

Stop for me, speak to me

Catching a bus should
not be a sight test

RNIB

supporting blind and
partially sighted people



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Foreword



I welcome this report and my company, Reading Transport fully supports the RNIB's campaign.

I'm shocked, but as a one-time conductor many years ago, hardly surprised that eight in ten people who are blind or partially sighted say they've missed a bus because they could not hail it.

At Reading Transport the rule is that drivers should stop when someone is standing at a bus stop, unless the person has clearly signalled they do not want that bus. This is a simple rule that benefits all users.

I think treating every stop as a "request" stop and only stopping when people hold their arm out is not the right way to run a service these days, not just because of blind and partially sighted people who may not be able to see the bus, but for anyone who might be unsure. It's good to learn that Transport for London have also revised their policy in London. We have, too and hope that others will now follow.

Changing the way our drivers think about potential passengers waiting at bus stops has improved the service to all users as well as giving added reassurance to visually impaired bus travellers.

Since we set up our Reading Transport Academy we have found that training the sensitivities and customer-empathy of our drivers directly relates to the way people respond to our service. The behaviour and reactions of the individual driver are crucial, so helping them to understand how they can make a real difference really works. We provide more than just basic disability awareness training to our driver teams. Since 2008 we have been using the services of two trainers with visual impairment expertise who are helping our drivers to develop the skills they need, through self discovery – the best way to learn. Supporting RNIB's bus campaign is all part of this for us.

It's over five years since I became Chief Executive Officer of Reading Transport and during that time I have worked hard to put customer service at the heart of everything we do. At first this was a slow process, but success breeds success and it becomes ever easier to convince our own staff that every customer is an individual. There are real benefits to drivers in making eye contact and saying a quick hello to everyone who boards. Increasingly, this is becoming the norm amongst our staff.

Innovation is crucial for our business and we continue to invest wherever we can in innovation. Thus we have many green diesel-electric hybrid buses in our fleet and

on-board audio visual announcement systems and much else, but the way that drivers deal with customers is now more than ever the foundation of good customer service. Verbal communication is after all what provides our blind and partially sighted customers with the accessible information they need.

Buses provide mobility to all – and for blind and partially sighted people they are often a key basis of their independence. Raising awareness both of the needs of users and the way needs can be met is good for everybody. We're on a roll now, but we can always do better. At Reading Transport we will continue to listen, learn and improve our service for blind and partially sighted people in particular (but actually everybody, regardless of individual needs) so they can get around independently on buses that they feel comfortable and welcomed to use.

James Freeman
Chief Executive Officer, Reading Transport



Introduction



Every day a hundred people in the UK start to lose their sight. Sight loss affects people of all ages although as we get older we are increasingly likely to lose our sight. There are almost two million people with sight loss in the UK and it is predicted that this number will double by 2050 – due to an ageing population and increasing incidence of health conditions linked to sight loss such as diabetes.

Whether you have only just started to lose your sight or you've been living with sight loss all your life, your local bus is a lifeline for getting to work, to the shops and for keeping up with your family and friends. The local bus can be the only affordable way to independently get around. Many blind and partially sighted people travel using concessionary fares schemes, others have to make journeys at peak times and pay full fare.

Inaccessible buses prevent blind and partially sighted people from fulfilling their potential because having the ability to travel easily is key to playing a full role in society and achieving success in work and training. Many people struggle to read bus numbers, timetables and signs, but too often the way the bus service is run makes “seeing” an essential ability for using it.

We at RNIB believe that every bus service in the UK should be fully accessible to everyone living with sight loss and that the adjustments necessary are already within the capacity of all bus operators.

RNIB is calling on bus operators to ensure their drivers:

- **Stop for blind and partially sighted people waiting at a bus stop because 9 in 10 cannot see to hail it – catching a bus should not be a sight test**
- **Speak to blind and partially sighted people boarding the bus because the majority struggle to get clear information from the driver – without accessible information many cannot travel.**

Why bus operators should act now

Equality Act 2010

RNIB believes that, as a result of the provisions of the Equality Act 2010, bus operators are under a legal obligation to ensure that their services are accessible to blind and partially sighted people.

The Equality Act requires operators to, amongst other things, change policies and practices that place blind and partially sighted people at a substantial disadvantage and to provide auxiliary aids to existing provisions. In practice this is likely to mean that bus operators have a duty to consider many of the changes outlined in this report.

