



Road to Nowhere

An investigation into the problems faced by bus passengers who are blind or partially sighted and the isolation caused.



Road to Nowhere: Executive Summary

Public transport plays a vital role in helping many people, including disabled people, to become more independent. Research has revealed that although disabled people travel less, they are more likely to use public transport.



Lack of information once they are on board a bus deters the two million people who are blind or partially sighted in the United Kingdom from using buses. This is because they are unable to do things that many of us take for granted, such as being able to identify their stop. Guide Dogs conducted a survey entitled **“Road to Nowhere”** to uncover the extent of the problem. This was a follow up to the **“Forgotten Passengers”** survey conducted by the charity in 2012 which found that **89% of blind and partially sighted people had missed their stop because they didn’t know where they were on a journey.**

The **“Road to Nowhere”** survey was conducted between October 2012 and March 2013. Over **450 people** responded from across the UK, including blind and partially sighted people (including non-guide dog owners), people with hearing problems and wheelchair users. The statistics in this Executive Summary are drawn from the **370 people** who identified themselves as either guide dog owners or blind or partially sighted (but not necessarily a guide dog owner). Some respondents had dual sensory impairments with 45 of the 370 people stating they were also deaf or hearing impaired.

If you are interested in the findings for all respondents, or a selection (example, for respondents with a hearing impairment, or those who use a wheelchair) please email campaigns@guidedogs.org.uk

Bus Operator Results

The most frequently used bus operator amongst the respondents was First Bus, closely followed by Stagecoach and Arriva. Some of the findings are highlighted in this summary, but we will be happy to share detailed results and comments from bus users with individual operators on request. Please email campaigns@guidedogs.org.uk for further information.

Regional Results

Survey respondents were asked to identify those areas in the UK where they travelled by bus at least once a month. Regional variations are not highlighted in this report, but if local authorities wish to discover more about the results from their area, please email campaigns@guidedogs.org.uk

Blind bus passengers are on the Road to Nowhere

Only 5% of blind and partially sighted respondents described their usual on board experience as excellent, with 18% describing it as poor. These results were consistent when comparing with the survey as a whole, suggesting that poor experiences are commonplace for disabled people.

“ **Most bus drivers park 2-3 feet from the kerb making it difficult to board the bus.** ”

Guide dog owner, London



The survey identified some clear problems with bus drivers which go part of the way to explaining why the passenger experience is so poor.

The difficulties begin even before people board a bus. A lowly 25% of drivers always pull right up to the kerb. Failing to do this makes it more difficult for passengers who are blind or partially sighted to board. Only 55% of drivers always say number of the bus they are driving when asked. Once on board, only 17% of drivers always wait for blind or partially sighted passengers to find a seat before pulling off. To try and combat some of these easily-solved problems, we produced a “**Tips for Bus Drivers**” leaflet in 2012. Bus operators can obtain copies of the leaflet by emailing campaigns@guidedogs.org.uk

Some 54% of blind and partially sighted survey respondents reported that they have missed their stop because drivers have refused to agree to tell them when they had reached their stop. This is a shocking statistic, and explains why so many people who are blind or partially sighted lack confidence in their local bus services and decide not to use them. It is a sharp rise from a year ago, when the “**Forgotten Passengers**” survey found that 29% of people who are blind or partially sighted had been refused help by drivers. At the time, this was a worryingly high figure, so the rise in refusals from bus drivers is a real cause for concern to Guide Dogs.

The only guaranteed way to overcome the problem of passengers missing their stops is with the introduction of audio visual “next stop” and “final destination” on board announcements. This would remove the responsibility for informing passengers about their stops from the drivers and leave them free to concentrate on driving the bus safely. We urge the Government to include compulsory audio visual announcements in all Public Service Vehicles Accessibility Regulations (PSVAR) to ensure all buses across the UK are talking. This would bring buses in line with other forms of public transport, such as trains.

