



An accessible road network?

Disabled user experience on England's motorways and major 'A' roads

November 2018



Foreword

Our research shows how important driving is to disabled road users: it gives them independence and a sense of freedom when public transport may not be a viable option. Many enjoy not being defined by their disability when on the road, and value the sense of equality that driving offers.

According to the Department of Work and Pensions¹ 22 per cent of people report having a disability. Many of these use the road network either as drivers, passengers, or both. Disabled drivers represent five per cent of the driving population, which equates to approximately two million people. Through this research we have been able to explore the experiences of this important group of road users. We also spoke to stakeholders in the industry responsible for providing facilities, such as roadside services and breakdown recovery, that may be needed when using England's motorways and major 'A' roads.

Specialist vehicle adaptations are a recent innovation that have greatly enhanced the driving experience, and for some have indeed made driving possible. Other general adaptations such as cruise control and automatic gears make driving easier, allowing the driver to conserve physical and emotional energy whilst focusing more attention on following road signs and directions.

The research also highlights some marked differences between experiences on motorways and on 'A' roads. Some find driving on motorways easier than on 'A' roads, as they feel the road surface quality is better. They report more potholes on 'A' roads and an inferior road surface quality overall.

Poor quality surfaces can cause extreme physical discomfort to some, both during and after they have completed their journey. For the majority of disabled road users we spoke to, driving on Highways England's roads is preferable to driving on local roads or in urban areas: there are fewer junctions and other points of stress.

Difficulties can be encountered when using service areas. Participants saw services on 'A' roads as less predictable than on motorways where services are seen as both more 'regulated' and accountable.

"On this little thing here [small steering adaption]... completely changed my life, you know. I wasn't driving before this. I couldn't drive before this. It's just a very small thing, you know."

Road user with a physical disability

'A' road services are seen as being smaller and less likely to cater well for disabled people, for example by providing sufficient disabled parking spaces or toilets. On the other hand, their smaller size is seen by some as an advantage, making them more manageable because there is less distance to walk. Refuelling emerged from the research as a key issue: it is clearly a challenge to fill up if you have difficulty getting out of your vehicle.

Transport Focus is making several recommendations in light of this research and will continue to press for improvements to make driving on England's motorways and major 'A' roads more accessible to this group of road users. These things may take time to achieve in full, but the end result will be a road network that is more accessible to all, regardless of any disability someone may have.



Jeff Halliwell

Chair, Transport Focus

¹<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/family-resources-survey-financial-year-201617> - this represents approximately 13.9 million people

Summary

Our research shows that **Highways England** could do the following to improve the disabled road user experience:

- update and publicise information about help routinely available to anyone with disabilities who is caught in a traffic jam and requires urgent assistance
- publicise who to call if your vehicle breaks down; and how to stay safe when someone in a vehicle cannot follow the standard safety advice
- provide information about facilities for disabled road users at services on its roads (and provide it as open data for any organisation to use)
- review the layout of roadside services across its network, taking steps to provide more disabled parking spaces, curb their misuse by ineligible drivers, and reduce the distance between these and key facilities
- review disabled toilet provision at services across its network to ensure they are appropriately designed and routinely available for use
- work to improve road signage to make it clear for those who have cognitive impairments.

"Once we're in a car we're all equal, we're just road users."

