Inclusive Engagement

The need and role of access panels to inform active travel schemes and policy

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Image: Walk Wheel Cycle Trust

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About this report

Walk Wheel Cycle Trust

Walk Wheel Cycle Trust is the charity making it possible for everyone to walk, wheel and cycle.

We work directly with communities to make change happen. Then we evidence the impact to influence policies to push those changes further.

Because people-powered movement changes everything. Our health. Our wellbeing. Our world. www.walkwheelcycletrust.org.uk

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Report partners

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Bristol Climate & Nature Partnership

COMMUNITY FUND

Executive summary

This research examined how disabled people are engaged in transport and public realm schemes across the UK through the use of access panels. To do so we delivered a survey and interviews with local authorities in England. Access panels are groups of disabled people who are brought together to advise organisations on accessibility and inclusion. They typically provide feedback on plans, policies and services, drawing on their lived experience to identify barriers and suggest improvements. Access panels may also be known as engagement panels, usability groups or by other terms; for ease, they will be referred to as access panels throughout this report.

While access panels can be a valuable source of insight, they are not the only way of engaging disabled people. No single panel can represent the full diversity of disabled people, and panels will only ever reflect the experiences of those who are already confident, able and connected enough to participate. However, access panels can form one key part of a wider engagement process, working best when combined with other approaches, such as open consultations, user testing, targeted outreach and ongoing feedback mechanisms.

We found that engagement with disabled people is inconsistent, with significant variation between local authorities in resources, approach, and influence. Where engagement is embedded, projects tend to be more inclusive and effective, demonstrating that structured approaches, clear reporting, and transparent use of feedback make a tangible difference. While some areas have active access panels or other consultation mechanisms, many rely on ad hoc involvement, often led by a small number of highly committed individuals, leaving participation narrow and unrepresentative.

Disabled people are often not involved early enough in the decision-making process to influence outcomes meaningfully. Feedback is regularly sought after major decisions are made, limiting its impact. Additionally, engagement is frequently under-resourced, with insufficient funding for accessibility, technology, and financial compensation for lived experience, which risks excluding many potential participants.

The project also identified a lack of national coordination or oversight, resulting in duplication, gaps, and missed opportunities to share best practice and guidance. Local authorities often navigate engagement in isolation, with

limited guidance on proportionality, standards, or integration into formal governance structures.

Training and capacity-building emerged as a further barrier. Officers often lack experience and expertise in inclusive engagement, and disabled participants are not always supported to navigate planning or transport processes, limiting meaningful contribution. Rural areas and smaller projects are particularly under-served, showing that engagement must be flexible but guided by consistent national principles.

These findings highlight that, without national leadership, coordinated support, and sustainable resourcing, engagement remains piecemeal and uneven, with many disabled people left unheard. Yet, where structures, guidance, and resources exist, the benefits are clear: more inclusive planning, accessible environments, and projects better aligned with community needs. Addressing these gaps systematically is essential for creating transport and public spaces that are genuinely usable by everyone.

Recommendations

This report sets out five key recommendations to address these gaps for the UK Government and local authorities:

1. Establish a National Access Panel Network for transport

Active Travel England should establish a National Access Panel Network for transport to coordinate engagement with disabled people, share best practice, and ensure local approaches align with national guidance. The network would promote consistency and accountability across regions while allowing flexibility and proportionality for local contexts.

Delivered through a commissioned Disabled People's Organisation (DPO) and informed by Scotland's Access Panel model, it would provide technical support, training, accessible resources, and oversight, including reporting on how disabled people's input influences policy and projects. Active Travel England should also work with the network to publish national guidance on Access Panels and inclusive engagement, setting clear expectations for early involvement, proportionality, and meaningful influence.

2. Encourage and empower local transport authorities to set up access panels that genuinely inform transport planning

Active Travel England, working with the National Access Panel network, should encourage and support local transport authorities to establish access panels and embed disabled people's views within governance and decision-making. This should be achieved by integrating expectations for access panels and wider engagement into existing reporting, assurance, and funding mechanisms, including the Local Authority Capability Rating Process, national transport and planning guidance, Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plans (LCWIPs), and major funding programmes.

Local authorities should be supported and encouraged to allocate dedicated budgets for access panels, covering officer time, accessibility costs, and financial compensation for disabled people's participation. Authorities should also be required to report on engagement practices through project evaluations and integrate access panels or similar inclusive mechanisms into formal decision-making structures.

3. All local transport authorities should set up access panels, ensuring they are properly resourced

Local authorities should seek to prioritise the inclusion of disabled people's lived experience in shaping policy and practice and work with the National Access Panel Network to establish, maintain or improve access panels. Authorities should follow national guidance while adapting panels to local context and need and ensure sustainable revenue funding is in place for inclusive engagement. This should include dedicated officer time, standard funding for accessibility requirements, and ongoing resourcing of access panels rather than reliance on short-term or project-based funding.

4. Local transport authorities should implement practices based on data and insight to inform a culture of more inclusive engagement and delivery

Access panels should form part of a wider approach to inclusive practice rather than being treated as a standalone solution. Local and combined

authorities should make better use of existing data to identify barriers, target engagement, and prioritise delivery where need and inequality are greatest, strengthening decision-making and outcomes. Quantitative data should be combined with lived experience insights to better understand underlying issues and gaps in evidence.

Engagement approaches should be flexible and proportionate, reflecting local context, project scale, and capacity while meeting national standards. Ongoing training, joined-up use of data across departments, and regular review of engagement practices based on feedback and learning are essential to support cultural change and continuous improvement.

Contents

Background

Why inclusive processes matter

Walk Wheel Cycle Trust's Walking and Cycling Index (2025) found that only 39% of disabled people feel able to participate in making their neighbourhood a better place to live, in comparison to 51% of non-disabled People[1]. This gap highlights who feels able to influence local decision-making.

When disabled people aren't included in the planning or design of their neighbourhood, their needs and wants aren't always considered within decision-making, leading to projects that don't work for them.

Current consultation processes are not always inclusive or representative, and can even be completely inaccessible for some. When engagement does happen, it can often be once a project is in process, and either too late to change, or costly to adapt.

By including the voices of disabled people from the very beginning of a project and throughout, authorities can design and improve neighbourhoods to make them more inclusive, effective and beneficial for everyone, allowing disabled people to better participate in their community.

This piece of work was developed following several key projects Walk Wheel Cycle Trust has undertaken over the past few years, including the Disabled Citizens' Inquiry and Transforming Mobility. Our research has demonstrated that solutions that involved disabled people are more likely to address access issues, leading to better outcomes for everyone.

Community Climate Action project

The Community Climate Action Project is an ambitious, citywide programme funded by The National Lottery's Climate Action Fund, and co-ordinated by Bristol Climate & Nature Partnership. It demonstrates the important role communities can play in achieving the city's climate and nature ambitions, whilst also improving people's quality of life.

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[1] Walk Wheel Cycle Trust, 2026 [Forthcoming in March 2026], Walking and Cycling Index 2025: UK report

A key element of the Community Climate Action Project was the co-production of community climate action plans which respond to both social and climate priorities. The plans were developed through community engagement with diverse communities across the city, including the disabled community. Transport was a key issue for all communities, but they felt that it should be addressed at a citywide level, not a local level. As such, these community organisations took part in further discussions to produce the Inclusive Transport Vision, based on the priorities in their plans.

