability.

Background: Disabled access, transport issues and climate change

BDEF's Community Climate Action Plan recognizes that in addressing the climate crisis, transport is a key area that needs to be dealt with for disabled people. Transport systems need to change in order to ensure low energy usage, help adapt to an unstable climate, and make the best use of increasingly limited resources. Facilitating active travel (walking and wheeling; cycling, including adaptive bikes etc) and the improvement of mass transit systems are clearly the way to go to achieve this. At the same time, some disabled people will remain reliant on personal car usage due to the nature of their impairment, which needs to be recognised in policy so as to avoid people being singled out and discriminated against for having this need, but rather to facilitate access to the most sustainable vehicles available.

A sustainable transport system needs to have disabled access built into the heart of design. It is more complicated and expensive to 'retrofit' (add at a later time) all the components that make for accessible transport. Historically, accessibility has been sidelined from transport decisions, and disabled people have had to fight for their right to accessible transport. Typically, disabled access is siloed off when tackling issues such as transport or environmental concerns. For example, a 2022 study by a team at McGill University, Canada, found that of 190 countries, less than 10 had made even a minimal start in ensuring that climate policies on adaptation are consistent with disabled people's rights. Only seven countries consulted people with disabilities on policy design, illustrating that this trend looks set to continue unless interventions are made. Pushing for sustainable transport systems needs to ensure that '[eco-ableism](#)' is avoided, this being 'a failure by non-disabled environmental activists to recognize that many of the climate actions they're promoting make life difficult for disabled people'.

It must also be noted that regardless of considerations about sustainable transport, disabled people currently face huge access issues when trying to get from A to B, and this is problematic in Bristol more than many other cities. There are ways in which improvements have been made, such as having space on buses for a wheelchair, but things don't end there.

The concept of the 'Accessible Journey Chain,' ([Park and Chowdhury, 2018](#)), which takes into account all aspects of a journey from door to door reveals how some parts of a journey may be accessible, but unless all the components of the journey are accessible, people may face unacceptable barriers. For example, the bus may have a wheelchair space, but if someone is unable to get to the bus stop in the first place due to poor maintenance of pavements or because the local bus service has been cut and the bus service that is still running is too far away to get to, or once managing to get to the bus, the driver is hostile and the bus is already full of prams, the wheelchair space becomes irrelevant.

Disabled people are one of the marginalised groups who are on the 'frontline' of dealing with the impacts of climate change. As healthcare and social systems come under increasing strain, and access to the resources needed to deal with impairments becomes more problematic, as well as the issue of dealing with extreme weather, disabled people will face extra levels of vulnerability. In reality this is not a future event; disabled people already routinely face the impacts of these difficulties, and have developed expertise in navigating how to meet needs when faced with huge barriers to necessary resources.

Many disabled people are aware of vulnerability to climate change in a way that non-disabled/not-yet-disabled people have not yet thought about. Space should be made for these valuable perspectives and contributions. After all, around 20% of the population are disabled (1 billion people around the world), and anyone could become disabled at any time. Our society continues to have a culture of 'othering' disabled people, deeming them invisible, less important, or irrelevant. It is for all these reasons that BDEF sought to put in post a Transport Champion, as there is so much work to be done in pushing to get rid of barriers that are already a problem and to prevent new barriers from coming into play.

Learnings from working in the role of Transport Champion

Learning 1: The need for good strategy

People I encountered in the course of doing this work had so many stories of transport accessibility issues that it was overwhelming. Here is a list of some of the most persistent issues:

- Accessibility inhibited by persistent pavements problems, such as pavements not being properly maintained, making them excessively bumpy and lacking enough dropped curbs. This makes many pavements difficult/dangerous to navigate for those with limited mobility and visual impairment. Access is also frequently problematic due to the habits of the general public leading to pavement parking, bins, furniture and other items routinely blocking access. Businesses often block walkways with tables and chairs or construction materials. Those using wheelchairs and mobility scooters find themselves needing to take the risk of joining the road and navigating traffic. Some people gave stories of being unable to leave home due to blocked access.
- Buses being infrequent, unreliable, and canceled without notice.
- Bus services being cut (more than 30 across Bristol and some surrounding areas), particularly in economically disadvantaged communities who are reliant on the bus.
- Poor treatment by public transport staff. One bus user commented that he 'never knew if public transport staff were going to be helpful or hostile.'
- Stories of receiving discrimination and harassment on public transport from members of the general public.
- Poor maintenance of bus stops, which are often uncovered and with insufficient information.
- Wheelchair users having to wait for several buses before there is space for them to get on, mainly due to wheelchair space being occupied by prams (this is not intended to vilify parents with prams, but highlights that limited services put pressure on service users to share an inadequately resourced space).
- Disabled bus pass usage only being possible after 9.30am, causing an extra cost burden for people already cash-strapped (unlike registered blind/partially sighted bus passes and London's disabled 'freedom pass.' which can be used at any time of day).
- Common errors in audiovisual information, such as giving the wrong stop, and different bus apps giving different transport information. Visually impaired people report that they can't access bus timetables that are suitable for them.
- Panel rattling and overcrowding on buses being overwhelming for autistic people.

