

# PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT

Fourth Delegated Legislation Committee

DRAFT PUBLIC SERVICE VEHICLES (ACCESSIBLE  
INFORMATION) REGULATIONS 2023

*Thursday 11 May 2023*

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**Monday 15 May 2023**

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**The Committee consisted of the following Members:**

*Chair:* SIR ROBERT SYMS

† Baillie, Siobhan (*Stroud*) (Con)  
 Berry, Sir Jake (*Rossendale and Darwen*) (Con)  
 † Courts, Robert (*Witney*) (Con)  
 † Day, Martyn (*Linlithgow and East Falkirk*) (SNP)  
 † Duguid, David (*Banff and Buchan*) (Con)  
 † Fletcher, Katherine (*South Ribble*) (Con)  
 † Greenwood, Lilian (*Nottingham South*) (Lab)  
 † Hammond, Stephen (*Wimbledon*) (Con)  
 † Holden, Mr Richard (*Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport*)  
 † Lavery, Ian (*Wansbeck*) (Lab)

† Lightwood, Simon (*Wakefield*) (Lab/Co-op)  
 † Longhi, Marco (*Dudley North*) (Con)  
 † Mullan, Dr Kieran (*Crewe and Nantwich*) (Con)  
 Sultana, Zarah (*Coventry South*) (Lab)  
 † Whitley, Mick (*Birkenhead*) (Lab)  
 Winter, Beth (*Cynon Valley*) (Lab)  
 † Wood, Mike (*Dudley South*) (Con)

Aaron Kulakiewicz, Ian Bradshaw, *Committee Clerks*

† **attended the Committee**

## Fourth Delegated Legislation Committee

Thursday 11 May 2023

[SIR ROBERT SYMS *in the Chair*]

### Draft Public Service Vehicles (Accessible Information) Regulations 2023

11.31 am

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Richard Holden):** I beg to move,

That the Committee has considered the draft Public Service Vehicles (Accessible Information) Regulations 2023.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Robert. The draft regulations, made under powers conferred by the Equality Act 2010 as amended by the Bus Services Act 2017, will require operators of local bus and coach services in Great Britain to provide audible and visible information on board.

A lack of on-board information on buses and coaches can make it impossible for many disabled people to travel independently, confidently or, indeed, safely. I wonder how many times right hon. and hon. Members have boarded a bus in an unfamiliar area or late at night, unsure how they will recognise their intended location when they reach it. They might ask the driver or other passengers for assistance, but the chances are that they will spend the journey anxious about missing their stop and being stranded in an unfamiliar location. That is probably an occasional experience for many, but for millions of disabled people it can be an everyday reality every time they travel.

Visually impaired passengers may be unable to identify bus stops as they pass them. Autistic people or passengers with cognitive impairments may need help to track their progress along a route. Wheelchair users travelling backwards in a wheelchair space may not even have a clear view of their location. I know that bus drivers up and down the country try their best to provide passengers with the necessary help, but the fact is that remembering to alert a passenger in time to alight may sometimes slip their mind, given the multiple other tasks that they must perform.

A 2014 survey by the charity Guide Dogs UK found that 70% of visually impaired respondents had missed a stop, having asked the driver to let them know when to get off, when the driver simply forgot because of all their other tasks. Disabled people with other impairments will probably relate to that unpleasant experience. Such incidents curtail the independence of disabled people affected and are likely to dissuade many people from boarding a local bus in the first place. Similar anxieties can have an impact on the confidence of women and girls, as well as other people made vulnerable while travelling, who might find themselves in unsafe situations or unsure where to alight, particularly in the evenings. Ultimately, that lack of confidence may prevent people from accessing the education, employment or leisure activities that vital bus services support.

What is the solution? Members who take London buses will know that on-board route and location information is nearly ubiquitous in the capital. In places such as Brighton, Blackpool, Edinburgh and Cardiff, passengers have also benefited from the roll-out of such technology, thanks to the efforts of their local operators; I recently did so myself up in County Durham, on the X15 between Lanchester and Durham.

Despite the benefits for passengers and the good work of some operators, however, the provision of such information remains far too inconsistent across the country. Since 2017, provision in Great Britain has crept up from 36% to 43%. That means that in practice disabled people still cannot board a bus with any certainty that the information that they need to travel with confidence will be provided as standard. With proven, time-tested technology already on the network in some towns and cities, it cannot be right that disabled people in so many communities are still being left behind. It is time for a change.

**Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab):** Guide Dogs UK encourages MPs to put a blindfold on, get on a bus and experience what people with auditory and visual impairments have to experience every time. It really is—I was going to say “eye-opening”—something we should all do to experience what disabled people suffer almost daily. Does the Minister agree that we should encourage MPs to take such journeys to experience what disabled people experience?

