How can Visionary members help improve the experience of public transport for people with visual impairments?

Summary report

Motability Foundation

Visionary

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Introduction

People with visual impairments encounter a range of daily challenges when using public transport. This research delves beyond the physical barriers, aiming to understand the **impact of these challenges on people's everyday lives.**

Visionary, supported by grant funding from Motability, commissioned this study to engage with individuals with visual impairments. The goal was to develop clear recommendations and tools that charities can use to provide effective support.

Project objectives
The project sought to help Visionary better understand the challenges people with visual impairments (VI) experience when using and accessing public transport. Specifically, the research aimed to:

- Build on existing knowledge of challenges and understand them in greater depth
- Explore the impact of poor access to public transport on the wider lives of people experiencing sight loss
- Identify opportunities for supporting people with VI

What the research involved
Researchers from Revealing Reality worked with four of Visionary's member organisations to identify relevant participants for the work. This included recruiting **20 people with a visual impairment** (VI) to take part in three-hour depth interviews and shadowed journeys. It also included remote interviews with **16 stakeholders working in public transport or advocacy**. Analysis was carried out to identify themes and develop recommendations. Participants are referred to with pseudonyms throughout the document.

How to use this document
This document outlines three key recommendation areas for Visionary members to consider to better enable people with VI to use public transport. These include:

- Building confidence
- Reasons to travel
- Engaging stakeholders

Please refer to the annex at the end of the document for a more detailed outline of the research approach and sample.

Alongside this summary, Revealing Reality have developed written case studies and a film to be shared with members.

How can charities help **build confidence** of people using public transport?

☑ **Ensure people with VI feel empowered to use the tools, support and technology available to help them travel**
- Ensuring **all** people know that travel assistance is available to help them when travelling by train or underground
- Highlighting watchouts and tips for travelling on certain types of transport like the Metro or Underground
- Spotlighting apps and technology that people with VI find useful, including the best scenarios to use them in, strengths, drawbacks and price (if applicable)

☑ **Ensure different levels of transport training is available for people with VI**
Work with those delivering rehabilitation training to make sure there are different levels of training depending on confidence and experience, with a clear trajectory. Training areas could include:
- Confidence in making first journeys
- Making regular journeys
- Overcoming unexpected barriers along a familiar route
- Taking on spontaneous journeys or unfamiliar routes and modes of transport
- Travelling longer distance, outside the local area

"I got referred to a charity to help me with IT...but I depend on speech to do my IT sessions and I don't have the right device and software for that"

KESI
58, WREXHAM

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Why does building confidence matter?

Confidence was not necessarily determined by when people lost their vision. People who were born with their VI, or had lived with a VI since childhood, often had **established routines and workarounds** which they had developed over time.

For those who lost their vision later in life, attitudes to overcoming barriers were divided. A few people in the sample had lost their vision later in life were **motivated to find workarounds** and ways to overcome barriers they faced using public transport. One individual attributed this to having a successful career in finance beforehand and feeling confident using technology.

However, for some people, losing their vision meant their **size of world decreased**. Several had given up work with the onset of their condition and some felt unconfident applying for work in case it meant needing to travel to a new and unfamiliar area. Some also noted losing friends or struggling to meet and make new ones.

Confidence was shaped by **positive and negative experiences**, actions from **friends and family**, and the **support, aids and adaptations** people made use of. However, few people were confident navigating less familiar journeys or overcoming unexpected challenges on their route.

"My typical day is just sitting around doing nothing waiting for somebody to ring me, maybe pick me up ... I guess I can't really play pool, I can't golf with them.. I can't do the stuff we used to do"

HASSAN
32, LUTON

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How can charities support people to have reasons to travel?

✓ **Focus on support which encourages people to maintain or build their social network**
- Supporting people who have newly developed a visual impairment to maintain existing relationship and hobbies.

✓ **Create or signpost opportunities for people with VI to regularly engage in activities locally**
- Offering and promoting activities like sports groups and volunteering opportunities for people with VI

✓ **Encourage those who regularly overcome barriers when travelling to act as mentors** for other people with VI who are less confident travelling
- Showcase activities that others are engaging in
- Sharing learnings and promoting workarounds

"I'll go out on a Monday morning to the blind club.. they have speeches and games - I really enjoy it. They're lovely people - so jolly, so friendly"

DORIS
93, WALES

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Why does having **reasons to travel** matter?

People's travel behaviours varied across the sample across three key categories:

- Some travelled very rarely, had very few places they needed to go, and were generally fearful of travelling on public transport alone
- Some travelled on public transport alone when they needed to, but had few places they needed to go and were looking for more reasons to travel
- Some used public transport alone frequently and had several places they needed to travel to

Across the sample, **some people were highly motivated to travel**, in spite of the potential obstacles and challenges. For some, this was due to additional responsibilities, such as care duties. For others, it was the motivation to maintain social engagements or take part in an activity they enjoyed.