The Equality Act replaced the Disability Discrimination Act which contained almost identical provisions. In 2005 the Disability Rights Commission published the “Code of Practice on the Provision and Use of Transport Vehicles” which specifically explained how these provisions applied to the transport industry. It contained the following examples in relation to buses:

6.12 Disabled passengers with a visual impairment or a learning disability may need assistance in identifying their destination stop when travelling on a bus. The bus operator instructs its drivers to announce stops on request. The bus operator is providing an auxiliary service which makes its bus journeys accessible. This is likely to be a reasonable step for the bus operator to have to take.

6.25 A visually impaired person carrying a long cane is waiting at a bus stop which is used by buses on several different routes. On seeing that the waiting passenger is carrying a long cane, the bus drivers call out to her the number and destination of their buses, in case she is waiting for their bus. This is provision of an auxiliary service and may be a reasonable step for the bus drivers to have to take.

Although this Code has now been superseded by Codes relating to the Equality Act, it still provides a very good indication of what the Equality Act means for bus operators. A copy of the Code can be found in the Guidance and Good practice section of www.equalityhumanrights.com/publications

New EU regulations

The new EU Regulation on Passenger Rights in bus and coach transport will come into force on 1 March 2013.

The new rights awarded by the EU to disabled people offer more protection than the Equality Act, in particular in terms of access to travel information and assistance. In addition, the new EU law will make it compulsory for all bus drivers to undergo disability awareness training, something that is not currently an obligation in UK law.

Summary of rights in the new EU law:

1. A set of basic rights that will apply to passengers travelling on ALL buses and coaches, regardless of the distance covered. These rights focus on the needs of disabled persons and those with reduced mobility:
 - Non-discriminatory access to transport;
 - Mandatory disability awareness training of staff of buses and coaches;
 - Information to be provided throughout the journey;
 - Compensation for loss of or damage to wheelchairs or other mobility equipment;
 - A complaint handling mechanism with the power to enforce the regulation and to issue penalties.
2. A set of new passenger rights that will apply to long distance journeys on coaches ie where the scheduled distance is over 250 km (155 miles). These rights include compensation and assistance in the event of accidents and cancellations or delays. In addition, there are provisions specifically aimed at disabled people and people with reduced mobility. Bus and coach companies will be required to provide assistance to disabled people, provided that the passenger informs the company of his/her needs at the latest 36 hours before departure. If the bus operator is unable to provide suitable assistance, the passenger may be accompanied at no extra cost by a companion of his/her choice.

RNIB members and the public want improvements

RNIB has over 10,000 blind and partially sighted members from across the UK who help to shape our work. Members connect with each other at regional member forum events held around the country. These events include workshops and seminars on important issues that they face.

Access problems with buses are one of the most persistent hot topics raised at member events and there has been no downward trend over recent years.

Over the summer RNIB ran a series of workshops letting members contribute their own views on bus travel issues. The workshops proved extremely popular. People attend these workshops on a voluntary basis, giving up their own time. The high level of engagement confirmed bus travel problems continue to have major impacts on blind and partially sighted people across the country.

More people want to use buses



Four in ten blind and partially sighted people use bus services according to a study based on in-depth interviews with over 1,000 people.

The highest proportion of blind and partially sighted people using buses were those aged between 30 and 49 (52 per cent). The lowest was by people aged between 65 and 72 (32 per cent).

The main reasons given for using bus services were for work (7 per cent), leisure and hobbies (47 per cent) and shopping (77 per cent).

The Network 1000 study asked respondents if they wanted to get out more and 43 per cent said yes. This shows that six in ten who aren't using buses may well start using them if access improvements can be made.

Getting to work

“I travel into work Monday to Friday between 7.10am and 7.45am and travel home on the same bus 4.30pm to 5.00pm. I nearly always stop the wrong bus when going into work as two with different destinations come up the road at the same time, if the wrong bus is first and stops I miss the bus I want as it just goes past.” Mary

One in three blind and partially sighted people are in employment and many rely on local bus services to commute. The access difficulties highlighted in this report put additional strains on working blind and partially sighted people and those seeking work and in training.

Bus services provide disabled people who are working and who have no other affordable travel option a means to get to work, to job interviews and to training.

Bus operators need to be aware that the services they provide will be used by disabled people who are working and who have no other affordable travel option for getting to work on time.

