

West Berkshire Disability Alliance

Policy & Development Plan

January 2005

'Transport provision for disabled people in West Berkshire'

Introduction

The West Berkshire Disability Alliance (WBDA) has identified Transport as one of the 5 key areas it wishes to address.

To that end, the WBDA has undertaken a survey of the local rail network and together with other interested parties, another survey regards transport provision to the new West Berkshire Community Hospital. In October 2004, it also hosted a ‘question time style’ Transport Forum for older people and people with disabilities.

The WBDA has a seat on the Transport Action Group (part of the West Berkshire Partnership) and an ongoing roll in researching the needs of the local disabled community regarding access to taxis and advising West Berkshire Council’s Licensing Committee on this issue.

From this work the WBDA has produced a Policy and Development Plan entitled ‘Transport provision for disabled people in West Berkshire’.

This document is intended to be a living piece of work and will therefore be up dated if and when necessary. It will form the basis of all the WBDA’s lobbying, discussion and negotiation regards Transport and is expected to help lay some of the foundations for the ‘Social Exclusion’ section of the Local Transport Plan 2, the first draft of which is due to published in July 2005.

The document gives a detailed breakdown of the transport available for disabled people in West Berkshire, before providing a summery.

The areas of transport covered are as follows.

- Buses**
- Trains**
- Taxis**
- Community Transport**
- Private Vehicles**
- Travel Tokens & Bus Passes**

Buses

The bus services in West Berkshire are in serious decline. Of the 301 people surveyed at the new local hospital only 15 actually used a bus! Anybody only has to stand in Newbury Town centre and watch bus after bus go by empty or half empty. People in West Berkshire it seems, bar a small minority, do not even consider taking the bus.

Reading Buses, the main contractor providing services in the area, seem completely at odds with West Berkshire Council (WBC). The main mantra of Reading Buses is viability – if a route or service is not viable then they simply refuse to run a service and WBC are seemingly powerless to do anything about it.

The provision of an integrated transport service, linking bus services with rail services seems a very long way off. For instance, Reading Buses have refused to provide an additional service to Thatcham station (the second biggest town in West Berkshire) and there was no bus boarder platform included in the planned new development for that station (although it seems that one is planned nearby - across a busy road in front of the Swan Public House).

For people living in the more rural areas using the bus for work, to access the local hospital, to shop in the larger towns, or to socialise, is simply not an option, as the services are often limited to once a day, irregular, unreliable and in many areas there are no services at all.

For people with disabilities, especially those with ambulatory problems and wheelchair users, there are only a few low rider buses and only one bus platform in the whole of West Berkshire. To compound the problem the bus companies only have to introduce low rider buses as and when they decommission buses when they come to the end of their useful life.

WBC it seems, have no strategic plan, or will, to introduce more bus boarder platforms, only dotting them about when an area containing a bus stop is redeveloped.

With regard to Disability Awareness Training for bus staff, this seems to be something that will have a limited benefit, as the vast majority of buses (or all) have no conductor and the driver is prevented by security and health & safety policy to leave his 'cab' and give assistance to the public.

NB – There has been some 'dial-a-ride' services started in the rural areas, but the WBDA is unsure of their accessibility, availability, etc.

WBDA Opinion

The bus services in West Berkshire are seemingly in terminal decline and access to buses is extremely difficult for those with ambulatory problems and near impossible for wheelchair users (not to mention young mothers with buggies), which makes a mockery of the slogan 'Low Rider Easy Access for All' daubed along their sides. With no likely-hood of an improvement in the foreseeable future, the WBDA should not waste any energy campaigning for improvement. In fact it should come out with a public statement, decrying the state of the bus services in West Berkshire and lobby for subsidies to be transferred to other things like supporting community transport and greater provision of travel tokens.

The WBDA does however need to monitor the new 'dial-a-ride' services.

Trains

West Berkshire is served with an excellent rail service which runs the full length of the District's southern border running parallel to the A4, with stations at Hungerford, Kintbury, Newbury, Thatcham, Woolhampton, Aldermaston and Theale. To the east, all local trains run to Reading, from where a traveller can get to almost anywhere in mainland Britain, including Heathrow (by coach link) and Gatwick airports, while Newbury is the point of access to the main line service between London and the West Country.