- Lack of taxis which are reliable and accessible.
- The Clean Air Zone affecting Blue Badge holders, who after an initial period of time after it was introduced, became required to pay to enter the Clean Air Zone if driving an older vehicle (older vehicles with space for disability equipment can be bought at lower cost).
- New electric car charging points either 1) taking over Disabled parking bays or 2) the charging points being put up on a kerb so wheelchair users can't get to them. This is brand new infrastructure that is being put in place and is not being made accessible, highlighting eco-ableism in motion.
- Added to the above, new issues came up regularly, such as the whole country being threatened with rail ticket office closures with a total disregard for how this would affect disabled and older people, Spike Island residents fighting to prevent the new Cumberland Road bus gate adversely affecting disabled access, and stranded Ashton Vale residents starting a campaign to try and get their bus services back as a result of the wave of cut services last year.

Because the problems related to accessing transport that people encounter are so diverse, I could see that it was important to think about strategy. A good strategy is a “potentially achievable way of surmounting a key challenge” (from the book 'Good Strategy, Bad Strategy'). To develop a strategy, it's necessary to have a theory of why things haven't worked in the past, or why the challenge is difficult. In this way it's possible to outline an overall approach for overcoming obstacles. A good strategy recognizes and defines the problems and challenges, and identifies critical obstacles. Good strategy works by focusing energy and resources on one or a very few pivotal objectives, whose accomplishment will lead to a 'cascade of favourable outcomes.' In creating a strategy, there will be many things that remain unaddressed. If you try to focus on too many things at once, everything becomes watered down and you can end up not achieving anything at all. I will return to this point later.

When I first started my role, I conducted a [survey](#) to help me work out what to focus on in particular. Pushing to improve all aspects of bus services was people's main area of concern, followed by the quality of pavements. Disabled people use buses more commonly than other forms of public transport, which may be the only available accessible transport in their locality (see '[The Human Cost of Privatising Buses in the UK](#)', page 25). Many disabled people are reliant on the bus as their main form of transport, often due to driving being unaffordable or inaccessible. Disabled people are vulnerable to 'transport poverty,' and the cutting of bus routes means that many disabled people, especially those who are on lower incomes (also bearing in mind that disabled people are likely to live on lower incomes), and many who live in poorer areas of Bristol are now in 'bus deserts' due to WECA cutting of more than 30 services around Bristol. Improving bus services was therefore the obvious place to start.

However, it is also very difficult to figure out which aspect of bus services to focus on improving. Joining Bristol's Reclaim Our Buses campaign for 'bus franchising' is one place to start. This would achieve public control and oversight of bus services around Bristol (bus franchising has recently been achieved in Manchester). It would mean that the bus network would be properly regulated by an independent body (in the same way that Transport For London works to regulate transport across the city, leading to the provision of some of the best and most accessible public transport in the world). Bus franchising would mean huge gains for disabled access. In a franchised network, private companies would no longer have the freedom to axe routes, hike fares and cut corners with no repercussions. Companies would need to be accountable in terms of adhering to universal standards of accessibility.

Standards could be raised so that, amongst other areas, audiovisual information was improved, new buses were obligated to have space for 2 wheelchairs, and services could be integrated across a network, with inexpensive integrated ticketing schemes.

However, the campaign for bus franchising isn't without its problems. The main problem is that it could take 3 to 5 years to achieve. In addition, there is a big barrier associated with the Metro Mayor of the South West lacking 'precepting powers.' What this means is that unlike Metro Mayors in other parts of the country, the West of England Combined Authority (WECA) mayor does not have the power to raise the revenue needed via a levy on Council Tax that would be used to create a body to oversee the bus network. It's possible for the metro mayor to be given these powers, but as I understand it, all of the local authorities that make up WECA would need to give the go-ahead, and as things stand, South Gloucestershire is not willing for the metro mayor to have this power. This makes the possibility for bus franchising an even longer road.

Then there is the issue of the 30+ bus services in Bristol that have been slashed, particularly in economically disadvantaged areas where people are reliant on the bus, with a particularly high impact on disabled people. As veteran transport campaigner David Redgewell maintains, there's no point in campaigning for bus franchising if the mayor hasn't got 'precepting powers'; instead we should be campaigning for working class areas/disabled residents to have their bus services reinstated. However, when I spoke with Councillor Ed Plowden, who sits on WECA's scrutiny panel for transport, he raised that there was no way that people were going to be able to get their bus services back due to those services being apparently unprofitable for bus companies and too expensive to be supported by public money; a knock on effect of austerity. He said that the way forward was to push for the relatively new [WestLink](#) ('demand responsive') bus service to be extended, and for further Community Transport schemes for older/disabled people to be extended to areas where bus services have been cut and nothing has been put in their place. However, Westlink is still proving problematic in terms of reliability, and Community Transport is reliant on bus providers applying for grant funding to provide services in certain areas, as opposed to local government having an obligation to provide transport to areas which are reliant on the bus but aren't profitable enough for companies to engage in providing the service.