As part of the Community Climate Action Project's Climate and Disability programme, Walk Wheel Cycle Trust worked with Bristol Climate & Nature Partnership to support an Inclusive Transport Advocate Role. The role advocated for positive changes to the local transport system that support an inclusive shift to low carbon transport, and that is usable, accessible and safe for everyone. A toolkit was produced for the community providing information and suggestions on how they can influence and make positive changes in their neighbourhood.

This report builds on the toolkit, exploring how community-led, active engagement with disabled people, can strengthen and ensure that accessibility is central to transport planning, design and delivery.

UK Policy context

Disabled access panels operate within wider equality and accessibility legislation, but policy frameworks differ across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland due to devolution. A summary of equality and accessibility legislation and policy context for England is provided below[2].

England

- The Equality Act 2010 is the primary piece of legislation covering disability rights and accessibility. It requires organisations to make 'reasonable adjustments' for disabled people and contains anti-discrimination laws.
- Under the Equality Act 2010 and the Public Sector Equality Duty, transport authorities are required to consider equality impacts when developing or reviewing transport policies, services, and schemes. This

[2] House of Commons Library, 2022, Disability strategies in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland - House of Commons Library

includes identifying relevant protected characteristics (including disability), completing an Equality Impact Assessment (EqIAs), consulting externally where appropriate, and ensuring decisions are transparent and evidence-based, with EqIAs published to demonstrate due regard.

- There is currently no mandate or requirement for organisations to include engagement with disabled people when creating policy or projects.

Scotland

Scotland is the only nation in the UK with a formal national Access Panel network, supported by Disability Equality Scotland. Panels work with local authorities and national bodies to review designs, advise on planning and support inclusive policy. While panels are able to claim compensation towards some expenses (such as venue hire), participants are not paid for their time.

A delivery plan, A Fairer Scotland for Disabled people 2016-2021, was created for the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and aimed to make equality of opportunity, access to services and independent living a reality for all disabled people in Scotland. A progress report was released in March 2021, and the government are working with DPOs to develop a new strategy.

Aim

This project aimed to understand how local and combined authorities across England engage with disabled people, and how they are represented within active travel plans, projects and policy, through the use of access panels.

In particular, we wanted to find out:

- How are disabled people and other marginalised groups currently represented in transport decision-making through the use of access panels?
- What other models of engagement exist, and how effective are they perceived to be?
- What barriers do local authorities face in delivering meaningful representation?

- What are the key factors considered when local authorities choose or choose not to set up access panels?
- What would a sustainable, scalable national model look like?

Methodology

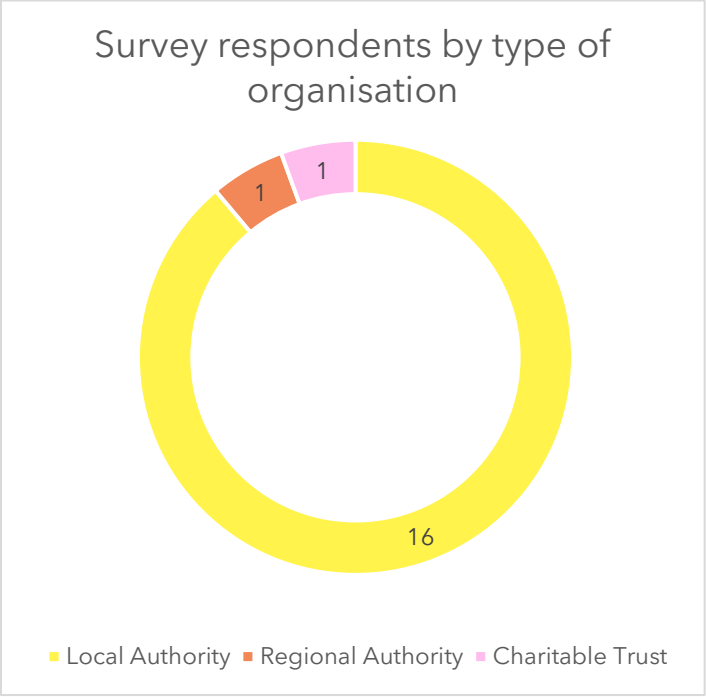
The project aimed to better understand of the use of access panels and wider engagement with disabled people through a survey and interviews.

1. An England-wide survey targeted towards local and combined authorities, containing both open and closed questions.
2. Follow up in-depth interviews with local or combined authorities who had completed the survey and were happy to participate further.

The survey is available as Appendix 1.

Once survey participants had completed the survey, they were able to select if they would be open to further discussion through a 30-minute interview, and able to leave their contact details if so.

18 participants completed the survey, with eight going on to attend an in-depth interview.



Survey and interview participants were diverse, covering both rural and urban areas, population sizes and demographics. and geographically spread across England.

The interviewed participants covered the below councils:

- Buckinghamshire Council
- Coventry City Council
- Dorset Council
- Leeds City Council
- Oxford City Council
- Staffordshire County Council
- West Midlands Combined Authority
- One City Council who did not wish to be named

Findings

Our survey and interviews found across the country, approaches to engaging disabled people in transport and public realm decisions vary widely in form, consistency and influence. Evidence highlights a landscape shaped by local context, geography and organisational culture, ranging from well-established, structured models of engagement with disabled people, to more informal or reactive arrangements. Taken together, these findings offer a snapshot of how engagement is currently experienced and delivered at different scales, reflecting both the diversity of practice and the uneven conditions under which it operates nationally.

Local authority engagement with disabled people

Across England, inclusive engagement is structured in markedly different ways, with no single dominant model in place. A small number of authorities operate formal, standing arrangements such as dedicated access panels, often linked to inclusive design or regeneration programmes and involving regular meetings, early-stage input and a mix of in-person and online engagement.

Elsewhere, engagement is more fragmented, relying on ad hoc working groups, individual representatives, or reactive mechanisms triggered by complaints or specific schemes. In several areas there is no standing access panel at all, with engagement instead dispersed across project teams, social care co-production structures or regional forums.

These structural differences are closely shaped by geography, capacity and internal drivers. Urban authorities more likely to have coverage, though this can be thinly spread with dedicated resources covering a larger population or more policy areas. In areas with a Mayoral Combined Authority, there can be greater resources available to support access panels, however they may be contain large rural areas, leading to uneven coverage with stronger engagement in particular towns or departments. Representation quality varies accordingly, from diverse, actively managed membership to narrow or inconsistent participation, particularly for sensory and learning-disabled people.

"In one of our towns, we have a well organised access group and we consult with them on all the schemes in that town as they progress; that is not run by Dorset Council, but it's run by the town council and that has, I think it's about half a dozen, maybe ten members representing different groups, not just people with disabilities. But principally, the main focus of it is access for people with mobility difficulties. But that is just one town and outside that town we don't have similar groups. It's a county with some 17 towns and people in one town are not interested in what's happening in another town and not the best place to talk about what happens in another town."

Principal Transport Planner, Dorset Council

Two of the areas interviewed mentioned the use of data to consider how disabled people are considered within projects or pieces of work; one by weighting survey responses to give greater emphasis to those completed by disabled people, and another by focusing work on areas deemed as having greater need due to higher levels of disabled people living there.

Overall, current structures reflect a mix of formal and informal arrangements, often dependent on local champions or policy priorities rather than a consistent national framework.

