

Driving Change:

Improving the Accessibility
of Taxis and Private
Hire Vehicles for
Disabled People



About Leonard Cheshire

Leonard Cheshire supports individuals to live, learn and earn as independently as they choose. Led by people with experience of disability, we are at the heart of local life — opening up opportunities, choice and support in communities across the UK. We are one of the UK's largest charitable providers of social care, and through over 100 services, including supported living and registered care homes, day support, community outreach and respite services, we support 2,500 disabled people every day. Leonard Cheshire also runs employment programmes for disabled people, including our flagship graduate internship scheme Change 100, and campaigns for change on the key issues affecting disabled people in the UK today. This includes campaigning for accessible transport for disabled people.

About this research

We conducted a nationally representative survey of 2,080 disabled people in England, Scotland and Wales. We also conducted in-depth focus groups with 56 disabled people and 12 key informants, including taxi & Private Hire Vehicle drivers, licensing authorities and Disabled Persons Organisations.

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Executive summary

Access to transport is necessary for any individual to fully participate in society, creating opportunities for people to work, learn and pursue active and connected social lives. Taxi and Private Hire Vehicles [PHVs] fulfil a unique niche in the public transport ecosystem because they offer an on demand and door to door service without fixed schedules or stops. In short, taxi and PHV users can go exactly where they want, when they want. For most of us, this is simply an added convenience. However, for disabled people travel by taxi/PHV is often essential, and for many, this mode of transport represents the only means of viable independent travel outside of the home. This is why in England in 2020, disabled people took twice as many taxi/PHV trips as non-disabled people, despite taking fewer journeys by any form of transport overall.¹

Yet, there are challenges to the provision of accessible taxis and PHVs in the UK. Across England, only 55% of all taxis and 2% of PHVs are wheelchair accessible. Moreover, only about half of local authorities require drivers to undertake training on how to support disabled customers². Challenges such as these are why disabled people often cannot access taxis/PHVs when they need them, or frequently do not have a positive experience on the journey. It's also clear that there are challenges for taxi/PHV service providers and policy-makers in meeting the goal of accessible taxi and PHV provision.

That's why at Leonard Cheshire, we are **driving for change**. With the support of Motability, we've conducted comprehensive research to understand how accessible taxi and PHV travel can become a reality for the UK's 14.6 million disabled people.³ Although there has been legislative progress in recent years enshrining accessibility into law, there is still much work to do to turn positive policy change into good practice.

1. Department for Transport. (2022a). National Travel Survey: 2021. In <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/national-travel-survey-2021/national-travel-survey-2021-introduction-and-main-findings>. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/national-travel-survey-2021>
2. Department for Transport. (2022b). Taxi and private hire vehicle statistics, England: 2022. GOV. UK. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/taxi-and-private-hire-vehicle-statistics-england-2022/taxi-and-private-hire-vehicle-statistics-england-2022>
3. Kirk-Wade, E. (2022). UK disability statistics: Prevalence and life experiences. In The House of Commons Library. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9602/>

Ensuring taxi/PHVs are available and accessible for all

Our research shows that disabled people cannot access taxis and PHVs when they need them. **Two-thirds of respondents told us that they could not always access taxis/PHVs when they needed them and 1 in 10 respondents said they could never access taxi/PHVs when they needed them.** Moreover, disabled people with more severe disabilities and those living in rural areas experienced greater barriers to taxi and PHV access. Many said they cannot travel when they need to. A key challenge was lack of available wheelchair accessible vehicles [WAVs].

However, service providers and others in the taxi/PHV ecosystem highlighted high upfront costs to the purchase of WAVs as a challenge in our research. This was particularly the case in context of the green agenda. For example, the Welsh government have a target that all buses and taxis will be zero emission vehicles by

2028. Due to expensive costs, some drivers, for example, shared that they would find it difficult to purchase new electric WAVs, compared to non-accessible ones. Drivers were also hesitant to purchase non-electric WAVs as they will be required to discard them in only a few years. This contributes to a lack of available WAVs across the UK.

“In rural areas there’s a great difficulty in getting people to [purchase wheelchair] accessible vehicles, because you might have a one-man band in a rural area maybe doing a lot of airport transfers and things. Why is he gonna spend £15,000 more for that odd occasion where someone requires a wheelchair? It doesn’t make any commercial sense for them to do so.”