All of the above are symptoms of how disabled people are marginalised in terms of accessibility needs being fully and properly considered. Creating an effective strategy would mean finding a way to ensure that disabled access is put at the heart of transport planning and policy. In the recommendations section I have suggested a strategy to achieve this, which may not be the right one, but will hopefully get people thinking more about strategy. There is also the question of how to build empathy amongst those who hold power. Several disabled people suggested giving non-/not-yet-disabled power-holders the challenges of navigating Bristol's transport system in a wheelchair or with a blindfold for a day to gain a better understanding of what disabled people are having to deal with.

Learning 2: Prepare yourself for what to do when you're undermined.

"As a Disabled person, I don't get the same respect, regard and esteem as other transport users. Disabled people come in as an afterthought" - respondent to BDEF transport survey.

"The people in power who make all the decisions that impact Disabled people all appear to be non-disabled. We need better representation in these organisations rather than having a change forced on us and then having to complain/protest afterwards" - Colin, BDEF colleague.

In my work, I observed a disconnect between disabled people's innumerable accounts of their discriminatory experiences of the transport system, and the accounts of decision-makers and power-holders who maintain that there is no way in which disabled people are being sidelined, that equalities legislation is being followed, that consultations are being held, that Equality Impact Assessments are being carried out, and that there is nothing more that needs to be done. Assuming that people are acting in good faith rather than just fobbing off disabled people, the main takeaway is that people with decision-making power find it difficult to recognise the ways in which disabled people continue to be sidelined, and that the decisions of people in those roles can be complicit in this. When I spoke to people with some kind of decision-making power, I would come away with a sense of, 'what just happened????' It was hard to grasp why I was saying things that I felt made sense, but seemed to get lost or were downplayed to the degree that I felt I was being told there weren't any problems anymore.

I believe that the people I spoke to were indeed (mostly) acting in good faith, and were not attempting to undermine what I was saying or to distort the facts. But if there is a systematic refusal by people with power to fully engage with where the problems still lie in terms of accessibility for disabled people, eventually those who are campaigning for things to be better may come to feel that they are being undermined. At some point people will get angry, which is a valid reaction, but gives an excuse for ignoring what people are saying.

I found myself quite stumped for what to say in these situations, which made me feel powerless. Even when I said to decision-makers directly, 'There is a disconnect between how disabled people are communicating the ways they experience discrimination and lack of accessibility on transport, and the ways that transport providers/decision-makers communicate that there is no real problem,' my statement would somehow get sidelined and I'd be told that things were up to standard and everything was already being done. I ended up doubting myself because of this. I still didn't really know how to deal with it, but I think it's important to be prepared for what to do when this occurs with a strong narrative and as much hard data as possible, and to strategize on how to hold people to account, such as by looking up and scrutinising the consultations that have been done or the Equality Impact Assessments that have been made.

I'm clear from all the contact I had with people that disabled people's experiences aren't being paid attention to in the measure that's needed. It is as yet unclear how to get Bristol City Council, WECA, and transport providers to be responsive if they really believe they are already doing the right thing. If they don't actually care, it becomes convenient to refer to the consultations and EqIA's as a way to maintain they've done everything they needed to do. In this way it's possible to disregard disabled people's experiences. David Sidebottom, from the watchdog Transport Focus, said in relation to the cutting of bus services, "before making tough decisions, an Equality Impact Assessment needs to be done, but this probably isn't happening to the level it should be." One disabled activist I interviewed said he'd "Lost faith that there's a strategy that will make power-holders do something unless they are personally invested." A member of the Reclaim Our Buses campaign made the observation that, "most decision makers don't use public transport and so have no empathy."

The following examples are to illustrate how after cumulative interactions, I started to feel a sense of being undermined:

Example 1: Proposed Ticket Office closures

I attended a meeting held by Transport Focus, a government watchdog which monitors transport issues and brings together many representatives of the transport sector at regular intervals. This was around the time of the move to close 1000 ticket offices at train stations and a public consultation was just beginning. A railway representative was at the meeting

and in the Q&A session, I asked if a proper Equality Impact Assessment had been conducted to look at how disabled people would be affected by the closures. He assured me that this had been done. The proposed closures then precipitated protests around the country, high profile media publicity and more than 700,000 people responding to the public consultation about how the closures would affect them. Following on from the outcry, no decision has been definitively made as to whether ticket offices will be closed. If the needs of disabled people had been taken seriously in the first place, the proposal for closures would not have been made. As it is, ticket offices were threatened with closure with no consideration whatsoever even at the most basic level of how to ensure that disabled people could still access rail transport by updating ticket machine technology to make it fit for purpose. Any Equality Impact Assessment must have been seriously lacking.

Example 2: Meeting with FirstBus

Part of my original job remit as Transport Champion was to provide accessibility training for public transport staff, so I was keen to try and get this off the ground and was pleased that a FirstBus manager agreed to meet with me. In the months before I had the meeting with the manager, I'd heard countless stories from disabled people about their treatment on public transport. In the survey I conducted when first in post, to which 70 people responded, many people cited hostility from drivers or members of the public, and situations such as having to wait for several buses before being able to get on as the wheelchair space was already occupied by non-wheelchair users. One respondent said, "I never know if drivers will be helpful or hostile." Shortly before meeting with the manager from FirstBus, I had a conversation with a woman who is a wheelchair user and gave a distressing account of harassment on buses and at worst being physically assaulted by a member of the public on the bus, where she was punched around 20 times until another bus user intervened. The bus driver did not acknowledge the incident and the CCTV cameras weren't working so there was no way to hold the member of the public to account, and her complaints to FirstBus remain undealt with. Understandably, it took time for her to gain the confidence to use the bus again. Since then, she's received hostility from a driver on a number of occasions, as well as other members of the public. This is not an isolated incident.