“On one occasion, missing the right stop made me 20 minutes late for work because I had to stay on the bus until it came back around to the right area again. The driver was also rather stroppy when I said that I would have to stay onboard because he said that his ticket machine wouldn’t allow for that option. This was unpleasant, humiliating, embarrassing and annoying. The driver said that if I couldn’t manage on my own then I shouldn’t be allowed out on my own!” **Thomas**

“I am a guide dog owner; I know the route from the bus stop to my destination and back again because I do it regularly. Having to get off at an unfamiliar bus stop can be like getting off an aeroplane in a foreign country. You do not know where anything is, and getting back to a place you recognise is impossible when you cannot see. This can quite literally add on hours to your journey, something which is just not an option when you are travelling to work. Whose employer would be happy with them turning up two hours late for work?” **Hilary**

New bus experience survey

Between June and September 2012 RNIB ran a survey to find out how blind and partially sighted bus users were getting on at key points in their bus journey.

The survey was based on a set of questions that focused on key transition points in a typical bus journey. Our aim was to let people express whether or not they did face difficulties and how severe these were, and also to understand what people felt made a positive experience.

The survey was available online, on paper and over the phone, to ensure the majority of blind and partially sighted people could fill it in whatever reading format they used. Blind and partially sighted respondents were recruited through RNIB’s membership networks and on the website.

In total there were 360 responses to the survey.

It revealed that the vast majority of respondents experienced moderate to severe difficulties at one or more key points in their bus journeys. It also showed that some respondents were having much better experiences than others, suggesting that some bus operators were performing better than others.



Positive about bus drivers

“I more often have good experiences than bad, thankfully: drivers call out the bus number before being asked, and if it’s not the one I want may tell me my bus is just behind them; they ask where I want to get off and offer to let me know; they have a look and tell me where there’s a free seat; they don’t move until I’m seated; they call out in good time as we approach my stop; they tell me if it’s a big step down to the kerb or verge; they are generally friendly, wishing me a nice evening.” **Hilary**

We recognise that most bus drivers aim to provide the best service possible to their customers and this includes blind and partially sighted people.

We do not believe any driver wants to leave anyone behind at a bus stop or ignore a blind customer’s request for verbal information. So what is happening out there that explains the gap between what drivers are trying to do and the barriers of access that so many blind and partially sighted people say they are facing?

Stopping a bus

Catching a bus should not be a sight test

9 in 10 people with sight loss cannot see an approaching bus in time to hail it.

8 in 10 people with sight loss say they missed the bus they want.

7 in 10 missed the bus because it boarded away from the official bus stop.

Blind and partially sighted people face long delays with no guarantee that the next bus will stop either.

1. Stop for me at the bus stop

9 in 10 survey respondents said they could not see an approaching bus in time to hail it.

“A good experience is when the bus turns up and actually stops for me as it is quite frequent that they will just drive past me. I have phoned the bus company and complained and they tell me I must put my arm out to stop the bus. I have pointed out I am blind so can't see the bus but have just been told all stops are request stops so I still have to put my hand out!”
Henry

8 in 10 said they missed the bus they want.

“I cannot see the bus at all but I can sometimes hear it coming. I have sometimes flagged a lorry down which is embarrassing. It makes catching a bus so difficult. I miss the bus so often and just wish bus drivers just could stop when they see me.” **Diane**



Request Stops put the onus on the customer to signal to an approaching bus in order to stop it.

According to the Conditions of Carriage published by all the major bus operators the onus is put on the customer to flag the bus down. In effect this means the service is provided on terms which can only really be met by people who have the ability to see.

Arriva

“If you wish to board a bus, you should give a clear signal in good time to the driver of an approaching bus.” www.arrivabus.co.uk

Go Ahead

“When you wish to board a bus at a bus stop you should raise your arm to clearly indicate to the driver as all our stops are request stops.”
www.konectbus.co.uk/About.asp

Stage coach

“In most urban areas, buses will normally pick up and set down passengers at marked bus stops. In busy areas, certain stops will be allocated to specific services. If you wish to board a bus, you should give a clear signal in good time to the driver of an approaching bus.” www.stagecoachbus.com

First Group

“Where a passenger intends to board an approaching bus, a clear signal should be made as an indication to the driver.” www.firstgroup.com/ukbus

We could not find any Conditions of Carriage that took into account the access needs of customers with sight impairments, for whom seeing an approaching bus or the route number displayed on the bus board is difficult or impossible.

