



We're on board

Making bus travel better for
blind and partially sighted people

RNIB

supporting blind and
partially sighted people

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1. Foreword

I am delighted to endorse RNIB's bus guide and charter. Buses bring independence to people living with sight loss providing a vital link to work, the local community and amenities. They are often the only affordable means of transport that blind and partially sighted people can use from home. It is clear that blind and partially sighted people value the bus services they rely on but they deserve a level of service that not only meets their needs, but matches that of other passengers.



Bus operators need to ensure, as many now do, that their drivers fully understand the important role they play in the lives of blind and partially sighted people. Good quality, relevant training in visual and disability awareness can make a huge difference to the relationship between bus drivers and their disabled and older passengers. Involving blind and partially sighted people in training or engagement activities, such as the RNIB Swap with Me events, is an innovative and effective way of improving services and relationships and I would like to see more of these types of initiatives taking place.

I welcome this bus guide and RNIB's Bus Charter. If the charter's commitments are followed by bus operators then levels of service can only improve, bringing more independence, choice and control to the lives of blind and partially sighted people.

The Baroness Kramer

Minister of State for Transport

2. Introduction

“ Since losing my sight, buses are my only way to get around, they give me independence and allow me to get to work.” Chris, Washington

Bus travel is a vital service for blind and partially sighted people allowing them to actively take part in their communities, to work and live their lives independently. As people with sight loss do not drive they rely on bus services to get them from A to B. They are a core group of bus passengers who have no choice but to use a bus in order to get around.

Yet, blind and partially sighted people tell us that they face many problems when using buses. These problems have led some to stop using buses altogether, putting themselves at great expense and inconvenience.

“ It damages your confidence if the service isn’t provided safely. Obviously it’s going to knock your confidence and I wouldn’t want to use the bus again.” Rahkee, Leicester

We know, however, that some of these problems could be easily and cheaply solved by bus companies and will lead to improvements that will benefit everyone.

Over the last 12 months we have been working closely with bus companies and this booklet sets out how you can make simple but effective changes that will vastly improve your service for blind and partially sighted passengers.

Through adopting the principles and policies set out in the Bus Charter bus companies can demonstrate their commitment to improving services for blind and partially sighted people in a meaningful, transparent and measurable way.

We also set out the key principles that have enabled us to work so effectively with bus companies to hold “Swap with Me” events. We explain how you can run your own Swap with Me events or adapt them for training and engagement purposes.



3. In our own words

No matter where we go in the country blind and partially sighted people tell us about the same problems that they face regularly on buses. So we thought it was best to let them tell you themselves about the difficulties they face.

Catching a bus shouldn't be a sight test

“ Recently I had three buses go past me without stopping!”
Janet, Leicestershire

Nine out of 10 blind or partially sighted people cannot see a bus number in time to flag it down. When they do flag down buses speculatively they often have this kind of experience:

“ A particularly bad example is outside my work, there are three buses that stop within probably five minutes at that stand and because I have to flag all three down it means quite often they just huff and puff at me or they say ‘Can’t you see the number on the front of the bus?’ and I then have to explain why I can’t see the number and I feel very uncomfortable doing that and I shouldn’t have to do that; I’ve needed to stop the bus for me to find out that information.” Chris, Washington

Communication

The importance of communication cannot be underestimated. A blind or partially sighted person relies on that verbal communication for vital information and to help orientate themselves getting on the bus.

“ My bad experiences with buses are daily. I can’t tell what bus number it is but the bus drivers are often rude and unhelpful. I feel let down and almost like a second class citizen.” Dale, Bristol

“I always have to hope that I’m on the right bus because when I ask the driver what bus it is they just mumble or don’t answer.” Gillian, Newcastle

Waiting for passengers to be seated and driving safely

It’s basic common sense safety-wise but giving a blind or partially sighted person the time to find a seat is incredibly important, and we know this does not always happen.