I went on to meet with the manager from FirstBus who is engaged in safety and equality work. As the meeting went on, I started to realise that finding an avenue to give the kind of training in my remit was going to be very problematic. The manager said that FirstBus staff already receive accessibility and safeguarding training, that the experiences of disabled people that I recounted were 'just stories' and that she couldn't give the go ahead for training for staff unless there was data collected via the FirstBus complaints system to show that there was a need for further training. When I said that I could provide the training for free as part of my job remit, she responded that FirstBus would not pay for the staff time for the training without the right data, as they have around 1000 drivers and it wouldn't be viable. I asked if there could at the least be education of drivers, as well as the public, that the Equality Act makes it legal to treat disabled people more favourably, such as in incidents where there is competition for space between a wheelchair user and a member of the public such as a parent with a pram. Her response was that she didn't see how it was the responsibility of the company to educate on the Equality Act. I asked if there could be extra signage highlighting that the sunflower lanyard is for people with invisible disabilities. She responded that the more signs you put up, the less people read them. I brought up that something that autistic people really struggle with on the bus is the noise of internal panel rattling and asked what could be done about this. Her reply was that drivers are already quick to report rattling which is promptly addressed by their engineers. I said that many disabled people reported that audiovisual displays often weren't working or were incorrect. She said this wasn't really a problem. From this exchange, I couldn't see how to get the training to go ahead.

The next day I met with two employees of Mencap, who highlighted that disabled people are unlikely to make complaints as it takes a lot of energy and people are accustomed to complaints not being dealt with, so struggle to see the point. In addition, they brought up how people with learning difficulties/disabilities find the FirstBus online complaints form very challenging and are unlikely to use it. I wrote to the FirstBus manager highlighting how if extra training was only going to be provided when the right data had been gathered, it seemed necessary to look at the accessibility of the complaints process. I've yet to hear back. This example shows how the onus is put on disabled people to not only have to endure the discrimination in the first place but to then have to jump through the right hoops to be taken seriously in terms of being recognised as experiencing discrimination.

Example 3: Spike Island residents' campaign

I had a meeting with Councillor Don Alexander, BCC's Cabinet Minister for Transport, as he kindly agreed to shed some light on the workings of the transport system in Bristol. During the meeting, he assured me that disabled people are certainly not sidelined in transport planning.

Some time later, I was contacted by residents of Spike Island, who have started a campaign in the last months to '[stop the isolation of Spike Island](#)' by a new bus gate on Cumberland Road. I asked Cllr. Alexander to comment on how the new bus gate would affect disabled people living on Spike Island who needed to travel by car, as well as carers and other health and social care professionals who would need to access Spike Island by vehicle. I also asked if Automatic Number Plate Recognition Technology (ANPR) would be used so that disabled residents and their carers etc. would be able to enter Spike Island without hindrance (this is routinely used in London for such purposes). Below are bullet points from Cllr. Alexander's reply. I forwarded this to the Spike Island campaign. The responses in blue are from disabled Spike Island residents. The exchange is an illustration of how transport planners believe they are doing enough, leaving the concerns of disabled people invalidated. Underneath the exchange is a statement I gave for Spike Island residents to use as they needed.

Cllr. Alexander: For many disabled people, their only form of transport will be - bus or by taxi/hackney if they do not have access to a car. The bus gate helps to ensure that a route into the city centre for buses and taxis from the west is substantially free of traffic delays and congestion. **Spike Island residents:** [No empathy shown to the needs of disabled people; no impact assessment \(therefore unlawful\); objections dismissed with cut & paste response. Access for locals and visitors will not cause delays to the bus.](#)

Cllr. Alexander: These benefits to the bus network and taxis/hackney carriage can be utilised by any person, as many taxis, and all hackneys and buses are adapted to accommodate wheelchairs. **Spike Island residents:** [If we are to use taxis instead of private cars, doesn't that double the emissions for each journey? Why are taxis being prioritised \(for licence fees\)? What are the costs of taxi vs car for people who need to travel for frequent medical care? Percentage of disabled people who can afford to leave car at home and use taxis instead? What about those who need care at home and their carers, who may have limited time and resources?](#)

Cllr. Alexander: You may also be aware that Cumberland Rd has become a heavily used cycle and pedestrian route, likely due to the reduced levels of vehicular traffic in comparison to other parallel routes. **Spike Island residents:** [Cumberland Rd is a wide road with pavements and is suitable for all types of users. What is the point of the Chocolate Path, newly restored at huge time and financial cost, if not to be the preferred route for](#)

cyclists and pedestrians?

Cllr. Alexander: We are increasingly seeing people with disabilities cycling, as it may be the only form of exercise or personal freedom which they have access to (see <https://wheelsforwellbeing.org.uk/>). **Spike Island residents:** In the words of a disabled resident, 'beyond insulting'.