Our research shows people living with sight loss often make all sorts of personal efforts to get round the problem of request stops, from only using buses when they can find a friend to come with them, to asking strangers for help, to holding up large signs or just flagging every approaching vehicle down that sounds like a bus.

Request Stops are causing a staggering eight in ten blind and partially sighted people to miss the bus they want. Every missed bus represents an inaccessible service and every person left behind will suffer negative consequences. These are especially severe on routes with infrequent services.

We call on bus operators to revise their bus stopping practices to ensure they are fully accessible to all blind and partially sighted people and to amend their Conditions of Carriage so their policy is clear.

2. Stop for me when boarding away from the bus stop



Six in ten survey respondents said they had missed a bus because it had not boarded passengers at the official bus stop.

“It can be difficult to get on the bus I want when it is boarding away from the actual bus stop but here in Nottingham the drivers usually roll forward to check and open the doors when they see me.” Bernard

It is normal practice for drivers to open doors when pulled up behind another bus which is already boarding passengers at the official bus stop.

There are good reasons why this stopping practice has come about but it also has a negative impact on blind and partially sighted people:

- Firstly, for people who rely on hearing the bus rather than seeing it, it is almost impossible to hear when a bus has pulled up behind another bus because the engine noise of the nearest bus masks the engine sound of the bus behind.
- Second, pavement furniture often lines the route near bus stops and this creates a hazard for people attempting to walk up a line of buses as well as those stepping off a bus.

Almost half of the 360 survey respondents said they had collided with obstacles on the pavement that obstructed the exit doors.

We call on bus operators to review their policies and procedures when boarding passengers away from the bus stop so they take the needs of their blind and partially sighted customers into account. No one should have to chase buses up and down the pavement, not least disabled customers.

Getting vital travel information



For most blind and partially sighted people obtaining information in audio format, (verbal communication and/or spoken announcements) is essential. Printed timetables, signs and symbols are not accessible. Neither are nods and gestures from the driver.

“There’s a driver on the route I use who doesn’t speak to me. People have told me he just nods but I’m blind and cannot see this.” **Jane**

3. Speak to me so I can get vital travel information

“I had to be at my destination for an appointment at a fixed time. I was not told the right stop, despite asking the driver to do this when I boarded. I ended up three miles past my destination and therefore missed my appointment. It took more than an hour to get back on track, thanks to a kind member of the public.” **Marcus**

Over half of the survey respondents said they had difficulty obtaining travel information from the bus driver.

Consequences are that blind and partially sighted people cannot get key travel information when onboard the bus, including:

- bus route number and destination
- upcoming diversions, changes to destination or out of service bus stops
- directions to a seat
- when to get off the bus*
- warnings if exit doors are obstructed by trip hazards when alighting the bus.

“I should have been on a number 118 bus from Filey to Scarborough Morrisons store, a journey of normally around 7 to 8 miles, but I wasn’t. I specifically asked the bus driver for Scarborough Morrisons. The driver didn’t respond, just took the pass and put it through. At the time when I would have expected to be at Morrisons, he went round two or three holiday camps passing caravans (peripheral vision picked this up). When I realised that it had gone the wrong way, decided to stay on until the terminus. When all the passengers had got off I challenged the bus driver and asked him when he was going to stop at Morrisons, to which he replied that he didn’t stop at Morrisons. He thought I had said Bridlington. Waited for half an hour for return trip and when I recognised a stop I got off. I reported it to the bus company’s head office and took the driver’s number. I was very distressed and shocked by the incident and so was my guide dog. The terminus staff recognised this and gave me a hot drink and a seat. My wife was anxious about where I was and thought I had had a brainstorm. It was one of the most upsetting bus journeys you could possibly have. The bus driver knew I was blind because I had a guide dog but it didn’t trigger any appropriate behaviour in his response.” Edward

*Automatic audio announcements (Talking buses) help people know when to get off the bus. Guide Dogs for the Blind Association are campaigning for a change in the law to make audio and visual information – including audible announcements of the current stop, next stop and final destination – available on board bus and coach services across the UK.

We support Guide Dogs Talking Buses Campaign because we want automatic audio announcements as standard on buses across the country. We believe bus operators should pursue this goal in parallel with the calls set out in this report.

We call on bus operators to address the lack of accessible travel information by enabling their drivers to provide clear spoken information to blind and partially sighted customers.