Common approaches to representation

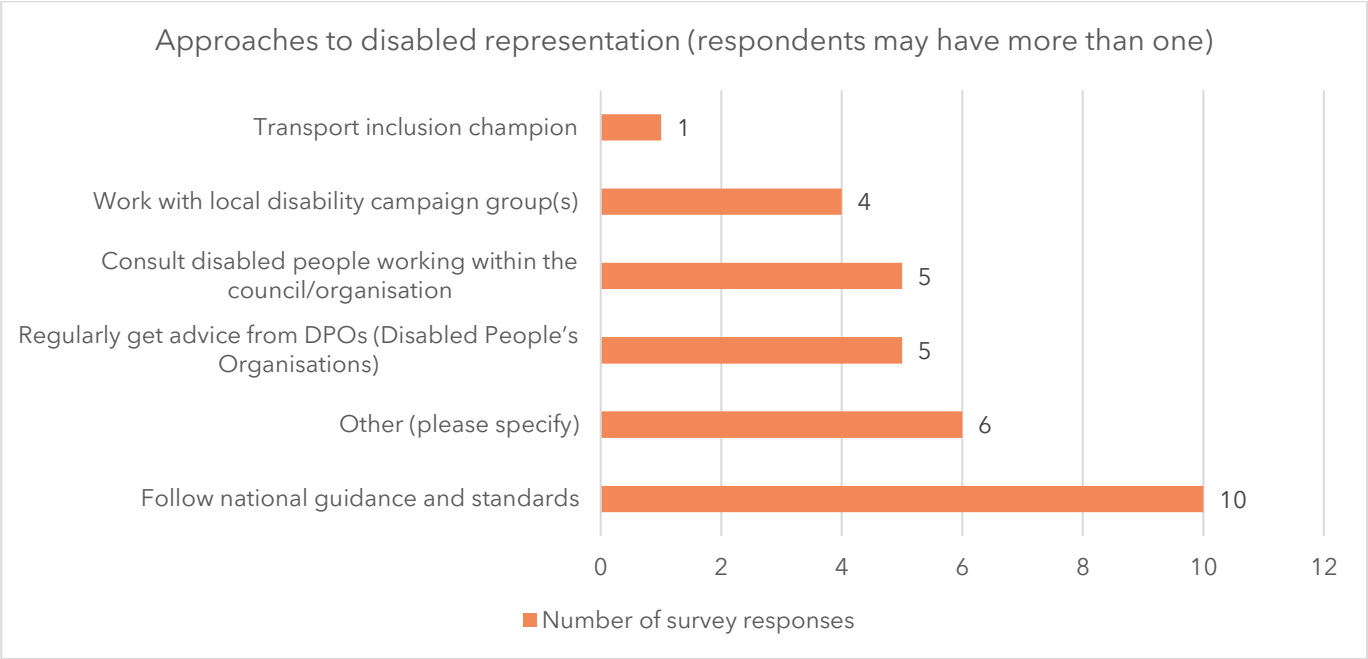
Across local authorities, representation of disabled people most commonly relies on a small number of recurring approaches. Where these exist, membership is typically drawn from local disabled residents and representatives of disability organisations, with varying levels of formality, turnover and support. In other authorities, representation is much narrower, sometimes centred on one or two long-standing individuals with specific expertise, or focused on particular policy areas such as rights of way or social care rather than transport as a whole.

Alongside standing groups, ad hoc and project-based representation is widely used. This includes time-limited working groups, design reviews, site visits and lived-experience walkthroughs convened for specific schemes or stages of delivery. While these approaches can provide detailed, practical

insight, they often lack consistency and continuity, and their influence depends heavily on timings and internal commitment.

Across both models, representation is frequently unpaid and uneven, with recurring gaps in sensory, learning disability and younger people's involvement, and limited mechanisms for refreshing membership or broadening participation over time.

Of the survey respondents, 9 had a formal inclusive engagement structure such as a disabled access panel, 7 did not, and 2 were unsure. However, all had approaches to representing disabled people within projects in some way, as shown on the chart below.



Some of the methods of engagement for transport policy and projects are listed as Appendix 2.

Case study

Coventry

“The DEAP speaks for people who cannot, or choose not to, speak for themselves.”

Cllr Thomas, Chair of DEAP

The Disability Equality Action Partnership (DEAP) is chaired by Councillor Thomas and meets three times a year. The group is not open to the public and representatives of various groups are invited by the Chair to attend. Surveys about upcoming projects are circulated by group members to their communities, ensuring a wider reach.

Each year the Partnership is reassessed to ensure that new people are invited that represent persons with disability within a diverse cross section of Coventry residents, charities/voluntary organisations and service users who meet to work together as an effective, proactive action partnership. The group deals with different issues at every meeting as well as providing updated information on ongoing issues.

The DEAP and input of other community groups and individuals, helped to develop the Transport Charter for People with Disabilities, the Sports and Leisure Charter and the Disability Shopping Charter, to provide a set of principles to recognise the importance and needs of disabled people within those service areas, and improve access.

Coventry is a Marmot city, and they aim to make sure that the One Coventry approach is interwoven throughout all of their work, to *improve outcomes and tackle inequalities*

Image: Route 52 in Coventry. The path increases accessibility for disabled people by being wide enough for bikes such as tricycles. It runs alongside the University of Warwick. Credit: Mark Radford/Walk Wheel Cycle Trust

Resourcing access panels

Access panels require long-term funding and local authority officer resourcing to organise and coordinate.

Where authorities have established access panels, roles and responsibilities are most commonly shared between local or combined authority officers and access panel members themselves. Council staff typically take responsibility for convening and supporting the access panel, setting agendas, providing technical and policy context, and linking discussions to formal decision-making processes.

Elected members are sometimes involved, either directly as access panel participants or indirectly through committee links, helping to connect lived experience insight with political oversight. Panel members are often drawn from disabled people's organisations, charities, user groups and advocacy bodies, and primarily contribute to lived experience, sector knowledge and challenges, shaping discussions through their perspectives rather than holding formal decision-making authority.

"It needs more gravitas. It needs a professional lead. And it needs somebody to hold it, own it, have an action tracker, make some accountability happen and be able to put boots up backsides when things don't happen."

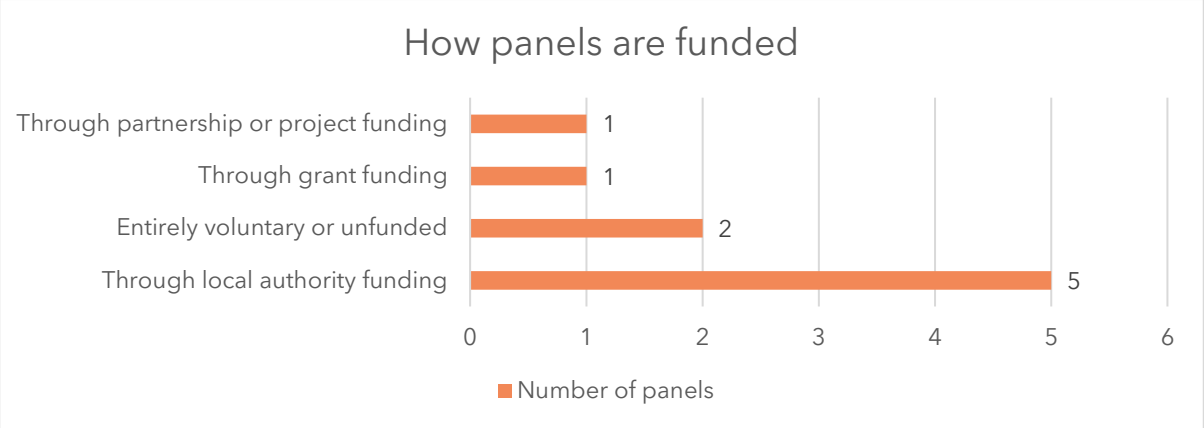
Access panel member, Oxford City Council

In a number of areas, responsibilities extend beyond the core authority–panel relationship. Other contributors can include town or parish council officers, national and local voluntary organisations, and interest groups such as walking, cycling, equestrian or access charities, reflecting the breadth of transport and public realm issues under consideration. This mix of roles highlights a generally advisory model, in which responsibility for process and influence sits with the authority, while panels provide insight, scrutiny and legitimacy through representation; often dependent on how actively their input is taken forward by officers and members.