“ Recently when I got on a bus, the driver drove off before I’d sat down. And while I tried to sit down my guide dog has slid across to the other side of the bus, quite drastically, which is quite bad for the dog and I

obviously couldn't help my dog because the bus was just too forceful and I just felt the bus driver was driving too recklessly." Rahkee, Leicester

"A bad experience is when I'm sitting on a seat, the bus goes round a corner and I end up on the floor, that can happen because bus drivers go at their speed don't they and they've got their time tables to keep and I can end up on the floor sometimes and that's a bit embarrassing."

Martin, Hertfordshire

You have reached your destination

We fully support Guide Dogs' campaign to make all buses talk, as audio announcements enable blind and partially sighted people to get off at the right stop. Even when they are introduced bus drivers still need to be able to communicate and assist passengers. At the moment many blind and partially sighted passengers don't feel able to trust the driver to assist them or give them the right information.

“Another thing is that the drivers often forget to tell you when you've reached your stop.” Dave, Bridgewater

“Although I am a very experienced disabled person with sight loss, it is just another bug in your day and one can have lots of bugs in their day, but having to deal with transport that doesn't work for you is a big one because it is part of your life.” Dale, Bristol



4. The Bus Charter

What is the Bus Charter?

Every bus company that we have spoken to says that they want to improve their services for everyone, including blind and partially sighted people. Yet many blind and partially sighted people feel that they do not have a voice that is listened to by bus companies. Unless they attend one of the Swap with Me events, people with sight loss aren't aware of the bus companies' willingness to make improvements and to listen to their concerns. Our Bus Charter tackles the main problems raised by blind and partially sighted people, giving them a voice in a positive and constructive way.

Throughout the "Stop For Me, Speak To Me" campaign we have sought out solutions to the problems blind and partially sighted people face when using buses. We have talked with bus companies from across the country to find out how they are improving things for their older, disabled, blind and partially sighted passengers. We have spoken to bus passengers to find out how they think things can be improved.

Our Bus Charter sets out how bus companies can improve their services for blind and partially sighted people (and everyone else). The charter contains real examples of policies or ways of doing things that we know have been tried and work, and can make a real difference.

We believe that this charter is realistic, simple to implement and achievable for bus companies and if followed will make a huge difference for blind and partially sighted passengers. On the next page you will find the Bus Charter with its 13 commitments.



The Bus Charter

In planning, delivering and monitoring our services we will work with blind and partially sighted people to remove barriers from independent travel. We will achieve this by implementing the following charter principles as part of our ongoing programmes of continuous improvement.

What we expect from our bus drivers

1. It will be our policy that bus drivers stop for any waiting passengers at bus stops, and we will ensure that the driver positions the bus safely, always trying to ensure that the door entry or exit is not obstructed by street furniture or other obstructions.
2. Our bus drivers will tell blind and partially sighted passengers which service they are and what their destination is, and ask if they need assistance with payment or finding a seat.
3. Our drivers will not pull away from a bus stop until blind and partially sighted passengers have found an available seat. Drivers will assist passengers by providing information about which seats are free or where priority seats are located.
4. We will ensure that where we have talking buses our drivers will not switch off or turn down the audio announcements. If a service does not have a functioning audio next stop announcement, the driver will advise the passenger when their stop is reached, and provide any necessary assistance in helping them to get off the bus.

Working with others to make improvements

5. We will check all of our customer feedback systems with blind and partially sighted passengers, and ensure that they are as accessible as possible. We will also promote our feedback procedures using the most accessible means – including websites, mobile sites and apps as well as more traditional methods.
6. We will review our timetable and bus stop information in conjunction with blind and partially sighted people, local authorities and other stakeholders to ensure it is as accessible as possible.
7. We will ensure that all of our bus drivers are fully aware of the rules around concessionary passes and we will support the scheme with a travel assistance card. The assistance card will indicate that additional assistance is needed and our bus drivers will provide this in a discreet way.