- Key informant (taxi driver)



Even where wheelchair accessible vehicles were available, our research identified cases of powered wheelchair users being rejected for journeys on the grounds of weight-related safety, unsuitable ramps, or the wheelchair not being able to fit inside a vehicle. These disabled people are rightly frustrated at not being able to board a wheelchair-accessible vehicle despite its name. The research identified that the UK's wheelchair reference standard⁴ is not harmonised with some of the newer models of powered wheelchair, which tend to be larger.

It is critically important that the UK government addresses the needs of disabled people for available, accessible taxis and PHVs in a way that is consistent with broader sustainable transport goals. Our research highlights that a financial incentive scheme to cover some of the upfront costs of zero-emissions compliant WAVs would help address the supply-side gap. The UK's wheelchair reference standard also needs to be revised to take into account some of the newer models of powered wheelchair.

“I’ve had to use my manual chair and then have somebody at work physically move me around the building, or move me around at work and at least on half of the occasions, because there hasn’t been an accessible taxi and it just feels so demeaning. They’ve made adaptations at work, but I can’t even just go to the toilet by myself, because there hasn’t been a taxi that I can get into work. I can go into the office one day in my manual chair, but I have to be pushed around by coworkers because I can’t get my powered chair into work. I can’t even go to the printer by myself, because I haven’t got the strength to push the manual chair. I’ve got the powered chair at home to be able to do that, but I can’t get it in [the taxi].”

- Focus group participant

4. The reference wheelchair is the standard used as reference for typical wheelchair specifications. They tend to be referenced by authorities when they set out conditions that certain vehicle models need to be suitable to carry a wheelchair, thus being deemed a “wheelchair accessible vehicle”.

Ensuring a positive experience for disabled customers

48% of all disabled people that we spoke to said they had experienced stigma and discrimination from taxi/PHV drivers or operators. For 8% of disabled people this happened often or always. Our research shows that intrusive questions about disability and complaints about disabled passengers being an inconvenience are common occurrences. **1 in 7 disabled people have even been refused travel on the basis of their disability, despite this being unlawful.**

Aside from explicit stigma and discrimination, the research also found that disabled customers regularly encounter drivers that do not know how to effectively use accessibility-related equipment. Wheelchair users particularly cited cases where their wheelchairs were not properly strapped in or not strapped in at all, leading to the wheelchair shifting in the vehicle when making turns or abrupt stops. Some customers recounted instances of being improperly strapped in, which led to their heads hitting parts of the vehicles. **18% of disabled people we spoke to in this research said that they felt unsafe during a taxi/PHV journey.**

These examples show that there is a need to extend and improve disability awareness training for taxi/PHV drivers and operators in the UK, as well as evaluate and monitor the effectiveness of different training programmes.

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Embedding accessibility across all elements of taxi/PHV journeys

Our research found that the emergence of rail-hailing apps like Uber or Lyft have benefitted some disabled customers who appreciate their accessibility features, like real-time tracking of the vehicle, cashless payment, and being able to directly contact the driver via the app. However, other disabled customers said they were experiencing “digital exclusion”. Some older disabled people or those with learning disabilities found it difficult to book taxis/PHVs using apps. Some pointed out that a smartphone is needed to access ride-hailing apps, the cost of which is an obstacle for people with lower incomes. These disabled people stressed the importance of preserving the existing methods of booking taxis/PHVs via a phone call.

These findings highlight that taxi/PHV operators must retain multiple methods of booking journeys to ensure that taxi/PHV travel is accessible to different groups of disabled people.

Embedding accessibility across all elements of taxi/PHV journeys also means ensuring that complaint and reporting mechanisms are accessible to disabled people. Our research showed that many disabled customers experience accessibility barriers within the reporting system itself. For example, some participants highlighted that their local authority website is not easy to navigate, or there were no ways to make known to the authority their access requirements to make a complaint about a taxi/PHV driver.

Disabled people also said that the existing complaints process was burdensome for them. They instead proposed that local authorities should be more proactive to monitor and evaluate the quality of services. Our research also found that disabled people lacked confidence in the ability of local authorities to effectively address reported instances of discrimination.