Funding and resourcing arrangements for disabled people's access panels varies across authorities, but none of the organisations with access panels provided financial compensation to participants, although some did cover expenses such as travel or subsistence. Access panels are typically supported through core local authority budgets, with staff time allocated to convene meetings, organise agendas, and support participants. These officer roles are often part-time or shared across multiple duties, limiting the capacity to provide more extensive support.

In addition to staffing, some authorities commission external organisations, such as specialist disability forums or accessibility audit bodies, to provide expertise or enhance engagement, which helps supplement internal capacity and capability but adds to budget pressures. Overall, the absence of paid participation can limit inclusivity, placing reliance on voluntary contributions, while funding for staff and external support remains the key determinant of how consistently and effectively access panels operate.

Funding for accessibility support also remained a challenge, with BSL interpreters cited as being an additional cost, and difficult to arrange short notice. It was also mentioned that needing to physically support participants (for example, getting in and out of transport to site visits) took additional resource. Some areas considered online meetings, or the use of technology to allow for virtual site visits that were most inclusive and resource effective.



Perceptions on the effectiveness of access panels

Perceived effectiveness and gaps in access panels reveal a mixed picture across authorities. While local authority officers who were interviewed all supported the concept of access panels, a lack of resources and limited opportunities for input at a decision-making level, led to differing opinions on their effectiveness.

Where access panels are well-established, supported by dedicated staff, and linked to formal decision-making processes, they are generally seen as effective in providing insight, shaping projects, and influencing policy. These access panels are valued for their ability to bring lived experience into discussions, challenge assumptions, and highlight accessibility issues that might otherwise be overlooked. Access panels were seen as being particularly effective when their input is considered early in the planning or design process.

At the same time, gaps are widely acknowledged. Many access panels are limited in reach, with underrepresentation of younger disabled people, those with sensory or learning disabilities, or groups facing multiple barriers to participation. The lack of paid participation further constrains inclusivity, relying on voluntary contributions that can exclude those unable to commit time without compensation.

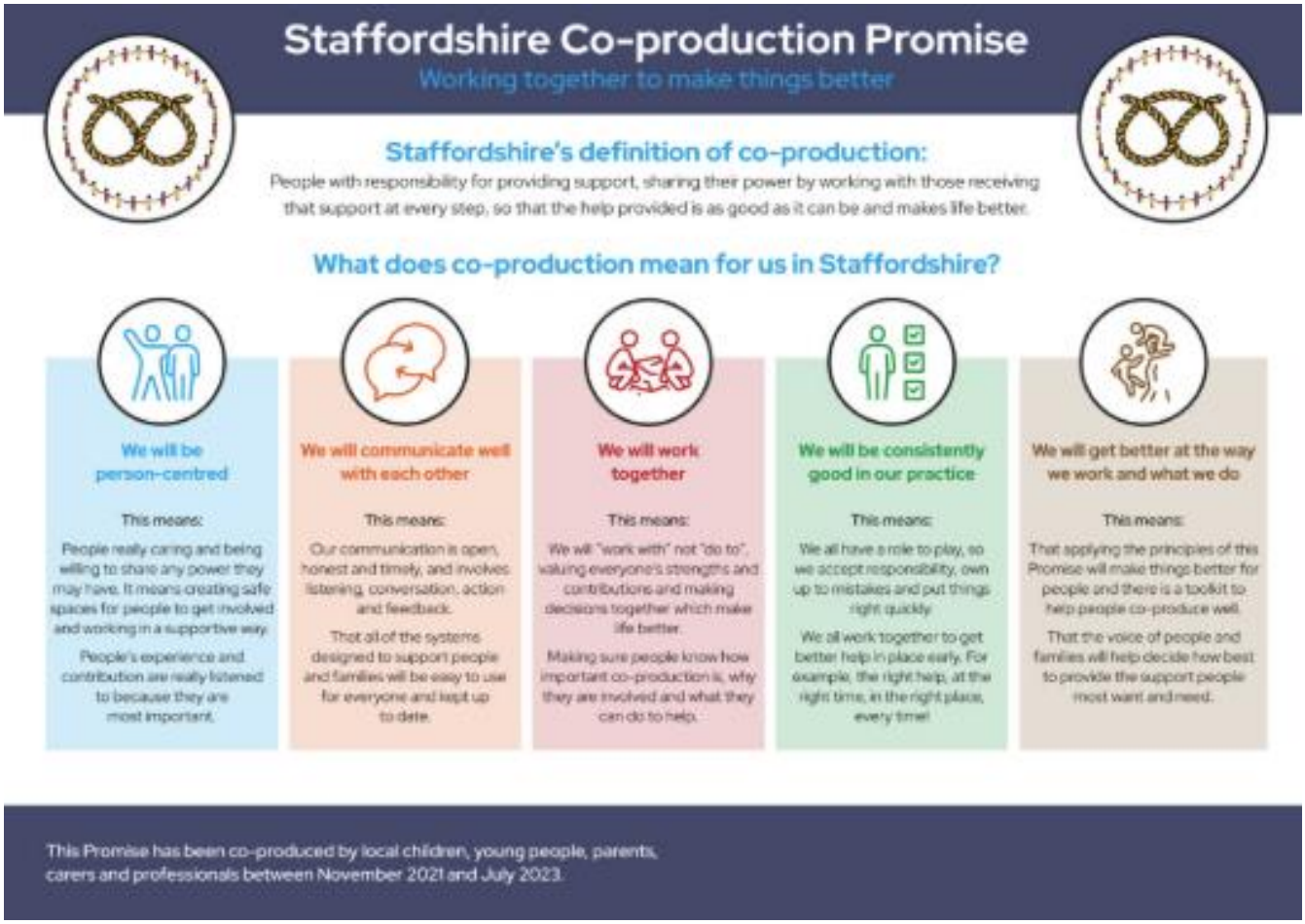
"Apathy, exhaustion, frustration. Disabled people have been consistently failed through a lack of forethought, support, inadequate services or systems that have not considered them.

Disabled people are exhausted from stress and anxiety of not having their needs met, exhausted from constantly having to fight to not get treated even worse or left behind. They cannot see that things will change and even when they have a glimmer of improvement, it is usually followed by a failure."

Project Delivery Officer, West Midlands Combined Authority

In addition, some panels struggle with inconsistent influence, particularly when engagement occurs late in project cycles or when internal champions are absent. Funding and staffing constraints, along with insufficient mechanisms for refreshing membership or ensuring diversity, are recurring challenges that limit the overall effectiveness of these advisory structures.

For survey respondents without a panel, they felt that they often struggled to engaged with disabled people through other means, and lacked the time, funding and resourcing to do so in a meaningful way.



Case study

Staffordshire

"Buses were picked [as the theme for the year] because they recognised in this group that actually transport is a key unlocker or an enabler of so many other things; jobs, accessing healthcare, schools, education, college... That's why they recognise that that actually if we can get buses right it'll be helpful to so many more people to be able to access these services. But they have said now that actually they've recognised through doing this campaign this year that transport would be a good theme to have recurring as well because they have recognised how important it is."