**Mr Holden:** I thank the hon. Member for that important point. As I said, many people will have had the experience of missing their bus stop because of a lack of information. I sometimes miss my stop just looking out of the window at the beautiful County Durham countryside. Missing their stop is an everyday occurrence for people who do not have the information to hand, because they are reliant on some senses but not others. The hon. Member makes an important point, as Guide Dogs UK has done with its campaign.

To level up services across the country, the draft regulations will create a new requirement for operators of local services in Great Britain to provide accessible on-board information. They specify that that must include information about the route, the next stop, route termination, diversions and hail-and-ride sections. The regulations are the product of engagement with stakeholders representing disabled people, bus and coach operators and specialists in the provision of information, as well as our statutory advisers, the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee. They attempt to strike a balance between delivering meaningful benefits for passengers and minimising negative impacts on operators. They are about setting the outcomes that disabled people need, but leaving it to operators to determine how they should be met.

Passengers will be able to expect a minimum standard for on-board information across the country, helping them to travel with confidence. The limited number of technical requirements in the draft regulations, such as the minimum volume level, are intended to support that minimum standard across the board. Meanwhile, operators will be able to choose the technology that suits their business and their vehicles. We have already ruled out the option of forcing passengers to rely on smartphones

to access information, as disabled people are much less likely than non-disabled people to own them, according to recent Ofcom research. However, on the wider question of technology, we recognise that one size does not fit all. We are certainly not in the business of telling operators to choose one brand of on-board system over another.

Although I am hopeful that most operators will embrace the new requirements as an opportunity to improve the service available to all passengers, I am conscious that, for some, any additional expense may be concerning. We have therefore designed the policy with the smallest, most marginal operators in mind. In particular, we have allowed more time for operators of older vehicles to comply. We have also exempted most community transport, including all vehicles operated under section 19 permits and all existing vehicles used under a section 22 permit.

Even with the proposed exemptions in place, by October 2026 almost every service that people use on a day-to-day basis will be expected to provide accessible on-board information under the regulations. In fact, with compliance focused initially on new and nearly new vehicles, passengers should begin to see and hear a difference from October next year. To be clear, that difference will be experienced by passengers across England, Scotland and Wales. We listened to stakeholders in all three nations while developing the regulations, and we expect the regulations to support independent, confident travel for disabled passengers and others throughout Great Britain.

To help the industry to understand the new requirements, we will issue guidance under section 181C of the Equality Act 2010. That will include advice about managing potential conflicts between passenger needs, as well as opportunities to go even further in making services accessible.

I will explain the enforcement processes for the draft regulations. We know that operators will want to do the right thing and that they will see the provision of audible and visible information as an integral element of a high-quality and accessible customer experience. If something goes wrong, however, passenger complaints should in the first instance be dealt with by the relevant operator. If they remain unresolved, they can be escalated to Bus Users UK or London TravelWatch for arbitration and potentially referred to the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency. The DVSA will investigate alleged breaches, referring them to traffic commissioners in appropriate locations across Great Britain.

We want to work with the industry to establish accessible information as a mainstay on our buses. That will help to build the confidence that is so critical to getting people back on to local transport services, which is something that hon. Members have been in touch with me about. They are particularly concerned about concessionary fare users, many of whom will be disabled people who lack the confidence to come back on to the network. We hope that this will be a move in the right direction.

**Siobhan Baillie** (Stroud) (Con): I thank the Minister and the Department for this very important legislation. It is common-sense and compassionate, so it is much needed. I am interested to know about the Minister's discussions with the industry. As it stands, about 46% of

buses have audible and visible information on board. For the 54%, what is the likely timescale for getting this stuff implemented and in action? Will there be a review to make sure that we are holding people's feet to the flames to get things happening?

**Mr Holden:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point. There are three deadlines in place: any new buses coming online by October 2024 must have the required information, buses built between October 2014 and September 2019 must have it by 1 October 2025, and pre-2014 buses must have it by 1 October 2026. It will be done in stages, but they will be quite quick stages over the next three years.

As I said, on a recent bus journey in County Durham I saw operators starting to retrofit services in anticipation of the deadlines. We expect compliance to be ahead of schedule, but we have important measures in place that can go right the way through to traffic commissioners, who will decide whether people can operate bus services at all if there is non-compliance. Having spoken at length to the Secretary of State, I am hopeful that we will not see non-compliance, however, and I know that the Department is engaged at length on the issue. I do not want to see people losing licences; I want to see people getting on board as quickly as possible.

We remain committed to the simple but powerful idea, set out in the inclusive transport strategy, that disabled people should have the same access to transport as everyone else. The draft regulations will level up local services, particularly outside London, and will encourage more people back on to the buses and support disabled people to travel confidently and independently across the whole of Great Britain. They will also have knock-on consequences for the rest of the population. Hopefully, providing access to extra information at people's fingertips will encourage more people back on to our bus network. I commend the regulations to the Committee.

11.42 am

**Simon Lightwood** (Wakefield) (Lab/Co-op): Good morning, Sir Robert. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship and to speak about this really important statutory instrument.

