

Get wheelchair wise: A wheelchair user's guide to public transport

As a wheelchair user you will find that more and more public transport is becoming accessible to you. New regulations mean that in future trains, buses and taxis will all have to be designed so that most wheelchair users can travel on them.

Here are some basic facts that you might find it helpful to know, particularly if you do not use public transport but would like to do so:

Before you Travel

- The majority of wheelchair users will be able to travel on public transport. But, you may find that you can't if:
 - your chair is very big (taking up a space - when you are in it - of more than 700 mm wide or 1200 mm long), or
 - your chair is very heavy, or
 - you need to travel with your legs fully extended or the backrest reclined, or
 - you have a scooter (which will be difficult to manoeuvre and may be unstable in a vehicle).
- You must ensure that your wheelchair is in a safe condition to travel. This means, for example, making sure that it is correctly maintained, that the tyres are properly inflated, that you have not overloaded the back of the chair with bags (this can cause the chair to tip over backwards on a ramp). If you have a powered chair you must also ensure that the battery is secure. If your chair has adjustable kerb climbers you should check that they are set so that they do not catch on the ramp.
- The transport operator has the right to refuse to let you travel if he believes that your wheelchair is not in a safe condition.
- There will continue to be a need for door to door transport services for those who cannot be public transport users.

Getting On and Off

There are different kinds of boarding aids to help you use public transport:

- In future low floor buses will have a ramp. In towns most will be power operated by the driver from his seat. In rural areas, the driver may operate the ramps manually.
- Higher floor buses and coaches are more likely to have lifts, which will be operated by the driver or another member of staff.
- On most trains manual ramps are kept on the platform or on the train.
- Taxis generally have manual ramps, which the driver will operate.
- Modern trams and rapid transit systems have level boarding so you can move straight from platform to tram without a ramp or lift.

On Board

- On mainline (inter city, suburban and cross-country) trains and in buses there is a space designed for you to travel in safety and comfort. You must always use this space.

- In a low floor bus this will be facing to the rear of the vehicle in a position that provides handholds and protection behind you. You may need to manoeuvre your wheelchair backwards and forwards in order to get into the space. The wheelchair will not be secured. If you use a powered wheelchair, you should also make sure that the power is switched off when travelling.
- On trains there is generally more space to manoeuvre into position. Your wheelchair will not be secured.
- The reason the wheelchair does not need to be secured in the conventional way on these types of vehicle is because of their design and movement characteristics. They are more stable than smaller or higher floor vehicles so there is less sway while the vehicle is travelling. But you should always apply your brakes when the vehicle is moving.
- Most trams or light rapid transit systems also have a dedicated space for wheelchair users. On systems that don't it is important not to sit where you are blocking gangways or doors, particularly if the vehicle is crowded.
- In a taxi or a high floor bus or coach you may find the wheelchair position is either forward or rear facing but in either case the wheelchair must be secured to the floor of the vehicle with a restraint system. There will also be a passenger seat belt or harness. This is to ensure that you are safe and that your wheelchair cannot move around inside the vehicle and injure you or other passengers. Again, your brakes should always be applied. You should never travel facing sideways. It is not safe.

Confidence

- If you have never used public transport before, don't be put off. Many transport companies now offer disabled people the chance to see how the system works - perhaps by a visit to the bus or railway station - before you travel for the first time.
- Don't pick a busy rush hour for your first journey if you are uncertain how you will manage. Travelling in the middle of the day will give you more space and time to build up confidence.
- Public transport companies have invested time and money in making their vehicles and services accessible. They want you as their customers!

Useful Contacts

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