The bus environment

8. We will seek to improve the way sound can be heard through the assault screen, between the bus driver and passenger, or where possible remove the assault screen.
9. We will actively promote the priority seating and areas for disabled people through awareness campaigns and materials on buses – this will include promoting this priority space for guide dogs.
10. We will make the pass scanners as visible as possible and ensure that our drivers are as consistent in their approach to scanning passes for blind passengers.
11. We will explore all options for providing audio announcements on our buses, including making use of new technologies when they become available.
12. When introducing buses with audio announcements, we will choose routes in consultation with passengers with sight loss and will prioritise the busiest routes and those which enable people to travel to key locations and facilities, such as hospitals or leisure centres.
13. In order to achieve the above we will build interactive sight loss awareness training into our driver training. We will involve blind and partially sighted people in the design of the training materials and activities and seek endorsement for our training from organisations representing blind and partially sighted people.



Swap With Me - EVMS



5. Swap with Me events and involving blind and partially sighted people

Our charter clearly recommends that bus companies engage with blind and partially sighted people in a meaningful way when planning and designing their services and bus driver training. We want to help you do that and this section of the booklet and the accompanying DVD film gives you practical tips and advice on how to do that.

During the spring and summer of 2013 bus depots and even park and ride car parks were buzzing with activity as blind and partially sighted people met with local bus drivers, instructors and managers to swap experiences.

“ Our Swap with Me events went very well, the initial event was so successful we had no hesitation in arranging a second event! The two events provided an opportunity for both new trainee and existing drivers to meet and share an invaluable experience about the difficulties and challenges our customers with sight loss face. Both events have also assisted EYMS (East Yorkshire Motor Services Ltd) to enhance our understanding and training programmes for future driver participation.”

Darren Kendrew Training Manager, EYMS Bus & Coach Training, East Yorkshire Motor Services Ltd

What is a Swap with Me event?

A Swap with Me event brings together bus drivers, instructors and managers with blind and partially sighted passengers for a few hours of sharing and swapping experiences.

Bus drivers get to experience wearing “sim specs”, which simulate different types of eye conditions. Wearing the sim specs they get the opportunity to try hailing, boarding, interacting with a driver, finding a seat and disembarking from a bus. Throughout the experience bus drivers are paired with a blind or partially sighted passenger so they can talk about how they feel wearing the sim specs and ask their blind and partially sighted passenger what they do in order to cope, and how things could be made better for them.

The blind and partially sighted passengers who attend are given the opportunity to sit in the driver’s seat and experience what it is like trying to communicate with the assault



screen down, or with a busy bus full of talking passengers. One thing is for sure Swap with Me events generate a lot of talking! The blind and partially sighted passengers also spend time learning about the experiences and point of view of the bus driver they are paired with.

Why they work

Swap with Me events work because they are different. They provide a safe environment for both bus drivers and blind and partially sighted people to be on the same level and to learn from one another. They provide a space for bus drivers to ask questions of passengers living with sight loss, as well as to experience the obstacles and barriers they face when using a bus.

The exercise is practical, relates to the drivers' job directly and is completely interactive. Bus drivers are learning without even being aware of it. Swap with Me events are also fun, always full of laughter and conversation. They are a non-confrontational way of raising issues and talking through practical solutions to everyday problems.

How to organise your own Swap with Me event

RNIB Swap with Me events have been a victim of their own success! In the first nine months of 2013 we held 30 events across the UK. But we do not have the resources to continue to indefinitely organise events. We can, however, give you the tools to organise them yourselves.

Our DVD, which accompanies this booklet, provides some practical insights and examples of how to organise a Swap with Me event. You'll also see an event in progress and hear from drivers, instructors, managers and passengers themselves about why these events are so successful.

This section of the booklet should give you some practical tips and ideas for holding your own Swap with Me events in the future.

When?

From experience we know that holding Swap with Me events in the winter isn't always a great idea. It snowed at our launch event which although very successful was bitterly cold. Unless you have some accessible indoor space to hold the event, Swap with Me are best held from March to October. There are plenty of other engagement events you can hold over the winter (see our Bus Charter accompanying notes on engagement).