Transport Strategy Assistant, Staffordshire County Council

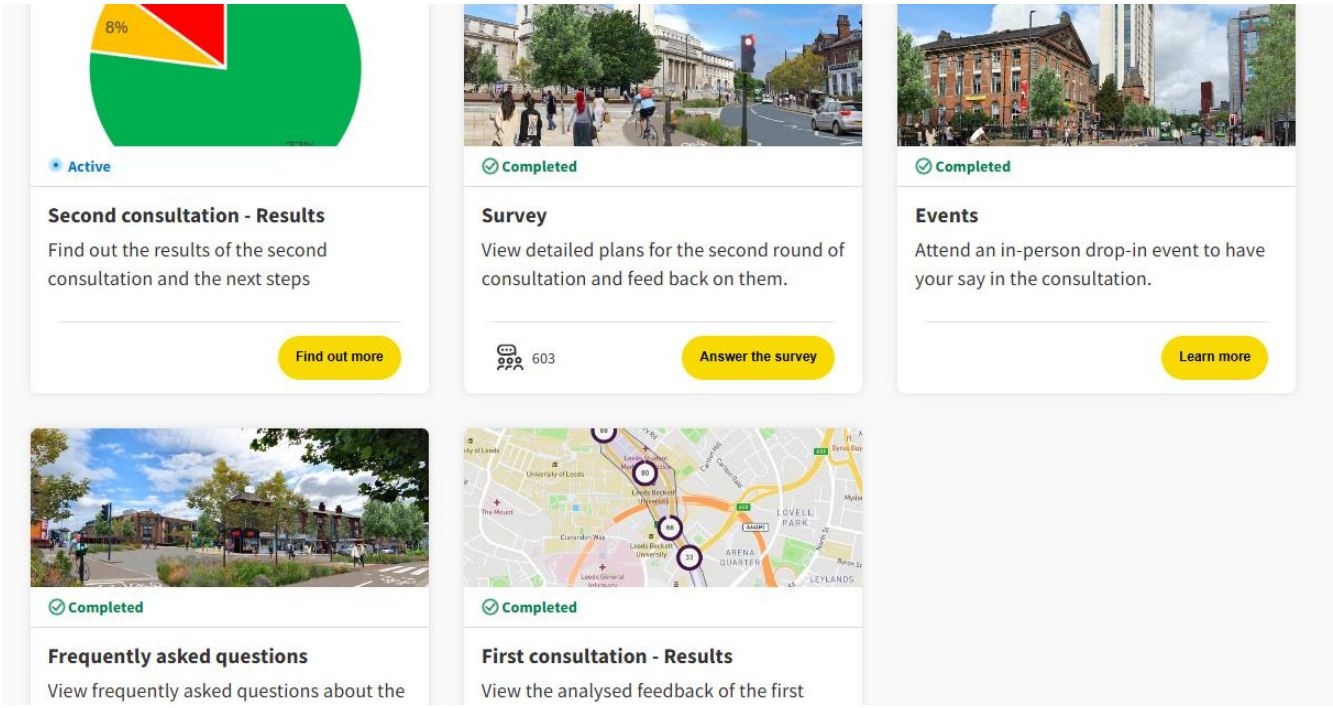
While historically engagement within the Transport team has been largely reactive and ad-hoc, despite strong policy intent and officer will, the Local Transport Plan now includes a dedicated chapter on inclusive and connected communities and the team are in the process of creating a transport specific disabled access panel.

The Transport team are working with colleagues in the Health and Care department, who operate a long-standing co-production group with disabled people and others with lived experience of services. This group is well established, supported by best practice in social care, and functions through an active partnership board. Disabled people are routinely involved in shaping priorities and challenging service delivery.

In the past year, the Health and Care co-production group selected buses as its annual campaign theme, recognising transport as a key enabler to reducing inequality and improving access to social participation. Through this work, the group met directly with council officers to discuss barriers to bus travel and identify improvements. A Transport Officer became involved in this work through informal internal connections, showing the potential for transport teams to make use of an existing, trusted engagement forum.

The Transport team is now exploring how to systematically engage with the Health and Care co-production team to inform transport planning and delivery. This approach aims to avoid duplication, make efficient use of limited resources and embed transport across departments within the council.

Image: Staffordshire's Co-Production Promise, created by Staffordshire CVYS with local children, parents and carers and adopted by the council. https://www.staffscvys.org.uk/co-production



Case study

Leeds

“You could send somebody documents till you're blue in the face, but when they're in a room with somebody and a real person says, ‘This stops me from going to the theatre or even going to the toilet’, And then they're like, ‘Whoa, OK, I need to clean up my act here’. So that's why I found the access groups really good when they do meet architects and designers in those sessions. Whereas, earlier, I'm commenting on planning applications, I'm sending emails, but it just doesn't hit home the same way as having a face to face conversation.”

Access Officer, Leeds City Council

Leeds has established multiple mechanisms to engage disabled people in transport and regeneration projects. The Access and Usability Group (AUAG), a subgroup of the city’s Disability Hub, meets quarterly to review major projects, while stand-alone sessions are arranged for urgent or smaller-scale issues. Within the council, the disabled staff network, DAWN, meets weekly for informal wellbeing “coffee mornings” and holds longer six-weekly meetings that can serve a similar advisory function to the AUAG.

For larger schemes, engagement is extended to external organisations such as the National Federation of the Blind, Leeds Deaf Forum, and Ageing Better, part of the Leeds Older People’s Forum. In the past, a disabled people’s Organisation (DPO) also contributed, though this is no longer active. Engagement methods are tailored to each project: highway schemes typically involve local consultation, letterbox drops, and pop-up sessions, while major regeneration projects, such as those in Morley and Holbeck, have prompted the establishment of project-specific inclusive design panels.

This approach was informed by lessons from the Leeds Station Gateway project, where it became clear that the AUAG had shrunk and no longer reflected the diversity of the city's disabled population. A project-specific Inclusive Design Group (IDG) was established, which successfully broadened participation and became a model for subsequent large projects. Practical adjustments, such as holding meetings later in the day or at lunchtime, helped ensure that people in employment or with other daytime commitments could participate, preventing the group from being dominated by individuals with limited daily mobility or suburban taxi users.

Through these mechanisms, Leeds has sought to ensure that engagement is meaningful, inclusive, and responsive, enabling a wider range of disabled people to contribute to the planning and delivery of transport and regeneration initiatives across the city.

Image: Screenshot of the Woodhouse Lane Gateway consultation webpage.
https://woodhouselanegateway.commonplace.is/

Key enablers of effective engagement

Although each authority spoken to had different methods and ways of engagement, several reoccurring key enablers emerged, based on what they had found effective or useful. Including these aspects in any access panel will lead to better outcomes and can be implemented regardless of the scale or scope of the access panel, and the local context in which it exists.

"The group has been really great for having one place where members can share views with each other and Councillor Plowden, who ultimately oversees transport in the city. Subgroups and other smaller meetings have been set up to address more specific and less strategic issues such as engaging with disabled drivers and to improve communications between WECA, BCC and disabled people on issues like e-scooter parking etc."

Transport Strategy Officer, Bristol City Council

Clear organisational commitment and leadership

Engagement works best where it is formally recognised within governance and decision-making structures, with visible support from senior officers and elected members. This helps ensure that disabled people's input is taken seriously and influences outcomes, rather than being treated as optional or consultative only.