The SI will require bus and coach operators to provide information to passengers throughout their journey, such as the route they are on, the stopping places and when they have reached their final destination, and to inform them of any diversions. It will make a big difference to all who travel on buses—some 2.8 billion passenger journeys were made last year—but disabled and vulnerable passengers will see a particular improvement. That is why Labour welcomes the SI and will support it today.

However, I must note that we have waited a long time for this announcement. The Government announced their first partnership in 2019, with £2 million to provide audio and visual equipment for buses, yet as their own press release says, only 30% of buses outside London provide such information at the moment. That is just not good enough. It leaves 70% of services to cover, and the Government have announced £4.65 million in funding to finish the job. Disability charities such as Disability Rights UK are concerned that the money will not stretch far enough to deliver the accessibility that buses

[Simon Lightwood]

need: grants are lower in real terms than they were in the last round, and our bus fleet in England is the oldest since records began.

I recognise that under the ZEBRA—zero-emission bus regional areas—scheme, the new funded buses will have to provide audio and visual information as standard, which I strongly welcome. However, as I have said repeatedly, the scheme is being delivered far too slowly: only six buses are actually on the road. It would be helpful, in the context of the wider announcement, for the ZEBRA scheme to be speeded up in order to deliver the ambition set out by the Government in the national bus strategy.

Will the Minister share the details of any assessment that has been done on reaching that £4.65 million figure? Does he intend it to cover the remaining 70% of buses that need it? I note that under the previous guidance, wheelchairs were not given the extra display panels because they often face backwards on buses. I would be very interested to hear whether the 30% of buses that have already been covered will be upgraded further to add that extra level of accessibility.

Although Labour welcomes this legislation, we remain concerned about the cuts to bus services over which this Conservative Government have presided. More than 1,100 routes have been cut in England over the past year. In some parts of the country such as Leicestershire and Hertfordshire, nearly half of bus miles have been axed over the past five years. Bus users are being failed by this Tory Government, who are out of ideas on the reforms needed in the sector. That is why Labour's plans for handing power and control of our bus services back to the communities who depend on them are so crucial.

Labour agrees that these changes will improve accessibility on our buses and coaches. We therefore welcome this SI, but we will continue to call on this Government to give communities more control over the bus services on which they depend and to speed up the pace of delivering on the commitments in the national bus strategy.

11.46 am

**Mr Holden:** I thank everybody who has attended today, and I thank the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Wakefield, for welcoming the proposals. A couple of the highly charged political points that he made at the end of his speech were, I thought, slightly disappointing. The Government have put more than £2.1 billion into supporting the bus network since the start of the pandemic. I have been involved personally, as I know previous Ministers have been, in signing off huge devolution deals, which never happened under the last Labour Government. The deals will support enhanced partnership working or franchising right across the country, including for the Mayor of Greater Manchester and in Merseyside, along with the bus service improvement

plans that we have put in place right across the country, providing millions and millions of pounds for local bus services.

In answer to the specific question about wheelchair users, the requirements will come into force for forward-facing wheelchair spaces from 1 October this year, and for all wheelchair spaces from October 2024. That is being phased in with the other requirements for the older buses. I hope that that addresses the hon. Gentleman's specific points.

Before I draw my comments to a close, let me reiterate some of the strengths of the draft regulations, which are grounded in the idea that disabled people should be able to move around this country as easily as anybody else and that where barriers remain, we will challenge them at every opportunity. They also recognise the tremendous experience and expertise in our bus and coach industry and seek to harness them to provide proportionate solutions.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned grant funding. We are providing £4.65 million for the smallest operators: that is targeted at those with 20 vehicles or fewer, and the cost estimates stand at about £2,500 to £5,500 for each of those vehicles. We estimate that the cost to the industry overall will be £8.6 million for the retrofitting, but we expect to see some of that cost being offset by increased use among disabled passengers. There will be an uplift for the industry as a result of having that in place, but we recognise that for smaller operators there may be up-front capital costs that affect their cash flow, which is why we are providing extra money. The legislation supports the idea that accessibility should be a universal right, wherever anyone lives in Great Britain.

May I say how immensely grateful I am for the sustained and pragmatic input of all our stakeholders, the devolved Administrations and particularly the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee in helping us to develop the draft regulations? In particular, the work of Guide Dogs UK has been invaluable to understanding the case for change and the human impact of a lack of accessibility and accessible information.

The draft regulations address one of the most pervasive and persistent barriers to accessibility on our bus network today. Once they come into force, they will represent a significant step forward in the usability of our local transport networks and will provide a big, tangible improvement for millions of passengers. Most of all, they will unlock the benefits of buses for disabled people up and down Great Britain. I hope that members of the Committee are looking forward to seeing and hearing the difference on their local buses in the years ahead. Once again, I commend the regulations to the Committee.

*Question put and agreed to.*

11.50 am

*Committee rose.*