4. Speak to me, I need to know you've seen me

Just looking out for blind people – is not enough



Most blind and partially sighted people we've spoken to assume their white cane is clearly visible to the bus driver when boarding a bus and that the driver understands what this means. When they hear no audible acknowledgment from the driver, they can feel their needs aren't recognised.

“I confess to feeling reluctant to ask bus drivers anything, unless they are familiar to me – as the first time after my sight loss I caught a bus from central Margate where many routes stop, I boarded the bus to ask if I was on the 8 and got the reply of “Are you *** blind, or something?” I managed a fair rejoinder with “No, I'm partially ** sighted and does the white stick not give you a bit of a clue?” but I was actually quite upset.” **Oliver**

For people who are partially sighted and who might not immediately appear as having sight loss, the Partially Sighted Society has developed the “shaded eye symbol” which can be placed on a bus pass wallet to alert the driver. www.partsight.org.uk



We interviewed some drivers to find out how visible the white cane is in typical conditions. Thanks to Reading Transport we were able to test it out for ourselves.

The test showed a white cane can get obscured when:

- another customer boarded in front of the white cane user
- the drivers' cab gate and/or ticket equipment blocked line of sight
- the driver wasn't looking.

We all have responsibility for addressing this problem:

- the person carrying the cane, to ensure they are aware of things that can obscure the view
- the driver, to ensure he or she makes a basic visual check of customers boarding their service
- the bus operator to facilitate their drivers to provide appropriate information and time allowances.

“We have a policy for all our drivers to make eye contact and say a quick hello to all our customers. This might sound like an impractical idea to some, but our mystery shopping shows our drivers are putting it into action most of the time. We treat our policy as essential to our customer service ethos, but we also know that this policy helps drivers spot and speak to anyone boarding who has a white cane or guide dog.”

Mick, Reading Transport

Another approach is provided by First Group buses with their “First Safe Journey Card”.

“Safe Journey Cards have been designed specifically with the needs of many of our customers in mind. If you have a fear of falling on the bus you’ll find this a great help. With a First Safe Journey Card you can privately let the driver know what sort of help you need and they’ll wait for you to reach your seat safely before driving off. Just show the Safe Journey Card to the driver when you get on the bus with your pass or ticket.

There are several versions of the Safe Journey Card from which you can choose the one that best suits your particular needs.

In addition, on the reverse of the Safe Journey Card there is a section you can fill in which allows you to give details to the driver of your destinations (Driver please let me know when we get to...)”

Source: www.firstgroup.com/safejourney



First Group are set to revise their Safe Journey Card in 2013

We call on bus operators to require their drivers to routinely check whether a boarding passenger has a disability and facilitate their driver’s to provide an appropriate level of adjustment for that customer. We welcome initiatives like the First Safe Journey Card which provides an additional option for disabled people to get the drivers attention but hope that it is not essential to carry such a card to qualify for access adjustments.

Additional barriers that blind and partially sighted people face

5. Making a complaint can be a sight test too

To make things worse, if a blind or partially sighted person wishes to report any of these problems to the bus operator, they will face barriers to making a complaint too.

Obtaining the bus registration number and the customer complaint details can be impossible because these details are provided on the bus in visual format only. Relying on the bus driver to help is often impractical when the driver is occupied, the bus is in motion and the individual has no means of recording the details in an accessible format.

We call on bus operators to make their complaints process fully accessible for customers who cannot read printed signs or bus identification/registration plates.

6. Assault screens: a sound barrier

Assault screens are transparent barriers which shield the driver's cab from the public area of the bus. They are designed to protect the driver from random assaults from the public. The screens function best when the driver sits as far back in the cab as possible.

While these screens are completely transparent allowing the driver to be easily seen (vital for eye contact and seeing gestures) the screens are not transparent to sound. They are a sound barrier to verbal communication.

Anything that affects verbal communication on a bus should be addressed because the ambient noise levels on a bus are already quite high, ie noise from other passengers, passing traffic (when the doors are open) and of course the engine of the bus itself.

Over half of the survey respondents said they had problems getting clear verbal information from the driver.

“Some forget that speaking from behind a screen often results in their voice not being heard, and totally blind people cannot lip read.”
Mark

“As a driver myself I don't like these screens because they cut me off from the customer. A big part of the problem is they make it hard for me to hear the customer and for them to hear me. We have an unofficial practice to open the gate so we can speak round it. Many of us do this because we cannot find any other way to help customers when they cannot hear us.”
Chris

Assault screen manufacturers have attempted to compensate for the sound barrier effect by drilling small holes through their screens. However, like light, not much sound can move through small holes, and so in practice this feature has little benefit. Other developments provide much greater potential for improvement, for example assault screens with a section that can be manually slid aside by the driver.