“ We have a very good bus service here in Medway and I would like to take full advantage of it. I feel this is not possible because the thought of getting on the bus and not really knowing where I am going causes me great distress. When I use the train service, I board with confidence as the comforting sound of the regular announcements allows me to do other things e.g. read my book, chat to other passengers and totally relax without having to worry about getting off at the right stop. May our bus service soon be in line with the excellent train service! ”

Guide dog owner, Kent

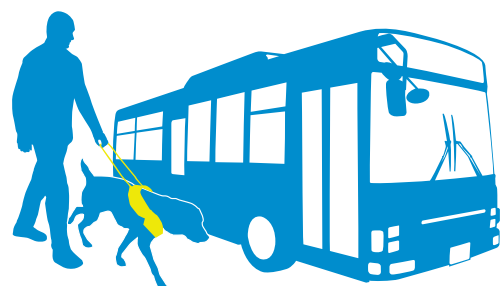


Disappointing results from three of the largest bus operators in the UK.

	First Bus	Stagecoach	Arriva
Bus drivers refusing to tell passengers who are blind and partially sighted where to get off the bus:	57% had experienced this	54% had experienced this	49% had experienced this
Bus drivers pulling into the kerb to make it easier for blind and partially sighted passengers to board:	Only 13% of drivers always pull into the kerb	Only 17% of drivers always pull into the kerb	Only 21% of drivers always pull into the kerb
Bus drivers telling people who are blind and partially sighted the number of the bus they are driving:	50% of drivers always communicate this information	55% of drivers always communicate this information	59% of drivers always communicate this information
Waiting for people who are blind and partially sighted to find a seat before driving off:	Only 9% of drivers always wait	Only 13% of drivers always wait	Only 20% of drivers always wait

“Some drivers can be kind and helpful. Others can be inconsiderate and drive off fast, resulting in me and my guide dog falling over”.

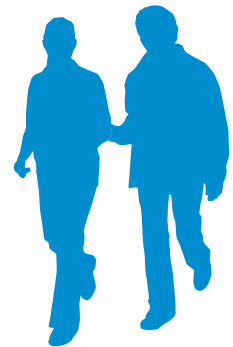
Guide dog owner, Shrewsbury





“ I have missed my stop before because the driver drove past my stop without saying anything to let me know. I once asked a driver for the number of the stand I was at and he completely ignored me, very rude! These experiences are part of my apprehensions currently. ” Lee, Worcester (guide dog owner)

The survey will be worrying for bus companies who claim that their drivers are trained to assist people who are blind or partially sighted. We are campaigning to persuade the Department for Transport to reassess the recent decision to postpone the implementation of the driver training elements of EU regulation No. 181/2011 for up to five years.



70% of respondents who are blind or partially sighted said that travelling by bus causes them difficulty in visiting places. Furthermore, **63%** of blind and partially sighted people choose to stay at home on at least a couple of occasions each month rather than using the bus. **I would feel more confident in using buses by receiving accurate information via audio visual announcements enabling me to have confidence in my travelling.** Guide dog owner, West Midlands

When asked how they felt as a result of the difficulties they encountered when travelling by bus, **81%** of respondents who are blind or partially sighted said they felt unable to enjoy the freedom that others take for granted. Other common answers included anger and isolation.

“ I live in a rural community, (and) none of my buses have audio announcements, which makes it difficult for me to travel alone and feel entirely comfortable and free of anxiety, particularly during quieter times of the day and especially when not knowing if the bus stop is a ‘request only’ stop. ” Guide dog owner, Kent



These damning results clearly show that improvements are needed to allow people who are blind or partially sighted the same freedom from isolation as other bus users.

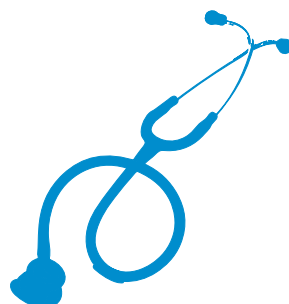
“ Often the problem with travelling on buses is when the stop is not announced (which is often) I have missed my stop and this makes me disorientated and isolated especially if there is no one around to assist. Bus drivers just let me get off without offering further assistance. ” Guide dog owner, Nottingham

The problems don't end there for people who are blind or partially sighted. The knock on effects of bus services that don't cater to the needs of people who are blind or partially sighted extend to employment prospects, with

- 9% missing job interviews,
- 14% turning down jobs,
- 34% being late for work,
- 2% and even losing a job.