However, **those who had less of need to travel,** for example those who were unable to work or more socially isolated, were less motivated to overcome the barriers and therefore **had lower confidence** in travelling.

"Well I have quite a few hobbies - I play visually impaired tennis.. I like walking... other hobbies include craft beer, American whisky, and then I tend to combine that with seeing sport"

STEVEN
41, BEDFORD

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How can charities **engage stakeholders effectively** and lobby for change?

☑ **Build connections with stakeholders**
- Develop relationships with key stakeholders by offering support and expertise
- Make key stakeholders feel responsible and prioritise these issues

☑ **Prioritise the stakeholders best placed to make change**
- Who is responsible for future transport strategy in the local authority?
- How can you bring together key stakeholders (e.g transport providers and Local Authority) and encourage collaboration?

☑ **Help stakeholders understand the key challenges**
- Build empathy and understanding e.g. utilise the resources such as film and case studies from this research
- Debunk outdated knowledge about people with VI and what they need

"Well generally I think people don't understand visual impairment. You can wander around with a big white stick and most people don't know what that means"

KELLY
58, WOLVERHAMPTON

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Why does **engaging with stakeholders** matter?

The stakeholders engaged with in the research had a varied understanding of the challenges people with VI face on public transport.

The stakeholders that had more real-world engagement with those living with visual impairments (for example, council rehabilitation officers or those working in disability advocacy charities) had more knowledge about the challenges, but did not always communicate this information to the relevant stakeholders (such as transport providers).

Stakeholders, such as transport providers, therefore, often knew very little about travelling on public transport with a visual impairment, or the barriers people may face. This meant they knew less about solutions that may be available, workarounds people with VI use, or what changes could be made to the transport network to reduce these barriers.

Stakeholders working in transport provision often also had competing priorities. Public transport's accessibility, specifically for people with VI, was not always a key focus in their role. Alongside other priorities, stakeholders reported budget and staff capacity as a key barrier.

"They don't understand it genuinely, and you have to say about a million times.. it's a lack of disability awareness training"

MATHEW
24, BEDFORD

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What challenges did people face on public transport?

Confidence was one of the biggest factors impacting people's ability to travel. However, throughout the research, people also reported common challenges they experienced when travelling. In many cases, these issues had further exacerbated people's lack of confidence travelling.

People used the bus more than other forms of public transport. However, this mode of transport also posed the most challenges for people travelling.

The following pages provide an illustrative list of common challenges experienced on public transport.

Challenges when using the bus:
- Not being able to identify which bus is arriving next, and when to hail down an oncoming bus
- Being unable to read timetable information
- Outdated timetables
- Travel apps being inaccessible, or updates making them inaccessible
- Not knowing or being able to access information about purchasing a ticket
- Not knowing where to 'touch-on' when getting on the bus
- Preferential seats being occupied (and challenges identifying an alternative seat)
- Drivers moving before the passenger has found a seat
- Low contrast design of bus interior
- Objects on the floor of the bus causing trip hazards
- Lack of audio announcements making it hard to know when to get off
- Changing models of bus mean design is often unfamiliar

What challenges did people face on public transport?

Across other modes of transport, the challenges different individuals experienced included:

Challenges when using trains:
- Roaming assistance staff making it hard to locate help when needed
- Inconsistent announcements and late announcements e.g. platform changes
- Booked assistance failing to turn up
- Lack of support when trains are delayed or cancelled

Challenges when using taxis:
- Taxis refusing to turn around and come to the pavement where a person with VI is waiting, to stop the person with VI having to cross the road
- Taxis refusing to accept guide dogs

Some individuals reported feeling more confident using trams and the London Underground. Benefits included:

Travel via tram:
- Stops all with the same design, including tactile paving and 'touch on' ticketing machines in the same location
- Consistency of audio announcements for all stops along the route
- Well-lit carriages

Travel via London Underground:
- Ease of booking assisted travel
- Ability to book assisted travel at late notice
- Presence of staff at every station
- Consistency of audio announcements
- Several transport planning apps to choose from

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What tools and support were people using?

Across the sample, people with VI had a range of tools, tips and tricks they used to make travelling easier for them.

Apps and technology
Across the sample, we saw a range of people using different technology which helped them travel. These included:

- Soundscape - a 3D audio navigation app for people with visual impairments, which works with Google Maps to help navigate different environments whilst traveling.
- NaviLens - Optical codes which can be scanned by a smartphone to provide dynamic information about travel. Codes can be scanned even when an object is moving e.g. if placed at the front of a bus, allowing a person with VI to identify which bus is approaching.
- Blindsquare - Using third-party navigation apps, the application identifies where an individual is and presents relevant information about buildings and infrastructure around them as they travel.

Other tips and tricks
- Booking assisted travel along routes
- Using a card with the correct bus number on to avoid hailing down the wrong bus when one is approaching
- Counting the number of stops the bus makes along a familiar route before reaching the desired destination
- Memorising the feeling of a bus journey, including distinct turns in the road, stops at traffic lights etc.