Cllr. Alexander: I hope this helps to answer your queries. There are now a number of bus gates across the city, and the only permitted vehicles are buses, taxis, motorcycles, cycles, and emergency vehicles. **Spike Island residents:** Repeated failure to recognise the uniqueness of the location and access options for Spike Island; ignoring the fact that this is the sole access route and the impact of cutting off eastbound access to a community based on the west side of the city; part of a wider plan, along with harbour fees hike, to isolate and drive people away from Spike Island to free up Council land for redevelopment and higher rents / rates / mooring fees.

My response for Spike Island residents campaign to use:

"The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, ratified by the UK in 2009, makes clear that when policies are designed which affect disabled people, they must be consulted and their needs must be considered. Policies to make Bristol's transport more sustainable must therefore not infringe upon disabled people's rights to freedom of movement and to access work, healthcare, education, food and community activity. As such, disabled people must not be inhibited from driving where there is no alternative or where alternatives remain inadequate, underdeveloped, or unsustainably expensive. Disabled people already face numerous extra barriers when accessing transport, and these must be reduced rather than increased by policy makers. Adaptive bikes may be a good option for some disabled people, but it cannot be assumed by policy makers that this form of transport will ever be suitable for all disabled people. Disabled people who have the necessity of driving must not be forced into using taxis as an alternative to driving when taxis are highly expensive, and are currently very unreliable, with far too few taxis being adapted for accessibility. Disabled residents of Spike Island have made clear that the Cumberland Road bus gate looks to adversely affect many of their rights as citizens, which has been ignored by Bristol City Council's policy makers. This could be easily mitigated with the use of ANPR technology, as used in London and other areas, to ensure that disabled Spike Islands residents can come and go freely, and healthcare/social care providers are able to access Spike Island without hindrance."

Learning 3: The way that budgeting is done highlights how disabled people aren't fully taken into account in transport planning.

At the Transport Focus meeting I attended, a representative from WECA said that WECA had "never had more money to deliver bus services than we have now." This was incredibly striking and I asked a question in the session about how this could be when so many bus services had just been cut. The answer given was that the way that budgets are allotted meant that there wasn't enough within the supported bus service budget to keep operating expensive to run services. A Transport Focus representative kindly offered to have a meeting with me at a separate time to explain how this works. I have to say that I still felt pretty hazy after the meeting about how budgeting operates.

Councillor Ed Plowden, who sits on the transport scrutiny panel for WECA (which has no decision-making power but poses challenging questions to the main WECA committee), made clear to me that due to austerity, there is no hope of the bus services that have been cut being reinstated. He said that this is because of the high running costs of the services,

some of which apparently cost around £30 per user journey. He said that the main way to go was to push for Westlink (a new on-demand bus service which operates in some areas of Bristol) to be extended to areas where it does not yet have routes, and to ensure that the companies set to run new community bus schemes that will cater to those with mobility impairments are fully accessible.

The apparent impossibility of reinstating any of these bus services is strange in the context of WECA having secured an extra £105 million from central government in November 2022 for a "Bus Service Improvement Plan" (BSIP). This was awarded to all local authorities, but some such as WECA received a larger pot of money to boost the attractiveness of using the bus. Dan Norris's 'birthday bus scheme,' in which you can spend the entire month of your birthday riding the bus for free, is a supposed way of enticing people into greater bus usership. At a cost of £8 million, it could be questioned why this money wasn't poured into reinstating services (you can't ride the bus for free if you don't even have a bus service). The reason given is that the initial barrier to reinstating canceled services was that this budget was to be used for transport initiatives that were "new and innovative," such as the Westlink service. The regulations have now apparently been relaxed, but it remains very unclear what is possible or not possible to use the funds for.

When going through the 130 page improvement plan, it starts to become clearer why services to certain areas have been slashed. In the whole document, the word 'disabled' is mentioned 3 times, with no specific focus on how the plan will improve accessibility for disabled people. BSIP has a strong focus on bus services as being necessary to raise economic productivity, illustrated by sentences such as, "Transport is critical to delivering clean and inclusive growth," and "Improvement of our bus network is essential for tackling the congestion and blockages in our region that are holding back people's job opportunities and businesses' productivity growth," and "The West of England includes communities amongst the most deprived in England. Better services to these places, and to residents without access to cars, will bring wider access to job and education opportunities."

This is a very different focus to that of reliable and accessible transport as a right for all citizens so that they are able to participate fully in all aspects of life. It is notable that Ashton Vale, an area of the city particularly designed for older and disabled residents, has had its bus services completely cut, with no alternative as yet being provided. Residents of Ashton Vale are less likely to be 'economically productive.' They are also more likely to be economically deprived and to have limited mobility. Many people in the area have become reliant on family and friends offering lifts, or have found themselves without transport at all. The nearest bus stop is now over half a mile away, which is too far for anyone with limited mobility to get to. It is issues such as these that the BSIP should be seeking to tackle. Its delivery plan on 'non-intensive services' states that, "Our ambition is to provide public transport services to all those who need it. This will require provision of demand-responsive services to low-density areas." However, many of the services that have been cut are not in particularly low-density rural areas – which makes it seem that services have been cut for those who don't have jobs, such as retired people and disabled people not able to work.