The WBDA in June 2004 undertook a rail audit in partnership with the WBC Access Team and the West Berkshire TAG, by taking a task group of various disabilities on a return trip from Kintbury & Newbury via Reading to Oxford - the full report of which can be found on the WBDA website www.wbda.org

For many disabled people, especially those with severe sight and ambulant impairments, and wheelchair users, 24 hours notice of travel is required to ensure the required support from rail staff, leaving no room for spontaneity in this mode of travel.

Many stations are unmanned or inaccessible either one or both sides of the track and the trains themselves often have no designated places for wheelchair users, making the journey very uncomfortable and hazardous.

The WBDA has identified several areas for improvement at the stations and on First Great Western 'Sprinter' trains encountered on the audit. For instance, in one area of the Sprinter train it should be quite easy to take

out a section of 4 seats to give 2 wheelchair users a comfortable and relatively safe area to position themselves.

Here though lies a problem, as the rail operators are reluctant to lose any seats from a train (even 4!) and can hide behind legislation like the bus operators, which makes no requirement to make rolling stock accessible in the foreseeable future unless it is replaced by new.

Some of the WBDA's recommendations are fairly inexpensive and easy to implement, like better parking provision at stations for Blue Badge holders, induction loops on all ticket offices, better seating for those with ambulant problems and better markings and indicators on stairways, for those with a sight impairment. Others, such as tactile paving to define the safety line away from platform edges will need quite a large work programme, and with it a cost implication.

Some of the recommendations are unlikely to be carried out because of the expenditure involved, like putting a lift on the footbridge at Newbury station.

WBDA opinion

Unlike the bus services, the rail network can be accessed by even those with a severe impairment, albeit with varying degrees of difficulty. The rail service is also more consistent and gives the potential of long distance travel.

The WBDA needs to undertake further surveys of the stations that serve West Berkshire, including Reading and Paddington, and campaign for its recommendations to be implemented. To this end, a dialogue has been started with Mike Crane, Franchise Development Manager for First Great Western Link.

Taxis

A Taxi means a licensed hackney carriage (not a private hire vehicle). It is important to note that when discussing taxis in this context, the term relates to the licence or plate, not a specific vehicle. Hence as an old vehicle wears out, its plate can be transferred to a newer vehicle. The old vehicle is no longer a taxi and the new vehicle becomes a taxi with all the legal benefits and restrictions that brings.

At the moment (01/01/05) there are just 6 fully wheelchair accessible taxis in West Berkshire from a fleet of 184, with 12 more having a

‘swivel’ front passenger seat fitted. This situation is very unlikely to change before April 2005.

At the moment (01/01/05) there is no National/Government requirement to make all Taxis accessible to disabled people. Each Local Authority can set its own criteria. West Berkshire Council (WBC) could if it wished, enforce all taxis to be wheelchair accessible, but this is unlikely as it could be contested in court and have a negative effect on the goodwill of the taxi drivers and their representatives.

WBC’s current licensing department’s policy required all taxis licensed after April 2001 to be either fully wheelchair accessible, or to have a ‘swivel’ front passenger seat fitted by August 2003. Taxis licensed before April 2001 were exempt from this condition.

This policy caused a dispute to break out between some taxi drivers and WBC, and at the 11th hour the WBDA was brought in to give advice.

After giving the swivels seats a trial using a variety of disabled people with ambulant problems and who were able to transfer out of a wheelchair into a car, the WBDA came to the conclusion that swivel seats were of limited use to people with disabilities and could actually be dangerous, as in some cars airbags had to be disabled and the passenger had to sit in an exaggerated high position within the vehicle.

The WBDA also concluded that people with disabilities who were likely to use a saloon car could already access such a vehicle without too much mechanical assistance and what would be more use was a wide door opening, a seat not too low, or too high and the taxi driver to be aware of their impairment.

Unfortunately the WBDA’s advice was ignored and a deal was done between meetings with the various taxi associations involved in the dispute.

6 taxi operators appealed the above condition in court and won their appeal, the Stipendiary Magistrate apparently concurring with the WBDA’s findings on swivel seats. In light of this court action, WBC suspended the issuing of new taxi licences from September 2004 and this suspension is likely to remain in place until 31/03/2005, as a way forward is sought.