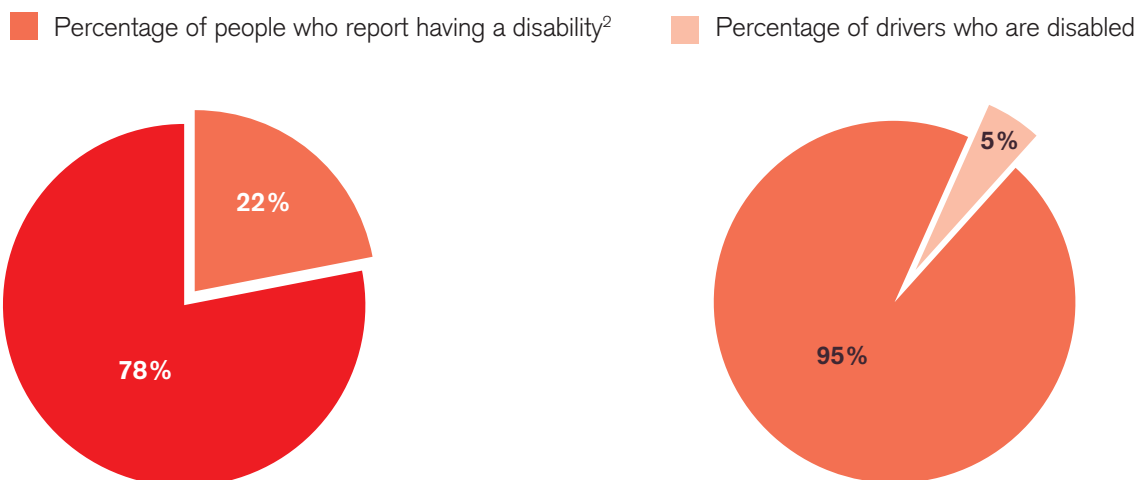
Road user with a physical disability

As promised in its inclusive transport strategy² the **Department for Transport** should help finance the installation of more 'Changing Places' toilets to expand provision of facilities suitable for people with severe physical and cognitive disabilities.

Petrol retailers must ensure they are compliant with the Equality Act 2010, making reasonable adjustments to ensure disabled customers are not disadvantaged.

Every organisation involved in roadside services and recovery should review and improve the disability awareness training given to all their staff.

Disabled drivers as a percentage of the driving population



²<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inclusive-transport-strategy>

Key findings

England's motorways and major 'A' roads are vitally important to disabled people, particularly those who have difficulty using public transport. Overall, their experience of Highways England's roads is positive and liberating. Nevertheless, the research identified ways in which the experience could be improved, and these are discussed below.

A key contextual finding is that journey planning is very important to many disabled road users: for some it is significantly more important than for the majority of road users. If you are disabled there are many different factors you need to take into account when making a journey, including conserving physical and emotional energy so you can complete your trip.

Journeys often need to be meticulously planned, working out where it is suitable to stop and rest or take medication, with unexpected events such as traffic jams allowed for.

Drivers with severe anxiety may use tools such as Google maps to help them identify local landmarks so they can assure themselves they are on track, and so avoid becoming stressed. Some also use the three-dimensional driving view to rehearse their journey.

In addition to the finding that disabled road users need to plan to a much greater degree than others, four themes emerged from the research. They are: getting stuck in a traffic jam; breaking down and the fear of doing so; and aspects of using roadside services.

Getting stuck in a traffic jam

Unforeseen delays are frustrating for any road user but the consequences of becoming trapped in traffic for long periods can be far more significant for disabled road users. Although they are generally more aware of the need to account for traffic when journey planning, the main problem cited is limited resources available to identify delays. Also, many were not clear who to contact for information or assistance in the event of becoming trapped in a lengthy traffic jam.

Recommendation 1

Highways England should do more to publicise the information sources that are available to find out about delays and what it will do to help disabled road users who develop urgent needs in the event of becoming trapped in traffic for an extended period. This should include publicising details about who to phone for assistance if required.



Disability Driving Instructors
www.disabilitydrivinginstructors.com

Breaking down and the fear of doing so

Among the disabled road users we spoke to, only a few had ever experienced breaking down. We found that while some felt confident they would get the help they needed, others were not so sure. Those who had experienced breakdown prior to becoming disabled were able to consider the new challenges they might now face in the event of breakdown.

The following fears were raised:

- difficulty getting out of a vehicle quickly or in the dark
- being unable to get over the barrier beside the road
- that recovery staff are not trained to manage adapted vehicles and disabled drivers and/or passengers
- among those aware of them, smart motorways are felt to be intimidating due to the lack of a hard shoulder.

"Do they go to some vehicles quicker than they go to others? Would they prioritise a disabled person's vehicle over another one?"

Road user with a physical disability

The stakeholders we spoke to who provide breakdown and recovery services recognised the need to train their staff in disability awareness. However, it is unclear whether minimum training requirements are in place and whether staff are assessed after their training. Lack of training can lead to experiences that are traumatic for the customer: for example, a person with dementia could be mistaken for somebody under the influence of alcohol.

Recommendation 2

Highways England should communicate, through multiple channels, what assistance will be provided in the event of breakdown. Guidance should be communicated about the specific steps disabled road users should take to stay safe in the event of breakdown if they are unable to follow the standard safety advice. A review of staff disability awareness training should be undertaken by all organisations involved in roadside recovery and services, and plans implemented to ensure all staff receive and maintain a high standard of training.



Roadside services

Where are the services? What facilities do they have?