We recognise the role of these screens in keeping drivers safer, but they should be designed for both safety and accessibility. They should not prevent the driver from providing blind and partially sighted passengers with clear and accessible spoken information.

We call on bus operators to adjust their driver communications briefing to account for the problems that assault screens cause. The outcome should be that customers and drivers can communicate verbally without obstructions. In addition, we call on operators to ensure new or replacement assault screens have a slide section. We encourage manufacturers to address the pass-through of spoken information in new designs and to fully test their prototypes in real world situations to ensure verbal communication is not restricted.

7. Driver training – not specific enough



We explored how bus operators instruct and train their drivers to interact with blind and partially sighted customers and welcome the disability/diversity training course as part of the bus driver Certificate of Professional Competence (CPC).

The disability training courses we assess took drivers through a range of general disability related topics but did not enable drivers to consider how these issues relate to their own practices and to develop strategies for modifying their own professional practice or behaviour.

In contrast we found two bus operators (Reading Transport and Trent Barton) who did train their driver teams to address the specific problems that blind and partially sighted customers face. These courses included practical exercises which enable the bus driver to experience some aspects of sight impairment themselves, whilst boarding a bus, moving around on the bus and alighting.

It was clear that the training provisions that combined sight loss specific learning outcomes with interactive exercises delivered the most cost effective solution.

Even though drivers have to attend disability awareness courses as part of their CPC, we could not find where operators routinely assessed the outcomes of the training. We think clearly defined outcome-based objectives are needed in every disability training course that drivers attend.

We call on bus operators to ensure that their driver instruction and training specifically address bus stopping practices and accessible information provision for blind and partially sighted customers. The effect of the training on actual driver behaviour should be routinely checked and assessed too.

8. Performance management should not work against access

In our research we could not find any example of a bus operator who incentivises their drivers to give disabled people proper assistance, but most operators do incentivise drivers to meet strict timing targets.

We are very concerned by performance targets and incentives which fail to take into account the extra time it can take for a driver to:

- pull up their vehicle at a bus stop to provide accessible route number/destination information to a blind or partially sighted person waiting at the upcoming bus stop
- provide accessible travel information to a passenger when on-board the bus
- provide assistance to a seat or to alight the bus.

We call on bus operators to ensure that the time spent assisting disabled passengers is given a positive score in their performance matrix. Providing assistance to disabled people should never count against a driver because it adds extra time. We hope operators will recognise that incentivising drivers to reduce journey times or meet strict timing targets, will also act as a disincentive to the provision of essential accessibility adjustments to disabled passengers.

Bus operators who are making a difference

Transport for London (TFL) – stop for me

TFL updated their bus stopping policy in 2008 following a stakeholder consultation process. The revision was communicated to all TFL drivers in their “Red Book”.

Extract from Red Book:

“As your bus approaches: You pull up to pick up passengers. It doesn’t matter what kind of stop it is or if the passengers put their hands out – if there’s someone waiting to board, you are expected to stop.”

TFL’s revised policy accommodates the needs of people with sight loss.

“I will usually stop if I see someone at a bus stop with a white cane but it’s not always easy to see until the last moment. I think part of it is that we are so used to people holding their arm out that we forget that there are people who cannot see the bus coming.” **Ben**

TFL – talking buses

Over the last five years TFL have rolled out automatic audio visual announcements across their bus fleet using the iBus system. iBus is far more than just a talking announcement system, but it’s the provision of information through audio, such as bus route number and destination, name of next stop and a range of other travel messages via loudspeakers on the bus, that enable blind and partially sighted people to travel independently.

“I have good bus experiences when the automatic audio stop messages are working and when the bus driver pulls up to where I am standing and doesn’t stop behind another bus. This happens mostly in London on my regular route with the 185. Because I can now listen out for my stop, I never miss it and I know exactly where I am on my journey. This also means that I can be and travel more independently without having to ask for additional assistance.” **Anthony**

This bus user’s reaction is typical of the many responses RNIB has received about AV announcements on buses across the country. It emphasises just how important onboard travel information is to blind and partially sighted people.

Reading Transport – speak to me

Since 2008 Reading Transport has made customer service a priority. They set a goal for every bus driver to acknowledge every customer when they boarded the bus, by making eye contact and saying hello.