Dedicated officer capacity and continuity

Having named officers responsible for coordinating engagement, preparing accessible materials, and maintaining relationships with participants and organisations is crucial. Continuity of staff helps build trust, retain knowledge, and avoid repeated "starting from scratch" with new panels or projects.

Early involvement in projects

Disabled people's engagement is most effective when it happens at the earliest stages of planning and design, before key decisions are fixed. Early involvement allows lived experience to shape options, identify issues proactively, and reduce the need for costly or limited late-stage changes.

Accessible and flexible engagement methods

Well-designed, accessible meetings, including hybrid options, appropriate timings, clear papers, and expense reimbursement enable a wider range of people to participate. Flexibility helps reduce barriers for people in work, with caring responsibilities, or with fluctuating impairments.

Broad and purposeful representation

Using a mix of standing access panels, project-specific groups, and outreach to specialist disability organisations suggests helps broaden participation and improve diversity. Regularly refreshing membership and targeting underrepresented groups reduces reliance on a small number of individuals and strengthens the legitimacy of engagement.

Case study

West Midlands Combined Authority

“Leadership is fully behind that and it's a published initiative and strategy that we've got that is driving accessibility in the West Midlands, certainly from a combined authority perspective.”

Equalities and Diversity Manager, WMCA

West Midlands Combines Authority (WMCA) approach to engaging disabled people externally is shaped by a strong organisational commitment to accessibility, supported by senior leadership and dedicated expertise. The appointment of a Senior Specialist Disability Officer, alongside the ambition to make the region an exemplar for accessibility, has helped provide clear direction and consistency. This is reinforced by a formally approved Accessibility Roadmap, which sets out practical standards for accessible communication and engagement, including clear guidance on formats, language, presentation design and the avoidance of inaccessible visual content.

These standards directly inform how the authority engages with disabled people and organisations, ensuring that materials, meetings and consultations are accessible by default. Engagement places emphasis on reaching the full diversity of disability, including people with hidden impairments and neurodivergent people, and on involving disabled people at an early stage in the development of strategies, policies and projects. Equality Impact Assessments are used where appropriate, but the focus is on meaningful dialogue and co-production rather than compliance.

Partnership working is central to this approach. The authority actively engages with disabled people's organisations and, where possible, works with disability-led and disability-owned businesses to provide accessible formats, specialist advice and training. External engagement is also informed by a broader intersectional equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) approach, recognising how disability intersects with race, gender, religion and belief, and shaping more inclusive and representative participation.

The development of a panel is currently at the planning stage. Alongside this, next year WMCA will strengthen and develop the voices of disabled people through the Disabled People's Voice Network of Networks. This work will inform impairment-specific steering groups at a local level, the WM Disability Coalition, and a strategic Exemplary Region collective.

Together, these groups will span mayoral priorities as well as health, social care, and wellbeing, creating a comprehensive framework that enables strong cross-sector connections. In addition, they will shortly be launching a Design Excellence Panel, focused on meaningful design and ensuring the needs of the widest possible audience are met.

In 2024, WMCA published their report Making the West Midlands an Exemplary Region for Disabled people.

Image credit: West Midlands Combined Authority, Making the West Midlands an Exemplary region report.

Case study

Oxford

“I think what needs to happen is national, local governments and local organisation, they need to say this matters. And I think at the minute, it really doesn't. DEI has been flatlined. The idea and the concept of disabled access, champions, groups, whatever you want to call them. It's such a powerful thing.”

IMPACT panel member, Oxford City Council

In Oxford, engagement with disabled people in transport planning is anchored in the Inclusive Transport and Movement Focus Group (IMPACT), which brings together people with lived experience alongside councillors, advocacy organisations and sector specialists. The group typically has 15–20 regular members who volunteer their time to review transport and movement projects from an accessibility perspective, contributing both strategic insights and detailed lived experience.

IMPACT was established in May 2020 as part of Oxford City Council's commitment to inclusive decision-making under the Equality Act 2010 and its Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy. It meets regularly and reviews projects from early concept through to final design and delivery, including public realm improvements and larger schemes spanning both city and county responsibilities. Organisations represented include local advocacy groups such as Wheels for Wellbeing and Unlimited Oxfordshire, as well as community networks and residents with direct experience of disability.

The group's impact demonstrates the value of sustained engagement. It has directly contributed to accessibility improvements in Broad Street and Market Street, influencing the placement of seating, dropped kerbs and tactile paving. It has also played a role in strategic discussions around longer-term projects such as the reopening of the Cowley Branch Line and redevelopment of the Covered Market. Notably, group input was instrumental in establishing a free accessible shuttle service linking west Oxford to the city centre when Network Rail's closure of Botley Road disrupted usual travel routes.

Despite these successes, members have identified opportunities to strengthen the model further. IMPACT operates entirely on a volunteer basis, and while this fosters strong commitment, it limits the group's capacity to engage between meetings and to influence timelines on fast-moving projects. Oxford's engagement schedule, like many elsewhere, is shaped by wider political and administrative boundaries between city and county decision-makers, which can fragment influence. Members have also highlighted the benefits that could be gained from clearer preparation of materials, earlier sharing of information, and a more formalised leadership role to coordinate actions and follow up.

Caption: An IMPACT group site visit to review project plans.
Credit: IMPACT

Challenges and barriers

Despite examples of strong and innovative practice, authorities consistently face a range of challenges and barriers that limit the effectiveness of engagement with disabled people. These issues arise at multiple levels, including organisational capacity and capability, funding and resourcing, accessibility of processes, and the wider context in which engagement takes place. Barriers are often structural rather than intentional, shaped by competing priorities, tight timescales, and reliance on voluntary participation, and can result in engagement happening too late, too narrowly, or without sufficient influence.

Resource and capacity constraints

Resource and capacity constraints are a persistent barrier to effective engagement with disabled people across authorities. Limited staffing, competing priorities and short-term funding arrangements often restrict the time and expertise available to plan, deliver and sustain meaningful engagement. In many cases, responsibility for engagement sits alongside multiple other roles, reducing continuity and limiting the ability to build relationships, support participants or follow up on input.

"We do have some specialist staff, but we definitely could do with more general EDI practitioners to enable us or allow us to do that engagement in communities, to get out there and meet disabled people, disabled organisations, and local authorities and to get an understanding of need. So, resources is a big thing to enable us to mobilise people and engage people with disabled people where they are in the region. As a combined authority we work with seven constituent local authorities. So at the moment it's just me in terms of doing that external networking. So there's me that has to do that networking across seven authorities."

Equalities and Diversity Manager, WMCA

Issues of representation, diversity and reach

Issues of representation, diversity and reach remain a significant challenge for many authorities. Engagement activity often draws on a small and familiar group of participants, limiting the range of lived experience reflected and increasing the risk of over-reliance on a few individuals. Sensory and learning-disabled people, neurodivergent people, and younger disabled people are frequently underrepresented, while rural geography, digital exclusion and travel barriers further restrict who is able to take part.

Where participation is unpaid, involvement can also skew towards those with the time, resources and confidence to engage. As a result, engagement does not always reflect the full diversity of disabled people's experiences, reducing both its legitimacy and its ability to inform inclusive decision-making.

"We became aware of a family of three visually impaired people who then said there are more visually impaired people you don't know about living here. And now we can't walk in this space independently because it's chaos. We can't find our way and that's the only controlled crossing in the middle of the village. So now we can't even get to the other side of the road. And I think it was really interesting that those people lived in that community, but for some reason they didn't engage with the project, and they also didn't join the other group.