The present (01/01/05) situation is thus.

- There were 136 taxis licensed before 01/04/2001 – of which 2 were fully wheelchair accessible
- There were 48 taxis licensed after 01/04/2001 – of which 4 are fully wheelchair accessible, 12 have swivel seats fitted in saloon

care, 18 are MPV's with 'totally unsuitable' swivel seats fitted as standard and 14 are non-compliant to the new conditions

- There are 8 operators waiting to apply for licences

NB – at the present moment (01/01/05) there is no requirement of Taxi drivers in West Berkshire to undertake any disability awareness training.

Because of the court ruling a stalemate of sorts has evolved, however, there is plenty of light at the end of the tunnel. WBC wants to revisit their whole licensing policy and make it work for disabled people and taxi operators alike.

To this end, a small task group has been set up consisting of members and officers of WBC, who will consult with disabled groups and taxi operators. The WBDA has been asked to take a leading role in gathering information regarding the needs of local disabled people.

There is a narrow timescale involved in formulating a workable policy, as all parties recognise that the suspension of issuing new taxi licences can not continue indefinitely. The deadline looks to have been set for 31/03/2005, with much of the consultation/discussion needing to take place in January/February 2005.

As there is no clear National/Government guidelines on the licensing of taxis with regard to disabled access, it is then up to the above group to form a policy for West Berkshire that will satisfy the needs of all stakeholders.

WBDA Opinion

Early 2005 will prove a crucial time regarding disabled people accessing taxis in West Berkshire in the future. The WBDA must gather as much opinion as possible from other disabled groups and individuals. It is important that all disabilities are taken into consideration, not just the needs of wheelchair users, but also including people with ambulant problems, with sight and hearing impairments, with learning difficulties and those with mental health needs.

This consultation regarding other groups and individuals has to take place in January and will ultimately form the WBDA's opinion/policy regarding the licensing of taxis. However, here are some thoughts on the matter.

We could take the heavy hand and demand that all taxis, from a certain point in time in the near future are fully wheelchair accessible, but this would prove unworkable for an array of reasons.

- There is no National/Government requirement to make taxis fully wheelchair accessible
- WBC has the statutory power to impose such a condition but does not seem to have the will to do so
- Such a condition would almost certainly amount to a legal challenge from the various taxi operators, the outcome of which is far from certain
- The goodwill needed from taxi operators in the implementation of a successful policy regarding a disabled friendly taxi fleet would be lost
- A fleet of fully wheelchair accessible taxis may not suit people, with ambulant problems, who can transfer from their wheelchair into a car seat and those who have a sight impairment
- There is no proof that the whole fleet of taxis in West Berkshire needs to be fully wheelchair accessible – in fact general consensus seems to point to the need for a diverse fleet of vehicles

We could demand that all taxis licensed since April 2001 were fully wheelchair accessible (as the Stipendiary Magistrate in the court case indicated that he would have turned down the 6 taxi operators appeal had WBC's policy required that all taxis should be fully wheelchair accessible). This approach would probably also prove unworkable because

- The Taxi operators against it would almost certainly appeal and even if it was over ruled at a Magistrate level, it could be contested and won at a higher level
- It would mean WBC admitting that its policy, giving the option of fitting swivel seats instead of providing a fully accessible vehicle, had been ill conceived
- Those taxi operators who have abided by the policy and had fitted swivel seats could have a case to claim compensation at around £1,000 per operator (the cost of fitting a swivel seat) – and would then have to provide a fully wheelchair accessible taxi at some point in time
- The stalemate would deepen as litigation took its course
- Goodwill would be lost and with it the chance to roll out a programme of Disability Awareness Training for West Berkshire taxi drivers

We could go for a third option, that would require all taxi operators applying for a license after 31/03/2005 provide a vehicle that is fully wheelchair accessible and undertake a course of Disability Awareness Training. Taking this option may give the impression of taking the easy way out, but it could well prove the best way forward in the long run, for the following reasons