Mick Hughes (Head of Training) explained that while this is really the most basic of courtesies, it is a practice which has all but disappeared from most bus drivers and this has led to them becoming isolated from their customers. Feeling isolated is bad for customer service.

So simply saying hello sets up a good customer relationship and this breeds positive feelings amongst customers. Mick also recognises that for blind and partially sighted people, saying hello connects that individual verbally with the driver. Once connected that person can quickly check the bus route number and destination and ask for driver assistance when they get to their destination. If they need more travel information such as where to catch a connecting service, or how to find the entrance to the railway station, the connected relationship makes this easy too.

James Freeman, Chief Executive Officer of Reading Transport reports that in 2012 their driver team are close to achieving their customer greeting goal for almost every customer.

Local councils who are making a difference

An important partner in the delivery of local bus services is of course the local council. They can both collaborate with and compliment the work done by bus operators to improve bus travel for blind and partially sighted people.

The following examples demonstrate how two local councils are improving access to buses by adjusting roadside equipment, information services and by engaging with local blind and partially sighted bus users.

Brighton and Hove – make their “bus stop display signs” talk

Brighton and Hove Council have used RNIB React to ensure that blind and partially sighted people are able to take advantage of the bus information boards that sighted people have become so familiar with. The RNIB React system provides audio information about a location from talking signs which can be activated using a small handheld device. When buttons on the device are pressed they trigger information from the speaker units inside the React boxes along the route.

Blind and partially sighted people in Brighton and Hove are now able to carry a handheld device which they can press to hear information about which buses are approaching the bus stop and when the buses are due to arrive. There are

currently 20 bus stops in Brighton and two in East Sussex that have this system, with more planned.

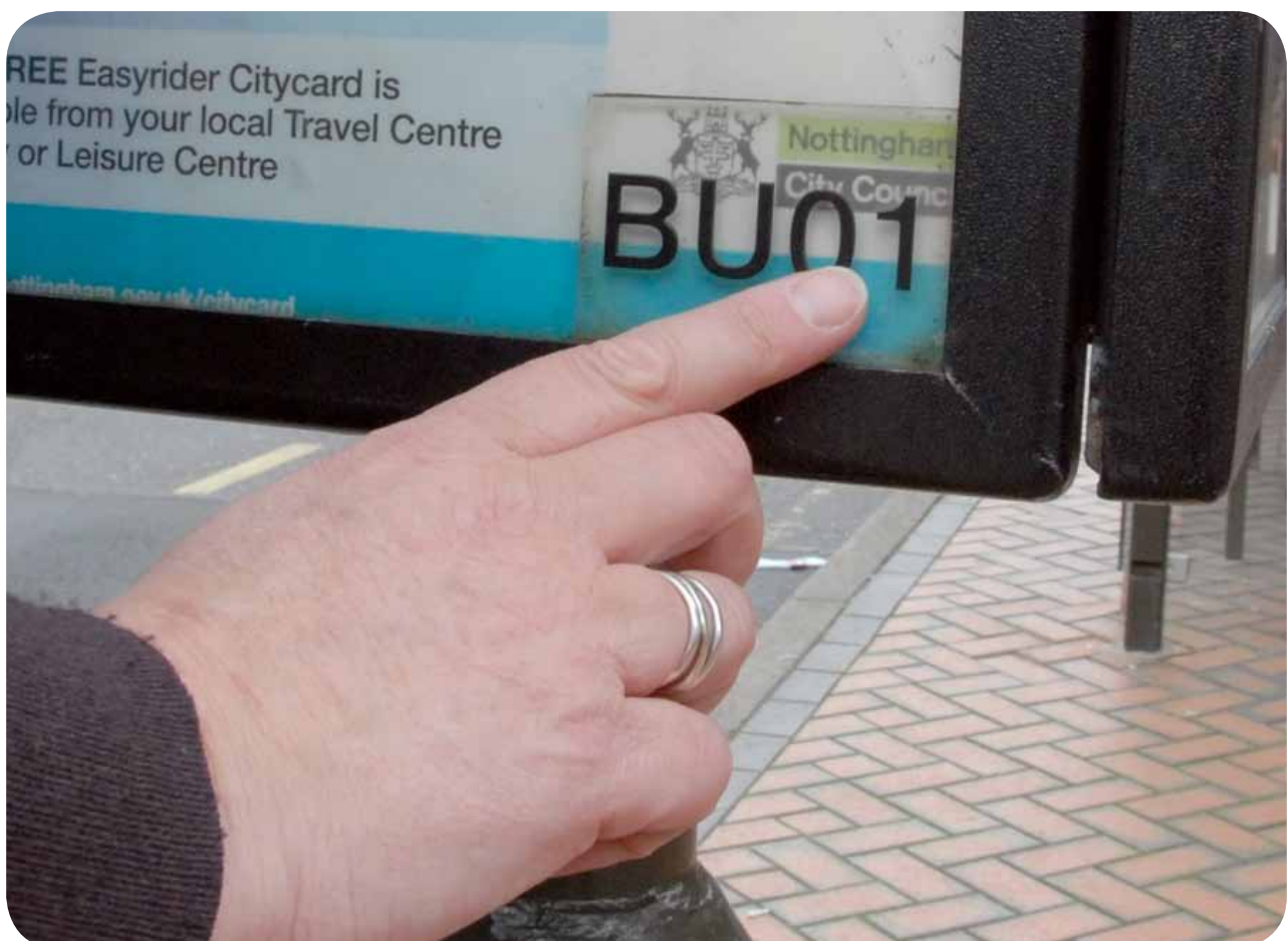
RNIB React has been installed in over 13 locations across the UK including Birmingham, Leeds, London and Belfast.