So I sort of feel like maybe in really small places it's about saying to that parish council, we've got to reach everyone in the community, we need to reach them all and so we need to try all the channels we can think of to get consultation and engagement right down to that, you know, door to door kind of level."

Access Officer, Leeds City Council

"We implemented a scheme that involved removal barriers at a bus stop and tried to consult with the group and they didn't get back until very last minute. It felt like the opinion of one individual and didn't go through a panel, but very much limited to their experience. That one objection could have scuppered the scheme which wouldn't have been best for everyone."

Transport Planning Officer, City Council

Proportional approach

Applying a proportional approach to engagement presents an ongoing challenge for authorities. Many struggle to balance the level of engagement with the scale, cost and impact of schemes, particularly where resources are limited or project timelines are tight. Smaller projects may receive minimal or no direct input from disabled people, while larger schemes can demand significant time and capacity from both officers and participants.

In rural or geographically dispersed areas, proportionality is further complicated by travel distances and smaller population bases, making intensive engagement harder to sustain. Without clear guidance or shared expectations, decisions about what constitutes "proportionate" engagement can be inconsistent, leading to gaps in involvement and uncertainty for both authorities and disabled people.

"I think guidance on that kind of proportionality threshold approach would be helpful to know where to expect this; at what at what level of impact. Funding, scale of location are the triggers. We're doing that essentially off our own backs, but it's tricky because we're working with the ATE guides or other guides which says this is what you should do. 80% of the schemes we do are fairly routine, small-scale measures. We're trying to for the higher, the bigger schemes, but we don't really have the kind of guidance to say that's the right approach."

Principal Transport Planner, Dorset Council

Training

Training is a key but uneven element of effective engagement, and gaps in skills and knowledge create barriers for both authorities and panel participants. Staff involved in transport, planning and engagement do not always have sufficient understanding of disability, accessibility requirements or inclusive engagement practices, particularly where training is optional, one-off or limited to specialist teams. High staff turnover can further weaken capacity, with knowledge lost if training is not refreshed regularly.

At the same time, panel members themselves are often expected to contribute to complex technical discussions without structured support or training. This can limit confidence, reduce the effectiveness of input, and place additional pressure on a small number of experienced individuals. Providing training for panel participants, such as introductions to transport processes, design standards, decision-making structures and roles, can help level the playing field and support more meaningful, informed engagement. Without this, engagement risks reinforcing existing imbalances rather than empowering a wider range of disabled people to participate effectively.

“I don't know if you've ever looked at a technical drawing code. I haven't got a Scooby. I don't know what I'm looking at. And they show you the pipeline and they show you where the payments are broken and they'll show you the alternative routes. And you're watching it on the screen and going, ‘I have not got the foggiest in what you've just said. How am I meant to understand it? If I can't see it?’

And that's the reality of it, is lay people with disabilities and neurodiversity, developmental issues, life challenges thrown at them daily. They're coming in at an operator manager level from zero. Are you mad? You know, people don't work like that. And obviously you've got the different ways of learning as well. I prefer to actually go out and see something. I can't look at something on the page. It doesn't work. I need to go and have a discussion and try it out and see whether or not it functions.”

Access panel member, Oxford City Council

Creating a scalable model

A scalable model for access panels to engage disabled people in transport decision-making needs to balance consistency with flexibility. It should be built around clear, transferable principles that set expectations nationally, while allowing local authorities to adapt structures and delivery to their size, geography, capacity and communities. The aim is not to prescribe a single panel format, but to establish a robust framework that supports meaningful, embedded representation across different contexts.

Principles for meaningful, embedded representation
At the core of a scalable model are a small number of shared principles: early and ongoing involvement in decision-making, representation that reflects the diversity of disabled people, accessible and inclusive engagement by default, transparency about how input is used, and recognition of lived experience as a form of expertise. These principles help shift engagement from ad hoc consultation to a more consistent and trusted part of governance.

Recommended model elements

- **Governance and accountability:** Engagement structures should be formally linked to decision-making processes, with clear reporting lines into senior officer groups and elected member forums. This helps ensure input is visible, considered and responded to.
- **Resourcing and financial compensation for lived experience:** Sustainable engagement requires dedicated officer capacity and funded support, including financial compensation for disabled people's time and expertise, alongside expenses. This reduces reliance on goodwill and widens participation.
- **Clear roles and influence in decision-making:** Panels and participants should have a shared understanding of their role, remit and influence, including when and how they will be involved, and how feedback will be acted on or explained if not taken forward.
- **Support, training and sustainability:** Both officers and panel members need ongoing training and support, including introductions to transport processes, design standards and accessibility principles. Mechanisms for refreshing membership and avoiding burnout are essential.

Adapting to different local contexts
The model should be flexible enough to work across urban, rural and regional settings. Smaller authorities might use shared or countywide panels, project-specific groups or partnerships with existing co-production structures, while larger or combined authorities may operate standing panels alongside local or scheme-based engagement. Proportionality should guide the scale and intensity of engagement, supported by clear national guidance.

Alignment with national policy and funding mechanisms
To be effective, a scalable model must align with national policy frameworks and funding arrangements. This includes clear expectations within transport and planning guidance, consistent standards for engagement and accessibility, and funding mechanisms that support staff capacity, paid participation and training. National alignment would help reduce inconsistency, strengthen accountability and support authorities to move from variable practice to a more equitable and sustainable approach to engagement.

Funding programmes, such as the Active Travel Fund and Integrated Settlements for Mayoral Combined Authorities, provide opportunities to attach conditions or guidance requiring early and meaningful engagement with disabled people as part of scheme development and delivery.

National guidance on inclusive procurement and commissioning can support the involvement of disability-led organisations and businesses in engagement, and training roles.

Recommendations

National

1. Active Travel England should create a national Access Panel Network for transport

A National Access Panel network for transport would provide coordination, share best practices, and ensure local efforts align with national guidance, creating a consistent and effective approach for the use of access panels and working with disabled people to inform practice.

A clear national network would help to ensure consistency across regions and sets expectations for meaningful involvement of disabled people in transport and public realm decisions. It helps avoid fragmented approaches and strengthens accountability. It should also allow for flexibility and proportionality depending on local context.

Actions:

1. Active Travel England (ATE) to create a national network, drawing on Scotland's Access Panel model, through commissioning an existing DPO or disability organisation to take on this role. This network would:
    - Share best practice, providing technical support and training, monitoring panel effectiveness, and advising on policy.
    - Act as a central hub for resources, accessible materials, training and guidance to ensure consistency while allowing local adaptation.
    - Implement accountability measures, such as annual reporting to central government or oversight body on how disabled people's input influences policy and projects.
2. Active Travel England in partnership with the National Access Panel Network to publish guidance on access panels and wider inclusive

engagement, outlining principles for early involvement, proportionality, and meaningful influence.

2. Encourage and support local transport authorities to set up access panels and ensure disabled people's views are reflected within governance and decision-making structures

Active Travel England working in partnership with the National Access Panel Network should ensure adequate resources are available to local transport authorities while at the same time building their use into existing reporting mechanisms to encourage their adoption locally.

Actions:

1. Develop the Local Authority Capability Rating Process to embed the use of access panels and wider engagement with disabled people.
2. Embed requirements in national transport and planning guidance, including revisions to Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plans (LCWIPs) and major funding programmes.
3. Encourage local authorities to establish budgets for access panels and engagement with disabled people. This should include:
    - Dedicated officer time to coordinate access panels.
    - Financial compensation to disabled people for participation, recognising lived experience as professional expertise.
    - Accessibility costs such as interpreters, assistive technology, and venue accessibility.
4. Require local authorities to report on engagement practices in project evaluations.
5. Encourage local authorities to integrate access panels, inclusive design groups, or similar mechanisms into formal decision-making structures.