Roadside services are important for any road user, but even more so for those who are disabled. When planning a journey, understanding the location of service stations on route is a key step in the process. It is important to know where you can stop for a rest, refreshments, to use the toilet or to take medication. With this knowledge disabled road users are more likely to travel further afield.

Recommendation 3

Highways England should compile and maintain accurate information about facilities provided for disabled road users at services on its roads, including details of the layout at individual service areas. This information should be provided by Highways England itself and available as open data for others to use.



Signage – approaching and within services

We found that road users can find signage confusing on the approach to and within services, especially if they have cognitive disabilities. Some road users reported being confused when confronted with multiple pieces of information on the same sign. This can lead to drivers becoming confused about when they should exit the road to reach the service station. Once off the main road drivers can also become confused by complicated routes into service station areas; the different roundabouts and turn-off points that need to be negotiated. Road users told us that signage within services can also be unclear, leading to unnecessary depletion of both emotional and physical energy reserves as visitors search for the facilities they need.

Recommendation 4

Both **Highways England** and **roadside service providers** should undertake ergonomic studies to determine how current signage could be improved to give greater clarity, including for those who identify as having cognitive impairments. Improvements should then be made where required.

Parking and distance to walk to facilities

Having parked, disabled road users can find that the distance to walk to different facilities within the service station area is too great. This can be because the disabled parking spaces are too far from the entrance or because they are full. This is sometimes due to occupancy by non-blue badge holders, forcing disabled people to park further away.

Also, additional time is often required by disabled road users when visiting services. Getting in and out of the vehicle can be time-consuming and they often need longer than others to rest before resuming their trip. The research highlighted the need to allow longer than two hours' free parking for disabled users.

"Much of these challenges are of a historic nature. A lot of these services were built in the 60s but what we're trying to do is redesign some of the car parks and make access points for wheelchairs and so on, but it's not just about wheelchairs."

Stakeholder interview



Recommendation 5

Highways England should review the layout of roadside services across its network, to identify immediate actions that can reduce the distance between disabled parking and the entrance to services, to provide more spaces where there are currently too few, and to inform the design of new or refurbished services.

The Department for Transport should require more than two-hours free parking for disabled visitors at motorway services, and services operators – whether on motorways or 'A' roads – should strengthen efforts to minimise use of disabled spaces by those who do not have a 'blue badge'.

Toilets and changing facilities

While accessible toilets are a regular feature of motorway service areas, road users told us that on major 'A' roads they cannot always be used. Reports of misuse included incidents where toilets were used for storing items such as bins or staff bicycles. The disabled toilets are sometimes located a considerable distance from the services entrance, which can make them inaccessible for some; it is simply too far to walk. The practice of combined usage of disabled toilets with baby changing facilities can also cause frustration. There is a perception among some disabled road users that 'A' road services seldom have accessible toilets, leading them to seek out facilities in nearby towns.

'Changing Places' are facilities for those with severe physical and cognitive disabilities who require additional equipment, such as a hoist. Currently there are 20 'Changing Places' toilets in place or planned at roadside services in England, two of which are at 'A' road services. Although 'Changing Places' toilets can be found at other locations, for those unable to use a standard disabled toilet the lack of adequate provision can present a barrier to travelling at all.

"[Changing Places] are complex and expensive to deliver... there is a material cost... we need to be profitable and be able to reinvest. In reality, it's an extremely large amount of money to be spent with no financial return... We are happy to do that, we just need some time to get there."

Stakeholder interview



"A lot of public toilets [on 'A' roads] have closed down which makes life difficult for people who are travelling."

Road user with a physical disability

Recommendation 6

When designing new or refurbished services, **services operators** should locate disabled toilets as close as possible to the entrance, to ensure customers need walk no further than necessary.

Highways England should review disabled toilet provision at services across its network to ensure they are appropriately designed and fully available for use. It can then work with individual operators to address deficiencies and repeat the audit of these facilities regularly.

As promised in the inclusive transport strategy the **Department for Transport** should finance a proportion of the cost of installing 'Changing Places' toilets, to ensure greater provision, in recognition of the fact that standard disabled toilets do not meet the needs of those with severe physical and cognitive disabilities.





Refuelling

Disabled road users should be able to travel on Highways England's network with the confidence that they can refuel at any petrol station without difficulty or embarrassment. Yet for those with mobility impairments getting out of a vehicle to fill up can be particularly challenging, so assistance is often required.