Nottingham City Council

Nottingham City Council worked closely with RNIB and Action for Blind People to improve public transport for blind and partially sighted customers.

Three significant developments are:

- introduction of tactile buttons onto all City Centre bus stops that provide the bus stop ID in tactile format
- provision of a Transport User Group letting disabled bus users from across the city to regularly feedback their experiences to the council and local bus operators
- a telephone travel information line with advisors trained to assist blind and partially sighted people.



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Conclusion

Access to bus travel remains one of the most common issues for blind and partially sighted people. Usable bus services are a foundation stone for people who do not have the option to drive or cycle.

People with sight loss need to travel by bus so they can work, shop and keep up with family and friends and to contribute to society to their full potential.

We call on all service providers to address the access barriers presented in the “Stop for me, speak to me” campaign report and remind them that people with sight loss have a legal right to use bus services. RNIB provides support to blind and partially sighted people who ask us for help to pursue their rights. We will also support any organisation that makes a firm commitment to remove the barriers of access to bus services highlighted in this report.

Our objective is to ensure blind and partially sighted people can access bus services like anyone else, fully independently and without unnecessary difficulties.

Appendix – bus experience survey findings

Below are the findings of the bus user experience survey conducted by RNIB Campaigns Team between June and September 2012.

All eight questions are listed together with responses from the 360 submissions.

Question 1. Are you usually able to read the route number of the bus that is approaching you, with enough time to hail it?

Yes14%

No86%

Question 2. If you answered no, do you think this has caused you to miss a bus that you could have got?

Yes76%

No14%

I don't know10%

Question 3. Have you ever missed a bus you wanted because it stopped to pick up some distance from the bus stop?

Yes56%

No29%

I think so9%

I don't know6%

Question 4. How reliable do you find bus drivers at providing you with clear verbal information when you ask them for it?

Quite reliable39%

Not very reliable39%

Completely unreliable11%

I don't usually speak to the driver11%

Question 5. Can you usually identify where the priority seating is on a bus?

Yes40%
Sometimes find it difficult33%
Always find it difficult15%
I don't need priority seating12%

Question 6. When you ask the driver to let you know when your stop is approaching, are they reliable at doing this?

Yes usually.....24%
Sometimes don't33%
Often don't11%
Very unreliable13%
I never ask.....18%

Question 7. If you have missed getting off at the right bus stop, please describe in your own words how this affected you, such as what you had to do to get back on track and how long it took.

247 written responses were submitted. Many described serious consequences arising from missing the required bus stop. These included being forced to cross busy and unfamiliar roads to find way back to correct destination, missing important scheduled appointments and spending long periods of time waiting for assistance to arrive.

Question 8. When getting off the bus have you collided with obstacles on the pavement that obstructed the exit doors?

Yes45%
No39%
Possibly but it was a long time ago13%
Doesn't apply to me3%

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Hugh Huddy

RNIB Campaigns Team, October 2012



“From March 2013, bus operators will be required by law to provide accessible transport information before and during travel.”

This publication is available in print, large print, braille and audio.

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