Changes to routine
Although some people were using workarounds, several people had changed their routines to make travelling feel easier for them. This included:

- Planning journeys well in advance
- Never travelling in the dark
- Only travelling with a friend or carer
- Never travelling to unfamiliar places

These changes often limited when and where people with VI could travel.

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Annex

Including detailed methodology and sampling overview

About the Motability Foundation

This project was funded by the Motability Foundation who fund, support, research and innovate so that all disabled people can make the journeys that they choose.

This was funded by an Innovation Grant managed by the Innovation Team. The Innovation Team carry out ongoing research, in partnership with disabled people and key stakeholders in the industry, to inspire innovations that continue to champion accessible transport for all. They also commission and grant fund research. This research usually explores a topic which will inform innovation work, outlined in our new priority areas below.

- Priority One: Finding solutions to improve existing transport in the areas of greatest opportunity.
- Priority Two: Ensuring accessibility is a key part of future transport modes and technology.

For more information on the Motability Foundation please visit www.motabilityfoundation.org.uk

About Visionary

Visionary is a membership organisation for local sight loss charities and our Vision is for a world in which people living with sight loss can access the services they need at a local level where and when they need them. Visionary supports 111 member organisations which collectively serve 225,000 blind, partially sighted patients and those affected by sight loss in local communities across the UK. Our members provide all age services across prevention, diagnosis support, rehabilitation, daily living, education, care home, care at home and employment. We achieve our aims by:

- Connecting individuals from organisations together and organisations to each other.
- Developing platforms for collaboration and joint initiatives with local and national partners.
- Sharing knowledge and expertise to help members be all they can be.
- Amplifying and harnessing member voice to inspire innovation and create change.

To further enhance the support and opportunities available to local sight loss charities, Visionary partners with 29 national sight loss charities throughout the UK, Ireland and across the world. To find out more, please visit our website: www.visionary.org.uk

About Revealing Reality

Revealing Reality is an independent, multi-disciplinary research agency, working with regulators, government, charities and private sector organisations. We provide insight to inform decision-making, policy recommendations and service design and to help drive change.

We conduct detailed qualitative and quantitative research into services and their users – observing how systems function and capturing a range of different perspectives to understand user experience and unmet needs. Our work also includes the exploration of people's behaviours and motivations, with an emphasis on understanding these within the context of people's real lives.

https://www.revealingreality.co.uk

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Methodology

Revealing Reality and Visionary focused the research in four areas across Great Britain - Scotland, Bedfordshire, Wales and Staffordshire. Revealing Reality then worked closely with a Visionary member organisation in each location to recruit 5 people with a visual impairment (n=20) and 4 stakeholders across transport, planning and disability support (n-16). Fieldwork for this project was conducted between August- October 2023.

Revealing Reality carried out **in-person ethnographic interviews with people with a visual impairment.** The interviews explored:
- An overview of the person, their current lifestyle, including their social network, goals, and interests
- Weekly routines: where they go, what they are doing, who they are with
- Their experience with their visual impairment, and wider needs
- Their experiences with travel and accessing transport, specifically public transport – and what this enables (e.g. health, work, education, socialising, shopping etc)
- Barriers / challenges when it comes to using public transport, as well as how they have overcome any of these
- Pain points along recent journeys: from beginning to end of any journey

Alongside this, a subset of people, **completed a short data collection task** where researchers gathered 'real-time' feedback on people's travel. For example, people would send voice notes, messages, photographs and updates from recent travel experiences.

Revealing Reality also conducted **1-hour remote interviews with a range of stakeholders,** including transport providers, local planners, local authority representatives and campaigning groups.

The interviews covered:
- Background and role of the organisation
- Understanding of existing transport provision
- Current policies and guidance on transport accessibility
- Awareness and knowledge of existing challenges and barriers
- Current support available for people with VI
- Best practice and innovations

Revealing Reality analysed this data to develop the insights outlined in this report, case studies and films. This data was also shared at the Visionary Conference 2023.

Thank you to the Visionary member organisations that supported Revealing Reality with this research.

Sample overview

Revealing Reality interviewed 20 people who were partially sighted or blind. The sample ensured diversity of experiences, by ensuring we had a spread across:

- Conditions and types of visual impairment
- Length of time with a visual impairment
- Access and type of support (e.g. guide dogs, connected with services etc)
- Demographics (e.g age. gender, ethnicity)
- Location (e.g. ensuring inclusion of people living rurally)

Within the research, Revealing Reality engaged with 16 stakeholders across a range of roles including:

- Local authority transport managers and strategy leads
- Accessibility campaigners
- Transport providers (incl. marketing, SLT, stakeholder engagement and accessibility managers)

5 people living with a visual impairment

4 stakeholders (across transport, planning and VI support)

Four locations across GB

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Thank you