Those we spoke to said that few petrol stations have buttons that enable help to be summoned discretely, so it is necessary to sound the horn, which causes embarrassment. Furthermore, there is some suggestion that staff are not always available to help, and, in these instances, they are reliant on other members of the public to assist. While mobile payments options and paying at the pump are welcome initiatives, these are not yet available everywhere – adding the need to get to and from the shop.

"I've driven on motorways all my life and once I get in the car, it's just like it always was [before I got ill]"

Road user with a physical disability.

Recommendation 7

Petrol retailers should satisfy themselves that they are compliant with the Equality Act 2010 through having made reasonable adjustments to ensure that disabled customers are not disadvantaged. This may mean ensuring adequate provision of staff to assist those who need it, and making sure mechanisms are in place to capture complaints about failure to provide help so that problems can be identified and addressed.

"We use the M1 motorway every Friday, to visit our kids, my husband drives us. I wouldn't be able to get there by myself. I don't drive, and I can't get the bus, I struggle to walk to the bus stop and I don't know if there'll be a ramp."

Road user with a physical disability

Other issues to consider

Those with cognitive disabilities can find the conventional style of learning to drive difficult, as they respond better to a less structured, more fluid style of learning. Listening to and understanding the driving instructor or examiner can be challenging for those with learning disabilities or hearing impairments. The research suggests a need for more driving instructors who understand these needs and are able to adapt their style of teaching accordingly.

Specialist facilities do exist for those with physical disability. *Driving Mobility* is a network of 16 independent centres in the UK which provides driving assessment services and advice for disabled people, and many road users reported a positive experience using these centres. However, our research highlighted a need for more of them, particularly in rural locations.

"Yeah, I mean it was really difficult learning to drive, I just don't learn like that, it needs to be more free, the style of learning, I mean."

Road user with a cognitive disability

The **Department for Transport** should consider carrying out research to identify the number and location of instructors trained to help those with cognitive impairments learn to drive. This will enable an assessment to be made as to whether there are sufficient numbers in all parts of the country. This information could also be made available through gov.uk to help people with cognitive and other disabilities find a suitable driving instructor.

"No matter where I am or what I am, I've always got my car; that's my safety net."

Road user with a physical disability.

Case Study

A man in his twenties from London has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and drives extensively around the country for work. His greatest challenge with regards to driving has been learning to drive. He used four different driving instructors before finding one that adapted to his style of learning.



Disability Driving Instructors - www.disabilitydrivinginstructors.com.
Helping people with physical disabilities, with special educational needs and those with hearing difficulties.

Why we did this research

Transport Focus undertook this study as part of its wider commitment to focus on the needs of transport users with a disability. We want to understand the challenges and barriers this group of road users face when using England's motorways and major 'A' roads, the strategic roads managed by Highways England. The findings of this research will enable us to better inform stakeholders, leading to a greater focus on meeting their needs.

How we did it

In-depth interviews

Interviews were conducted between December 2017 and March 2018, with 50 individual disabled motorists and passengers. All the respondents self-defined as disabled under the Equality Act 2010 definition of disability: *'a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term negative effect on your ability to do normal daily activities'*.

Accompanied drives, where a researcher travelled in the car with the road user, were also undertaken with a selection of respondents. The key issues and challenges faced during the end-to-end journey were explored.

Focus groups

Six focus groups were conducted with different charities representing people with both physical and cognitive disabilities: Age UK, Action on Hearing Loss, Disabled Motoring UK, Mencap, Mind and Muscular Dystrophy UK.

Stakeholder interviews

Interviews were conducted with a number of stakeholders, who either provide services to road users or are experts in transport and disability. We spoke to people at both senior management and operational level to raise the issues identified in the research and gain different perspectives from the transport industry.

We spoke to the following organisations: The Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee, FMG (Highways England's contractor for the statutory removal of vehicles, loads and occupants), Highways England, Into Independence Ltd, the Petrol Retailers Association, an expert on disability issues and a roadside services provider who wished to remain anonymous.



Contact Transport Focus

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If you would like an EASY READ or an audiofile download of this report these are available on request.

Transport Focus is the operating name of the Passengers' Council

Transport Focus is the independent consumer organisation representing the interests of:

- all users of England's motorways and major 'A' roads (the Strategic Road Network)
- rail passengers in Great Britain
- bus, coach and tram users across England outside London.

We work to make a difference for all transport users