“It’s not easy to find the taxi licensing complaint form. You’ve got to go through a little, little folder to find it, so that wouldn’t be very easy. The place was even worse because it was a call-back thing, ‘Can we call you?’ I’m deaf. I can’t use the phone, I said. But there’s no way on the website to say that I want alternative text. I want an alternative and reply by e-mail. But they have to ring me. I have to get my wife to answer the phone. Then the local authority representative was like, ‘Oh, we can’t talk to your wife. It has to be consent from you.’ I can’t hear you on the phone. How am I supposed to give my consent, you know?”

-Focus Group participant

Two-thirds

Two-thirds of respondents told us that they could not always access taxis/PHVs when they needed them



Closing policy and legislative loopholes

The new Taxis and Private Hire Vehicles (Disabled Persons) Act 2022, came into force on 28 June. The act, a Private Members' Bill introduced by Jeremy Wright QC MP, amends the Equality Act 2010 to help ensure disabled passengers can use taxi and PHV services without being discriminated against and that they receive appropriate assistance, wherever they travel, without being charged extra.

Yet disabled people and key informants from the taxi/PHV sector we spoke to in our research noted some further gaps in legislation. Participants noted that access for wheelchair users still depends on the provision of wheelchair accessible vehicles by taxi and PHV companies.

A weakness of existing legislation is that it sets no minimum requirements for providing wheelchair accessible vehicles, leaving these requirements to be set by the individual local authorities. As a result, taxi/PHV companies that do not have wheelchair accessible vehicles in their fleet are not required to offer alternative

vehicles to wheelchair users. In response, some of our research participants proposed setting a minimum standard for wheelchair accessible vehicles to be available at certain times, thereby ensuring there are always vehicles available for passengers.

Another gap identified by the research is the devolved nature of taxi/PHV licensing processes. These are cases of drivers licensed by one authority with less stringent licensing conditions, for example in terms of disability awareness training or accessible vehicle requirements, operating in a neighbouring authority with more stringent conditions. As a consequence, passengers living in the local authority with more stringent conditions may still encounter issues arising from lower driver training requirements or a mixed vehicle fleet.

It is critical that these gaps are closed in order to ensure taxi and PHV provision in the UK is accessible and available to all.

The change we're driving towards

- 1. Financial incentive schemes should be introduced for taxi/PHV companies to cover some of the upfront costs of purchasing sector-compliant (e.g., electric) WAVs, attract drivers back to the trade.**
 - Incentive schemes should be targeted to areas of the UK where there is a significant unmet need for WAVs (e.g., rural areas).
- 2. Disability awareness training should be mandatory across the UK for all new taxi/PHV staff (i.e. both operators and drivers) and existing staff should receive refresher training at regular intervals.**
 - Training should be differentiated by disability type and cover the needs of customers with different disability types. Training should also cover taxi/PHV provider obligations under the Taxi and Private Hire Vehicles (Disabled Persons) 2022 Act.
 - Drivers should be provided with supporting resources that they can refer to when undertaking professional duties (e.g., a good practice toolkit).
 - Disability awareness training programmes should be evaluated, and further research undertaken to identify particularly effective approaches.
- 3. The taxi/PHV sector should commit to developing a 'Disability Confident' Scheme, that enables disabled people to immediately identify which taxi/PHV firms are compliant with the Taxis and Private Hire Vehicles (Disabled Persons) Act (2022) whereby employers can display public facing badges, in response to meeting certain requirements. This may provide disabled people who have had negative experiences the confidence to return to the sector.**
 - The scheme should include a "voluntary disability reporting requirement", placing the obligation on taxi/PHV providers to monitor and achieve a certain level of customer satisfaction among disabled customers, to remain a member of the scheme.
 - Rollout of the scheme should be accompanied by a campaign to galvanize disabled customers to provide business to scheme members and encourage taxi/PHV companies to sign-up.

4. Taxi/PHV companies should retain, wherever possible, multiple methods of booking (e.g., via an app, via talking to a human operator) and paying for taxi/PHVs (e.g., via card linked to an app, via cash), to increase accessibility for different groups of disabled customers.

5. Regulatory bodies, including the Department for Transport and local authorities, should conduct a policy review to ascertain and address policy gaps in the provision of accessible taxi/PHV transportation. Consideration should also be given to how to reduce disability discrimination via supportive policies in the ride-hailing sector.

6. National guidance setting out the dimensions and specifications of a standard wheelchair, should be harmonised and routinely updated to account for the varying dimensions of powered and manual wheelchairs.



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