

Labour must be bolder on equal access

Since the 'Access for All' funding scheme was first introduced by the previous Labour government in 2006, the progress of step-free access improvements on the UK railways has made somewhat stuttering progress.

The 'Equality 2025' target was quietly dropped and replaced by the goal of achieving equal access for disabled people across the transport system by 2030, which at the current rate of progress appears highly unlikely. Indeed, the 'Inclusive Transport Strategy' which contains the 2030 goal already has a get out clause. It states in its Executive Summary: 'By 2030, we envisage equal access for disabled people using the transport system, *with assistance if physical infrastructure remains a barrier*'.

This is not equal access.

Although the Disability Discrimination Act of 1995 will result in all train carriages being fully accessible by 1st January 2020, it is ironic – or a disgrace depending on your viewpoint – that on that date thousands of platforms across the UK will remain no-go areas for disabled people.

While the £300m allocated to the 'Access for All' funding for Control Period Six (CP6 2019-2024) initially seems generous, £50m of this is actually deferred funding removed from the previous Control Period Five (CP5 2014-2019) following the Hendy Review of 2016. This review has delayed step-free improvements at stations such as Luton, Palmers Green and Peckham Rye among many others.

Currently approximately only a quarter of the UK's railway stations are step-free, and the prospect of disabled people being able to 'turn up and go' remains a distant one. This, along with the current Government's treatment of disabled people, described by a United Nations Committee in 2017 as a 'human catastrophe', has effectively resulted in a hostile environment for some of the most vulnerable people in society.

The lack of step-free access affects not only disabled people, however, but also those with impaired mobility such as the elderly and those with young children. The effect of this can be twofold; either people travel by less environmentally friendly means such as by car, or they don't travel at all. This can lead to isolation, loneliness, potential mental health issues and a reduction in quality of life. As the 2016 United Nations Committee report stated, the current government has 'failed to recognise living independently and being included in the community as a human right'.

Equal access *must* be seen as a right, not a favour and, therefore, should be at the core of transport policy, not an add-on. Restricted access to transport hinders work opportunities as well as the ability of disabled people to take a full part in society.

I joined the Labour Party, and campaign for equal access for disabled people, because I believe we should always strive for a fairer, more equal society and that we should judge our progress on how the most disadvantaged in our society are treated. It is clear that this government is woefully failing in its duty of care, and I know we can do so much better. As Labour's 2017 manifesto stated '....it is society which disables people, and it is our job to remove those barriers'.

I was very pleased to hear Dawn Butler MP, the Shadow Minister for Women and Equalities, state in her impressive Conference speech that: 'A Labour Government will put equality at centre stage. It will be the central thread across all of government'. However, if you look through Labour's 2018 National Policy Forum report, you will only find a fleeting reference to improving access for disabled people on

the railways and a brief mention in the 2017 Labour Manifesto. To date, other than widespread agreement that there is a significant issue, Labour have yet to set out any firm proposals.

What could any proposals look like? There are currently around 160 stations in the UK that have more than 500,000 passengers a year, but are without *any* step free access. Further, of the approximately 900 stations that have 500,000 passengers or more, many of these, while having step-free access to each platform, will not have *cross-platform* step free access, which presents considerable obstacles to disabled people, removing their ability to travel independently. Based just on the sheer number of passengers, these stations should be an immediate priority.

Following on from this the second batch of step-free improvements could take place at stations with passenger numbers in excess of 250,000 a year, followed by a set timetable for further improvements at the remaining stations. Using passenger numbers as the benchmark would be transparent and give clarity to the programme of improvements.

Naturally, there will be concerns about how much all these improvements will cost, how they will be funded and no doubt the 'magic money tree' will get mentioned. However, the Department for Transport's own analysis has shown that for every £1 spent on access improvements there is a £2.90 return to the economy. So not only is it the right thing to do in terms of removing barriers to disabled people, as well as the wider benefits to society, it also makes economic sense to do so.

Labour should also consider the use of Section 106 funding (money obtained from developers) in areas served by a station with no step-free access. Of course, the railways are just one mode of transport and should not be seen in isolation. The majority of passenger journeys are by bus (59% in 2016 compared to 21% by National Rail) and improvements must also be made in providing a fully integrated transport system, which makes the transition between transport modes seamless - and above all step-free.

Finally, we must ensure that disabled people are included at every stage of the improvements and not consulted after the conclusion of any planning as a tick box exercise. As disability campaigners state: "design with us, not for us".

Labour must be bolder on equal access, set out an ambitious plan of step-free access improvements, placing it at the core of its transport policy as part of our rebuilding of Britain, for the many not just the few.

Sources and further reading:

Equality 2025: <https://www.disability.co.uk/sites/default/files/resources/roadmap-full.pdf>

The Inclusive Transport Strategy - published July 2018:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/728547/inclusive-transport-strategy.pdf

House of Commons Briefing Paper - Access to transport for disabled people - published April 2016:

<http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN00601/SN00601.pdf>

House of Commons Briefing Paper - The UN enquiry into the Rights of Persons with disabilities in the UK - published March 2017: <http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7367/CBP-7367.pdf>