Turning to a different budgeting issue, one of the persistent issues cited by disabled bus pass holders is that it isn't possible to use a disabled bus pass before 9.30am, as if disabled people don't need to live life before this time. Disabled travel passes are issued in the recognition that disabled people have costs related to impairment that non-disabled people don't have, as well as frequently having less earning power due to lack of accessible work options. By contrast, people who have a bus pass due to being visually impaired can use their pass at any time of day. Likewise, in London, the disabled "freedom pass" can be used at any time of day. The reason given for not allowing disabled bus pass usage before 9.30am is that the bus pass is funded by WECA, who pay the bus companies for use of the pass. If the timings were extended, this would mean that there would need to be a budget

allocation which would diminish another funding pot. It is incredibly unfortunate that bus services are run for profit, as this would not be an issue if buses were operated as a public service.

WECA Mayor Dan Norris's birthday bus scheme cost £8 million, while City Mayor Marvin Rees spent several million on a feasibility study into an underground for Bristol, (which would cost up to £18 billion, making it incredibly unlikely that such a venture would go ahead). It remains a question as to how budgets such as these can be found when ostensibly budgets are so tight where accessibility issues are concerned.

Learning 4: It's incredibly difficult to work out who is responsible and for what

Not long into my role, I met with Rick Burgess, a highly inspiring activist from Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People. One of the things Rick brought up was, "The challenge is mapping who does what and why. You may find a huge chain of people passing the buck, which is what happened when we were campaigning for accessibility at Victoria Station in Manchester. We had to get everyone in a room at one time to get anywhere." This is sage advice. In Bristol, it is difficult to grapple with which aspects of transport are handled by WECA and which are handled by BCC, as illustrated in this [Bristol Post article](#) in which the metro mayor and a local councillor squabble over whether WECA or the Council are responsible for paying for subsidised bus services – so it seems like they don't know either.

Many of the Council's transport functions are now moving over to WECA. Cllr. Alexander informed me that BCC is a consultee with very little power. It is responsible as the highways authority for infrastructure, meaning footways and carriageways (meaning pavements and roads), bus shelters, cycle lanes.

According to Cllr. Alexander, one of the reasons that the condition of Bristol's pavements is substandard is that the Council receives from WECA only 10% of the budget that's actually needed for carriageways and footways. In addition, the Council struggles to get contractors to do the work needed due to inflationary pressures meaning that public sector procurement is increasingly problematic. This illustrates how it then becomes easy to pass the buck due to the current government's failure to properly fund services. It can't be denied that this is the case, but questions remain about what should be done about this extremely poor state of affairs.

The future – Where do we need to get to?

"We have to start to expect disability and see it as part of the environmental landscape" -[Crippling Climate Adaptation](#)

Bristol Green Capital Partnership produced an inspiring vision to cover all transport users across the city. Here is an extract:

"All residents of Bristol have accessible, affordable, convenient public transport that is safe at all times of day and free of discrimination. Public transport is integrated and citywide - meaning that buses, trains and any future services are joined up and easy to transit between, with a simple ticket that can be used for the whole journey. Accessibility is prioritised - with step-free access and adaptation to multiple different impairments. This involves ongoing consultation with disability equality groups."

Such a vision, if adopted by WECA/BCC, would put people's rights as citizens at the heart of transport planning. As such, increasing economic productivity may be one aspect of the need for a decent transport system, as opposed to BSIP putting economic productivity above everything else.

In terms of concrete improvements, the information I gathered from meetings and research led me to conclude the following recommendations for where we need to get to so that transport in Bristol can be considered fully accessible:

- A properly integrated transport system, where transport planners consider the Accessible Journey Chain, so that disabled people can get efficiently from door to door. There should be an increase in the number of interchanges to support connectivity around the city without having to go via the centre so that people can rely on different modes of transport that will connect up across their whole journey from beginning to end.
- A responsive feedback system so that disabled people can register complaints and feedback in a way that will be dealt with effectively and efficiently to ensure ongoing improvements.
- A transport system which is at best fully publicly owned, or at least franchised so that there is full public oversight and regulation. It would be ideal if this was for all forms of transport, such as an alternative to Transport for London, but would also be significant if bus franchising was achieved, as has now happened in Manchester.
- More frequent and reliable bus services would mean less pressured situations where people with varied needs – such as wheelchair access, pram usage etc. are all trying to access an underfunded service.
- Improved accessibility infrastructure, such as new buses having double wheelchair spaces, fully readable transport information for visually impaired people, properly maintained pavements which provide ease of travel and are free of vehicles and clutter and have adequate numbers of dropped curbs etc.
- Proper training for transport staff so that disabled people feel fully respected.
- Access to vehicles which are as low-impact as possible for Disabled people who are reliant on personal transport due to the nature of their impairment.
- Access to adaptive bikes for people with a variety of impairments.

How do we get there?

As referred to above, a good strategy is a “potentially achievable way of surmounting a key challenge” (from the book *Good Strategy, Bad Strategy*). To develop this, it's necessary to have a theory of why things haven't worked in the past, or why the challenge is difficult. In this way it's possible to outline an overall approach for overcoming obstacles. A strategy needs to recognize and define the problems and challenges, and identify critical obstacles. Good strategy works by focusing energy and resources on one, or a very few, pivotal objectives whose accomplishment will lead to a ‘cascade of favourable outcomes.’