“ I was travelling on a Stagecoach service at around 1:30pm. The weather was bad - absolutely throwing it down with rain. I was going to a team meeting and I asked the driver to tell me when we got to my stop and he agreed. The bus wasn't busy but still we had gone 3 stops beyond where I needed to be before the driver remembered. So I had to get off and walk back. By the time I got there I was soaked to my skin and very cold. The end result was I ended up with a bad cold that kept me off work for 5 days. ”
Guide dog owner, Grimsby

In addition to hampering employment prospects, people who are blind or partially sighted are having their health put at risk.



35% of blind and partially sighted respondents said that the prospect of travelling by bus put them off attending doctors or hospital appointments.

“ Numerous times I have asked the driver to let me know when my stop is due. Unfortunately these people are so busy they forget, which causes me to go past my stop by quite a distance. So much so, I have to go into the city centre and come back again. Often I have to rely on taxis because it’s much safer, especially at night and I can’t rely on the bus driver to tell me where my stop is. ” Guide dog owner, Northern Ireland

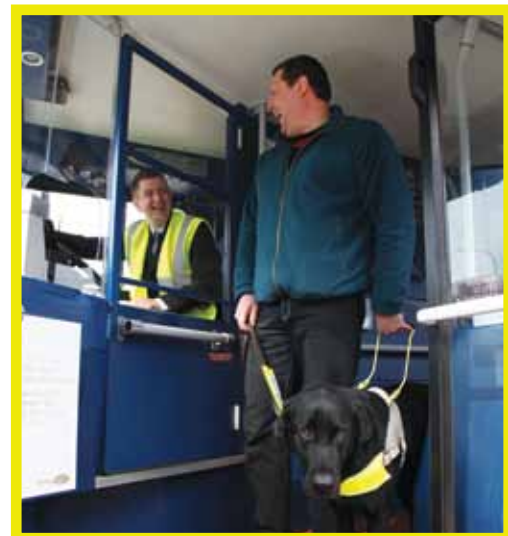
As well as making it more difficult to find and hold down a job, the alternative to using the bus is an expensive one. 67% of respondents who are blind or partially sighted spent money on taxi fares because they didn't trust their local bus services, with 14% spending between £30 and £50 a month, and 10% spending more than £50 each month on taxis.



The survey illustrates that, despite claims to the contrary, bus companies are failing to make adequate provision for the needs of people who are blind or partially sighted who want to use their services. Audio visual next stop and final destination announcements would give people who are blind or partially sighted much greater confidence when using buses. It would also allow the bus driver to concentrate fully on driving the vehicle, and help many other groups of bus users, including tourists.

“I would just like to say Brighton & Hove drivers are very good and most of the buses I use have audio & visual announcements”

Guide dog owner, Brighton



A new pot of cash has been made available by the Government to help bus operators in England make on board passenger information more accessible, and we urge them to use it. Transport Minister Norman Baker announced a new Better Bus Areas fund for bus companies to improve passengers' experiences in February 2013, and guidance issued suggests applications need to consider the impact upon disabled people as well as setting out how their applications will increase bus patronage. It is clear that on board audio visual announcements will make bus travel easier for people who are blind or partially sighted as well as other people with disabilities and the population at large, many of whom will currently favour other modes of transport such as a private car or taxi.

“Talking buses would take so much stress out of travelling. It would also help people who are unfamiliar with the route.” Guide dog owner, Leeds



Guide Dogs recommendations:

1. Government to amend the **PSVAR** and the **PSVAR** (Northern Ireland) to require audio visual next stop and final destination information systems on new buses across the UK.

2. Local transport authorities in England (in conjunction with local bus operators) applying to the Government “**Better Bus Areas**” fund to include provision for the cost of installing audio visual next stop and final destination information systems on their buses within their application . Applications must be submitted by **June 21 2013**.



The application form is available at www.gov.uk/government/publications/bus-service-operators-grant-reform-and-better-bus-areas

3. The Department for Transport to reassess urgently their recent decision to postpone the implementation of the driver training elements of EU regulation No. 181/2011 for up to four years.