The time of day to hold these events is also important to consider. If they are to be over lunch time then you'll need to provide some kind of light lunch. No matter what time of day, providing tea, coffee etc is a good idea as it helps people to relax and start talking.

You'll need at least two hours to hold a Swap with Me event but shouldn't need more than three.

Where?

You'll need space for at least one bus, but preferably two, parked up, and a safe area for people to congregate. Ideally there should be room for a bus to move and be hailed by the drivers in sim specs but this is optional.

Bus depots often provide this kind of space and can be excellent venues but other places such as large car parks or park and ride centres can also work. Local authorities are very supportive of Swap with Me events and can often help in sourcing suitable venues if a bus depot isn't usable.



Bear in mind that blind and partially sighted people will need to be able to reach your venue. If the venue isn't on a bus route or near a train station, a good tip is to lay on a bus to collect people from a central point and take them to the bus depot or venue. Local societies for blind and partially sighted people, local authority public buildings or major transport hubs are all good places to collect people from.

Who?

From the bus company

Naturally you need to make sure you have bus drivers present at the Swap with Me event including experienced bus drivers and those who instruct or train them. Many companies have included trainee bus drivers at Swap with Me events and this also works but we would always recommend that some experienced bus drivers attend too.

We know that some bus companies like to target who should attend in order to make sure that bus drivers who need extra training or support in customer service, actually spend some time with blind and partially sighted passengers.

Blind and partially sighted people

What can be more tricky is sourcing people with sight loss to attend these Swap with Me events. It is important that any passenger attending is confident about talking about their sight loss and also someone who uses buses. When a person loses their sight it can take them many years to come to terms with it emotionally and practically. This is why it is so important that you work with people who are confident about not only using buses but also talking about their experiences.

In order to recruit the right people to attend a Swap with Me event you can go through local organisations for blind and partially sighted people, local authority sensory services teams, disability and access groups, and of course RNIB. The important thing is to explain clearly that you need people who are confident about talking about their sight loss and experiences on public transport.

Support staff and volunteers

You will also need to make sure you have enough volunteers, whether from your bus company, local society or local authority available to guide blind and partially sighted people and provide any other support such as getting a cup of tea etc.

How to make this sustainable for training

You may well want to build Swap with Me style sessions into training for your bus drivers, and we would encourage this. However, this will possibly mean holding more than one Swap with Me event a year. Many blind and partially sighted people have been happy to attend more than one event but they cannot do this indefinitely. If you do want to recruit a group of passengers to help you put on Swap with Me events then you will need to consider how you reimburse passengers for their time. This doesn't always mean that you need to pay them (as this can sometimes interfere with benefits) but you need to discuss with them what will work for them.

What?

So once you have a venue, a time and date and a group of blind and partially sighted passengers lined up all you need to do is put on the event, right?

Not quite, you'll need some sim specs which you can get from Visual Impairment North East at vine-simspecs.org.uk. We recommend that you have someone from a local society, local authority or Action for Blind People or RNIB train you in the use of sim specs before you use them at an event.

Now you can hold your event, sticking to these principles:

- **Keep it focused on sharing and swapping experiences.**
- **Keep it focused on the everyday problems that blind and partially sighted passengers face and how to overcome these.**
- **Keep it fun and informal.**
- **Keep people comfortable – that helps them talk.**
- **Keep it active.**
- **Keep it safe.**



connect

Worcester depot team

FIRST MIDLAND RED
WESTWAY, CHELMS
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“ I’m delighted that we’ve partnered with RNIB and with its help have organised more than 15 ‘Swap with Me’ events across our UK operations. These initiatives have proved invaluable in better understanding some of the obstacles people who are blind and partially sighted have to overcome when catching the bus.

We are very proud to be the first bus operator to sign RNIB’s Bus Charter.”

Giles Fearnley, Managing Director, First UK Bus

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