Awards

I started to develop a strategy while carrying out my work, but didn't have the resources or people power to actualize it. It's important to recognize that it's unlikely that things are going to improve without disabled people, Disabled People's Organisations (DPO's), and allies all coming together to push for change. DPO's are currently fragmented and they need to meet together and collaborate more for community development, co-production and intersectionality (as found in a report made to BCC by Nick Beasley). An umbrella group of disabled people would have a much greater voice.

The outline of the strategy (that could still be of use) is to implement a system of awards to

transport providers and public bodies as a way to hold them to account. The idea for this was developed from conversations with disabled activists James Deane (Bristol), and Rick Burgess (Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People).

A system of awards could be used on either a small or a large scale, and could be applied to individual companies or the Council or the whole transport network. It would be most effective the more people and organisations were involved to give a high profile. The purpose of the awards would be both to highlight best practice and the needs for improvements to be made, giving pathways to achieve those improvements. They would be a way for disabled people to make clear where the problems lie and to overcome gas-lighting and people passing the buck. The awards would run from a Gold Standard, through to Silver, Bronze, Rusty, and Toxic Heavy Metal. A Gold award would be for transport that goes above and beyond to ensure that disabled people can get from A to B with ease and comfort. Silver would be a decent level of accessibility. It seemed best not to end with a Bronze award because Bronze still indicates some level of achievement, and if transport is truly poor, this should be highlighted with Rusty/Toxic Heavy Metal at worst. High levels of publicity would be advantageous to push transport providers into taking responsibility. The awards could be presented at a ceremony, and would work best if given out over a number of years, so as to chart progress. If steady improvements aren't made, this could lead to the launch of protests. Intrinsic to this award system would be the development of community, and effective protest would be more plausible from this community base. Further information can be viewed on the slides I made on a presentation of the strategy – [follow this link](#).

I discussed the possibility of a system of awards with many people, which was positively received as being able to offer hopeful solutions. Colin, a colleague from BDEF said, “the awards would be a very positive tool for change where people are incentivised to change things.” Hilary, from BDEF’s climate steering group, gave the feedback that, “We always remember the small, negative things. We need acknowledgement of good practice to take things forward.”

However, there are problems associated with the system of awards, such as not being able to gain enough momentum and resources to make it happen, or it petering out too soon so that pathways to improvement aren't followed. One person expressed that the positive framing may be a concern as many aspects of transport wouldn't even get a bronze award.

Public Communications Campaign

Running a public communications campaign to raise awareness of how disabled people are impacted by the wider public's behaviour in relation to transport was in my original job remit, though I have not been able to figure out how to do this within the limitations I have faced in the last months. However, this remains an important aspect of building towards shifts in how disabled people can navigate transport in Bristol. A public communications campaign would mean that people start to build public consensus that change needs to happen.

Part of this campaign could be to highlight some of the best accessible transport in the world so that people have an idea of what things could look like in Bristol. This would galvanise support, encouragement and inspiration, before moving on to what is challenging and where the problems are. Some examples of places in the world which are found to be of very high quality in terms of accessibility are:

- London – Has had a franchised transport system for years, overseen by Transport for London. Has a disabled “freedom pass” which can be used 24 hours a day, have improved continuous cycling routes to create thousands more routes which take into account different types of cyclist.
- Manchester, which now has bus franchising.

- Amsterdam/Utrecht, Holland
- Paris, France
- New York, USA

(I have not looked into accessibility outside cities).

Another aspect of a communications campaign is to design a card that can be left under the windscreen wipers of cars which are blocking access for wheelchair/mobility scooter users (I was assured by Cllr. Don Alexander that there is no legal issue with this, although there may be a logistical issue with reaching a windscreen wiper from a wheelchair, and understandably people may feel uncomfortable about potential confrontation should the car owner suddenly appear). Some text that may be useful:

“You might find it convenient to park here, but it's made my day much harder” or,

“Please be aware that although parking here might save you 10 seconds, it blocks the whole of my day.”

Final thoughts

Anthony from BDEF's climate action steering group remarked, “People are often fully able apart from their impairment. Disabled people are bracketed as separate but actually most people have impairments of some kind.” I found this an important statement, as it helps to break down the 'othering' of disabled people. With this kind of awareness of impairment as being natural and commonplace, it becomes the norm to consider and integrate everyone's access needs. This is a constant work in progress; nobody can ever know everyone's experiences of navigating the world, and so it takes an ongoing willingness to create adaptations and adjustments wherever access needs are identified. When things are viewed through the lens of '[ability diversity](#)', we start to create an awareness of how valuable it is to have input from the diverse perspectives, qualities and skills that are held across the full spectrum of human experience. Accessible transport is about facilitating access to all aspects of life, which is why removing transport barriers is so important.

Things it might be useful to know

Laws and policies

When dealing with power-holders, there is legislation that you can refer to that you might find of use. It is incredibly difficult to bring a legal case against anyone, but citing the law is a good way of applying pressure and getting people to up their game.