- It would almost certainly gain the backing of WBC and existing taxi operators

- It would set a precedent for rolling out a programme of Disability Awareness Training, that could then be aimed retrospectively on a voluntary basis at existing operators, especially if some financial incentive was given (i.e. a discount against the cost of a license for those undertaking the training)
- It would hopefully not lead to any further court actions - as no retrospective conditions would be applied
- If the 8 operators waiting to apply for a license agreed to the above conditions then the number of fully wheelchair accessible taxis in West Berkshire would increase by 133% overnight
- On average there are 12 new licenses granted per annum, so the number of fully wheelchair accessible taxis would grow year on year
- A diverse fleet of taxis would be maintained for the foreseeable future, which would prove advantageous to those with a disability who were not confined to a wheelchair
- Goodwill would be maintained
- A quick and sustainable solution could be achieved

NB – It may be necessary for WBC to provide a financial incentive for license holders to provide a fully wheelchair accessible vehicle and/or undertake a course(s) of Awareness Training. This could be done by means of a reduction to the annual fee.

The third option has one draw back however – what becomes of 6 operators who won their appeal and the 12 operators holding back awaiting the out come of the court case, and those having already fitted swivel seats, that the court (and the WBDA) have declared obsolete? This is perhaps a conundrum that we should leave in the hands of WBC.

Community Transport

There are many agencies and organisations providing this form of transport in West Berkshire including Volunteer Centres, Handybuses, and various voluntary care schemes. WBC also have a fleet of vehicles set aside for community transport attached to day centres, schools, care homes etc. There is also a limited Readibus service, which is a fully accessible door to door service with a pre-booking requirement, whose drivers are also trained carers.

Probably the best source of information regarding accessing community transport is a booklet produced by WBC called ‘Getting There’.

There is a need however to form a data base of the community transport in West Berkshire, to enable organisations, groups and individuals, easy

access to information about availability, booking requirements and vehicle specification. To this end Garry Poulson from the West Berkshire Volunteer Centre has approached the Transport Action Group for funding and support to undertake this work and the WBDA fully supports this initiative.

The advantage of Community Transport is that is relatively inexpensive to use and has a high level of wheelchair accessible vehicles and disability awareness amongst the drivers.

The disadvantage is that it almost always needs to be booked at least the day before, cannot be accessed on certain days or times (especially late evenings) and apart from the voluntary care schemes it is mainly aimed at group activities, not individual requirements.

WBDA Opinion

Although this form of transport has its drawbacks, it is an area that could be developed, especially in the more rural areas where local communities could be empowered to provide the type of transport arrangements best suited to them. More funds therefore need to be made available for purchasing vehicles, running costs and where necessary paying wages to drivers.

The database of available community transport should be completed with urgency. This should be followed by a careful comparison against the ideal model (although the ideal model needs to be developed first). Then a transition plan should be implemented (or argued for).

One part of the solution could be an expansion of the Readibus service in West Berkshire - if more funds were made available. If necessary, the WBDA should take a lead in lobbying for the further development of this service.

Private Vehicles

Many disabled people in West Berkshire (like their fellow able bodied citizens) have given up completely on any form of transport other than their own car or van. This is because of a variety of reasons, including accessibility, reliability, independence and convenience.

For many disabled people with a severe impairment a vehicle that has been specially adapted to meet their needs is the only option. These adaptations are often expensive and for some people the Government backed leasing scheme, 'Motability' is their only option.

This scheme discriminates against those with the severest impairments, as the 'Mobility Allowance' they receive does not cover the monthly payments and often a down payment of several thousand pounds is required. There is a grant available to cover this extra cost, but this was suspended for a time.

Anyone with a disability deemed severe enough can apply for a 'Blue Badge' which entitles them to free parking in WBC controlled car parks and to use disabled parking spaces for Blue Badge holders only. There is a need to undertake a survey in West Berkshire to determine if there is enough provision of these parking spaces.

A loss of on street parking also provides a problem for disabled people, as does the lack of dropped curbs near to designated parking bays, while traffic humps and bad roads provide a potential health risk and are likely to cause damage to vehicles in the long run (especially adapted cars and vans with lowered floors for wheelchair access).

It must also be recognised that most disabled people will be unable to do simple service and maintenance tasks on their vehicle, or wash, clean and valet it. In such cases there is often no choice but to pay somebody to do these things for them, which adds another financial burden.