Local

3. All local transport authorities should set up access panels, ensuring they are properly resourced

Local authorities need to recognise the multiple benefits of ensuring disabled people contribute towards policy and practice. Local authorities should work with the national network to maintain, improve or create access panels and ensure budget is available to cover the costs of inclusive engagement.

Actions:

1. Local authorities should s follow guidance set by the national network to create, maintain and improve access panels, following key principles for engagement and implementation, fitting with local context and needs.
2. Allocate revenue funding specifically for inclusive engagement, including dedicated officer time to co-ordinate, support and act on engagement activity.
3. Fund accessibility requirements as standard practise, including hire of accessible venues, communication support, interpreters, assistive technology and alternative formats.
4. Resource access panels on an ongoing basis, rather than through short-term or project funding.

4. Local transport authorities should implement practices based on data and insight to inform a culture of more inclusive engagement and delivery

Access panels should not be viewed as a standalone solution; meaningful change also requires wider cultural change.

Local and combined authorities already hold valuable data that can help identify barriers, target engagement and prioritise delivery. Better use of this information will strengthen decision-making, leading to better outcomes.

Engagement approaches should reflect local circumstances while meeting national standards. Flexibility ensures inclusion across different populations and project scales.

Actions:

1. Use data to identify priority locations, user groups and recurring barriers to target engagement and delivery of services to areas with most need and greater inequalities.
2. Combine quantitative data with lived experience insights to explain underlying issues, solutions and issues not currently recorded. For example, following up complaints or user surveys to further explore travel behaviour data.
3. Share data and insights across departments to support joined-up planning and reduce duplication.
4. Tailor engagement approaches based on project scale, risk and impact, ensuring that smaller schemes still include disabled people.
5. Adapt engagement methods to local context, including rural areas, digital exclusion and community capacity.

6. Provide regular training for officers, contractors and elected members on disability awareness and inclusive engagement.
7. Review and refine engagement approaches based on participant feedback and lessons learned.

Appendix 1: Survey

Disability Access Panel Survey

Section 1: About you

1. Your name:
2. Your role/job title:
3. Name of local or regional authority or organisation:
4. Organisation type
5. Local authority
6. Regional authority
7. Other public sector institution
8. Consultancy
9. Third sector
10. Other (please specify)
11. Department or service area:

Section 2: Disability Access Panels

1. Does your local authority currently have a Disability Access Panel or similar group that regularly engages with disabled people?

A Disability Access Panel may also be known as an Access Group, Advisory group, or by another name. A Disability Access Panel is a group of disabled people who offer advice and feedback to represent their needs and lived experience to help inform plans, schemes and programmes.

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

If you answered YES, please complete Section 3.

If you answered NO or NOT SURE, please skip to Section 4.

Section 3: If your local or combined authority has a Disability Access Panel

1. What is the name of the panel?
2. When was the panel established? If you are not sure, give your best estimate.
3. What are the panel's main objectives or purpose? (text box)
4. Does / would the panel discuss or feedback on active travel plans or projects?

Active travel refers to getting from place to place using physical activity, most commonly walking, wheeling or cycling, instead of motorised transport.

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

5. Does / would the panel discuss or feedback on public transport plans or projects?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

6. How is the panel funded? Choose all that apply.

- Through local authority funding

- Through combined authority funding
- Through grant funding
- Through charitable funding or donations
- Through partnership or project funding
- Entirely voluntary/unfunded
- Other, please specify (text box)

If your panel is funded by multiple sources, please provide a rough estimate of the % breakdown by source (text box)

7. Are panel members compensated for their time? This could be through financial incentives, such as cash or vouchers, or through other means, such as paid training or qualifications.

    - Yes - cash payments
    - Yes – vouchers
    - Yes – through other compensation (please describe, *text box)*
    - *No – panel members are not paid, but expenses are reimbursed*
    - No – no payment, including expenses

8. Who leads or coordinates the panel?

    - Local or combined authority staff
    - Panel members
    - External facilitators
    - Other, please specify (text box)

9. Who are the members of the panel? Choose all that apply.

    - Disabled residents

- Carers
- Voluntary sector (please specify the types of organisations present, optional text box)
- Non-disabled staff
- Other, please specify text box)

10. How often does the panel meet? If panel meetings are not regularly scheduled, give your best approximation.

- Every week
- Every two weeks
- Monthly
- Every other month
- Quarterly
- Annually
- Less frequently
- Ad-hoc, for example, to discuss new or specific projects

11. What kinds of topics or issues does the panel typically focus on? (text box)

12. In what ways does the panel influence decision-making or service design in the council? (text box)

13. What has been the impact of the panel so far? Please share any examples or case studies if possible. (text box)

14. What are the panel's biggest operational challenges? (text box)

15. How do you promote or publicise the panel and its work, both internally and externally? (text box)

16. Is there anything else you'd like to share about the panel or your experience of working with it? (text box)

17. Does the panel have a Terms of Reference? If you are able to share, please attach.

Once you have answered Section 4, please skip to Section 5.

Section 4: If your local or combined authority do not have a Disability Access Panel, or you are not sure

1. Has your local authority ever considered establishing a Disability Access Panel? If so, what stage are you at?
2. What were the main barriers your local authority has faced while trying to set up a Disability Access Panel (if this has been considered)?
3. More broadly, what are the key challenges your authority faces when trying to engage with disabled people?
4. Are there any other ways your local authority currently engages with disabled people to represent their needs and help inform transport or active travel plans, schemes or programmes? Please describe.
5. Is there a written policy or internal framework for engaging with disabled people (outside of Equality Impact Assessments)? If so, please summarise or provide a link if it is permitted to share internal documents.

Section 5

All respondents

1. What types of support, guidance or resources would help your local authority improve its engagement with disabled people? (text box)
2. Is there anything else you'd like to share, or any additional feedback on topic of Disability Access Panel? (text box)

Appendix 2: Types of engagement for transport projects and policy

Engagement mechanism / forum	Description	Transport-specific
Disabled people Strategic Transport Advisory Group	Strategic advisory group meeting before each Transport and Connectivity Committee to share views on upcoming transport policy, strategy and projects	Yes
External specialist organisations	Commissioned West of England Centre for Inclusive Living to carry out accessibility audits; Bristol Disability Equality Forum commissioned to support and improve engagement	Yes
Equality Impact Assessments (EqIAs)	Use of Equality Impact Assessments to consider impacts on disabled people	Yes
Health and Care Co-production Group	Council co-production group hearing from disabled people and co-designing campaigns; transport frequently discussed (current focus on bus travel)	No (cross-directorate)
Disability and Neurodiversity Partnership Board	Regular board for disabled and neurodivergent people; not transport-specific but transport issues commonly raised	No (cross-directorate)
Public transport forums	In-person and online forums held twice yearly to gather views on public transport	Partly

Advocacy group engagement	Attendance at advocacy group meetings relating to infrastructure improvements such as bus stops and policies	Yes
Travel Champions Group	Group used to discuss transport policies, infrastructure and related matters	Yes
Enhanced (Bus) Partnership Forum	Mechanism for bus users to provide feedback on accessibility, including through co-design workshops	Yes
Disability champion (elected member)	Councillor acting as disability champion	Yes
Design review and scheme-specific engagement	Active Travel Design Review Panel (with Active Travel England), Design Excellence Panel, and bus stop bypass engagement	Yes

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