- Public sector Equality duty
- Equality Impact Assessments (EqIA's) must be carried out and need to be acted on - so you can use an assessment as a basis for applying pressure.
- The Equality Act 2010 states that it is lawful to treat a disabled person more favourably than a non-disabled person.
- The Equality and Human Rights Commission have done work on transport rights.
- The UN Convention on the rights of persons with Disabilities (brought into UK law in 2009) makes clear that any time a government designs a policy which affects disabled people, their needs must be considered and disabled people must be consulted.

Dealing with transport issues

None of the following are going to change the overall approach towards disabled access and

disabled people, but if you have a particular issue you need to resolve, here are some contacts I came across which may be of use. Also, if you experience discrimination or harassment in relation to being disabled, it's important to make a complaint, as far as you've got the energy.

First Bus

If you experience a hate crime on FirstBus, report it to the driver, as they can log hate crime incidents on their ticket machines, after which a manager will interview them to go into the incident in depth. You can report an incident of abuse via the FirstBus app. You can report complaints to First Bus [via this webpage](#) by scrolling down to where it says, 'Get in touch.'

Pavements and roads

If there is an access issue in the street, you can report it via "[Fix My Street](#)." Remember to state if you are disabled. The Council will check it. The website gives updates of how the issue is being dealt with. You can also email the Council directly at Transport.Engagement@bristol.gov.uk .

It's illegal to block a highway (this means either a road or a pavement) and it can be reported to the police on their non-emergency number 101 if the issue is persistent (it may take quite a long time to get through on the phone). If possible, knock on the door of the person who is causing the blockage and politely ask them to move. You can also email neighbourhoodenforcement@gov.co.uk . If you do decide to contact the police on 101, they will only pay attention to vehicles parked on the pavement if there isn't enough space for a wheelchair to pass by.

It's not illegal to park in Disabled parking bays that are outside people's homes, which is unfortunate.

Clean Air Zone

You can find out if you're eligible for Clean Air Zone financial support [here](#).

Directory of transport groups and organisations – all those underlined are hyperlinked

- [Bristol Cycling](#) – Campaign for better cycling in Bristol and beyond
- [Bristol Walking Alliance](#) – Campaign on pedestrian-specific issues and comment on planning applications to make them as accessible as possible. Produce a guide called 50 steps to better walking.
- [Disabled People and Older People Pavements and Roads Meeting](#) – convened by Bristol City Council to share information and tackle problems. Contact: James.Morvan@bristol.gov.uk
- [Hubs Mobility Advice Service](#) – offers free impartial advice on accessible transport options across whole counties.
- [Let's Walk Bedminster](#) – community-led project to improve the walking environment in Bedminster, with a focus on accessibility. Contact: letswalkbedminster@virginmedia.com
- [Public Transport Safety & Equalities Group](#) – meets monthly with a focus on different equalities group each time. Draws together public transport providers and stakeholders to problem solve issues. Convened by Bristol City Council and SARI. Contact: director@saricharity.org.uk
- [Reclaim Our Buses](#) – Bristol-based community campaign which has drawn together diverse groups and individuals to push for public control of Bristol's buses.

- [**Sustrans**](#) – promotes cycling and walking, and maintains 12,000 miles of UK-based routes for cycling and walking.
- [**Transport for All**](#) - a disabled-led, UK-wide organisation that is striving to increase access to transport and street space around the country. They run campaigns and give information and advice: [Get Advice » Transport for All](#) To make an enquiry: [020 7737 2339](#) Email: contactus@transportforall.org.uk
- [**Wheels for Wellbeing**](#) – accessible bikes for disabled people. Also have an [Inclusive Guide to Cycling](#).
- [**Disability-Inclusive Climate Action**](#) (website in the early days of development - The University of Exeter is currently conducting a research project into how disabled people are experiencing the impacts of climate change and mapping how disability is explicitly considered in wider climate policy. Bristol is one of their case study cities. The other aspect of their work is to create public art which can be used as a research method to look at what can shift the narrative from disabled people being victims to disabled agency. Contact: Sarah.Bell@exeter.ac.uk

Useful links

[Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People](#)

[Where disability and climate meet \(disabilitydebrief.org\)](#)

[Resources on climate change and disability \(disabilitydebrief.org\)](#)

[Protest For All Guide \(bristoldef.org.uk\)](#)

[Teaching & learning guide for disability and climate justice - King - 2022 - Sociology Compass - Wiley Online Library](#)

[Inclusive Communication Toolkit - BDF \(businessdisabilityforum.org.uk\)](#)

[Campaigns » Transport for All](#)

[Enabling Effective Communication Between Hearing and Deaf / Deafened / Deafblind / Hard of Hearing People | Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People \(gmcdp.com\)](#)

[Campaign strategy | Disability charity Scope UK](#)

[A brief history of disabled people's self-organisation](#)

[Disabled campaigners are to thank for an accessible Elizabeth Line » Transport for All](#)

[Why franchising? | We Own It](#)

[Climate Leaders Group - Bristol Green Capital](#)

[Climate Action Programme Archives - Bristol Green Capital](#)

[Universities and Colleges - The Carbon Literacy Project](#)

[Streetspace Invaders FINAL WITH ENDNOTES - Google Docs](#)

[Crippling Climate Adaptation: Disability Justice and Climate Change - YouTube](#)

[Public Transport, Private Profit The Human Cost of Privatising Buses in the United Kingdom](#)