WBDA Opinion

The WBDA recognises that many disabled people are either on low incomes or reliant on benefits and the ownership of their own vehicle, especially adapted ones, often means an extra financial burden - while for many others, it is simply, an impossible dream.

The WBDA also recognises the concession given to Blue Badge holders by WBC and other Local Authorities – this is a concession that reflects the special needs of Blue Badge holders and must remain at all costs!

The WBDA needs to monitor the introduction of 'pay on exit' car parks, something that could pose a problem for disabled people. It must also monitor the reduction of on street parking and the provision of dropped curbs in parking areas.

One thing that frustrates disabled drivers and disabled passengers is non badge holders parking in Spaces reserved for 'Blue Badge holders only'. The WBDA needs to undertake some research in this area and if necessary lobby for more stringent policing of these spaces.

Travel Tokens & Bus Passes

WBC either issues a set amount of travel tokens to disabled people in West Berkshire (the amount depends on where you live, or if you require a companion to travel with you), or a half price bus pass. The tokens can be used to pay for Bus and Train journeys, Taxis, or Community transport such as the Handybus, Readibus and volunteer drivers.

In 2004 WBC cut the allocations of Travel Tokens because of budget shortfalls. There is a review taking place to try and find a fairer way to issue tokens, but there is a Government requirement to issue a half price bus pass (or the choice of tokens) to everyone aged 60 or over, which according to WBC members and officers hinders their attempts to make best provision for those most at need.

Currently there are 22,000 people entitled to take up the option of either a bus pass or tokens (around 10% opt for a bus pass). Most people in 2004 were allocated an average of around £30 worth of travel tokens.

WBDA Opinion

To most people with a disability a bus pass is not an option, as they can only access taxis or Community Transport. It is nonsensical, that people still in full time employment are entitled to a bus pass or tokens. This crazy system means that those who really need tokens only receive a derisory amount.

The WBDA must campaign for a fairer system, with the value of one return taxi journey to the nearest town per month, per entitlement (or a minimum of £8 per month, per entitlement, if the recipient lives in or near a town) as a starting point for negotiation.

Blue Badge holders, if they so wished, should be able to opt out from taking their allocation of Travel Tokens or a bus pass and instead claim a reduction on their Council Tax bill to the equivalent of their token allocation, over and above any other reductions they may receive.

This reduction would help off set some of the extra costs incurred by them and recognise that for most disabled people, public transport is simply not an option.

SUMMARY

It is clear that for many people with disabilities in West Berkshire, especially those with a severe impairment, accessing public transport is near impossible. Therefore, their only option is accessible taxis, community transport and their own private provision of a suitable vehicle. The WBDA therefore intends to undertake the following.

- Issue a statement decrying the fact that disabled people are denied access to the albeit limited bus services in West Berkshire and campaign for bus subsidies to be transferred to Community Transport and/or provide funds for extra travel tokens.
- Monitor the new ‘dial-a-ride’ services as they develop
- A further audit of the rail facilities serving West Berkshire and lobby for recommendations from the previous audit to be implemented.
- Work with WBC’s Licensing Committee and Taxi representatives to secure a workable and lasting policy for disabled access to taxis in West Berkshire.
- Undertake a survey of disability groups and individuals to feedback to the above committee.
- Press for Disability Awareness Training for taxi drivers and maintain an input regarding the content of this training.
- Press for an increase in the proportion of wheelchair accessible taxis.
- Seek an overarching plan for Community Transport and lobby for more funding to be made available for Community Transport initiatives.
- Support Garry Poulson’s initiative to form a data base of the various types of Community Transport available in West Berkshire.
- Monitor the provision of free car parking for Blue Badge holders.
- Survey car parking spaces reserved for Blue Badge holders to determine if there is a proper provision of spaces and the extent of problem regarding non badge holders parking in them.
- Lobby WBC for a fairer distribution of Travel Tokens.
- Lobby WBC to allow Blue Badge holders the choice to opt out of collecting a bus pass or their allocation of Travel Tokens, in favour of a reduction in their Council Tax.
- Lobby for recognition that as private vehicles, taxis and Community Transport will become more important, and buses less of an option in West Berkshire, the requirements relating to the provision of additional roads, improved roads to allow better traffic flow, and properly planned car parking must be given serious attention and budgetary provision.