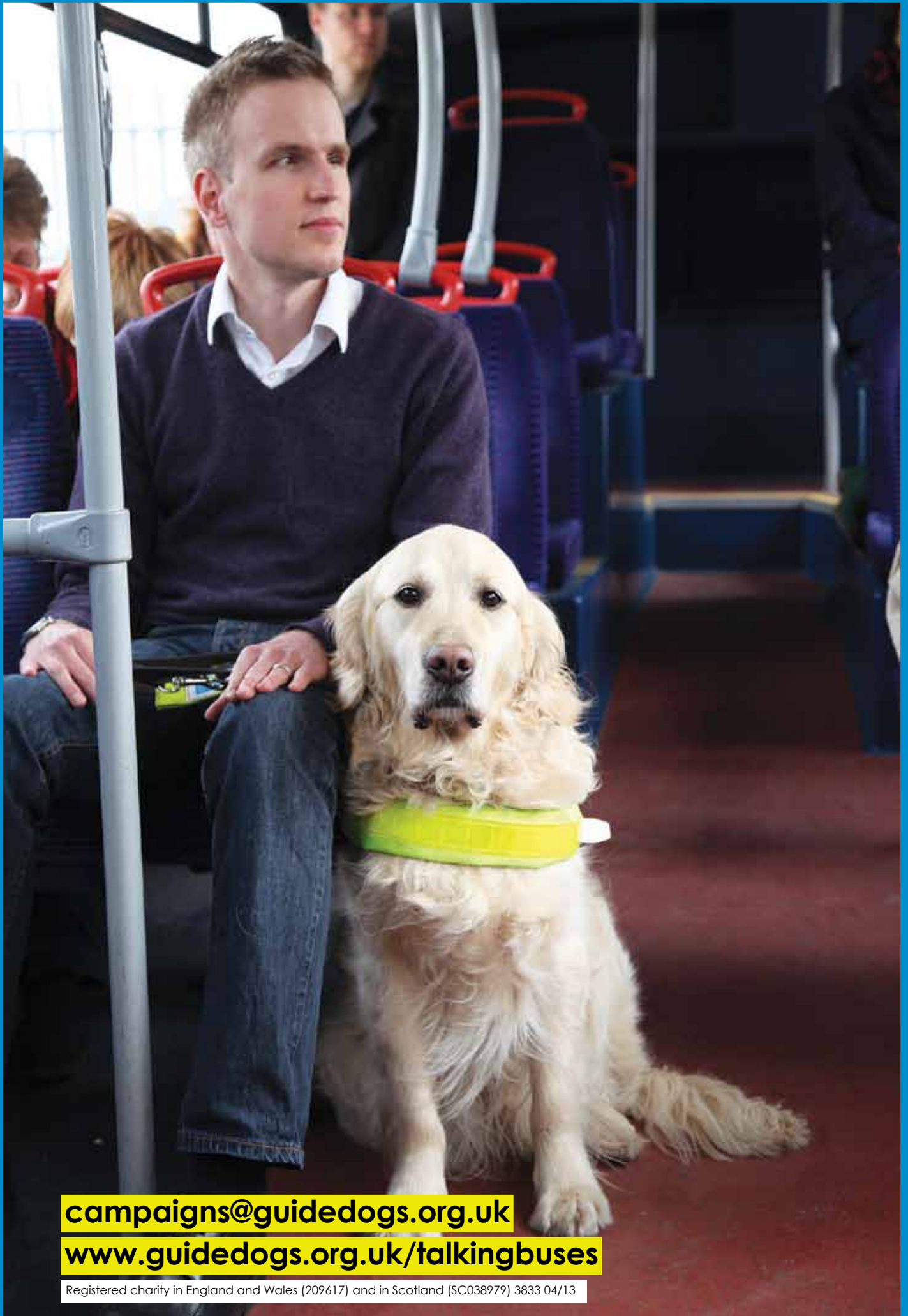


We have produced a “**Tips for Bus Drivers**” leaflet. We are happy to arrange informal question and answer sessions for drivers and offer sighted guiding training for drivers.

To discuss the simple steps they can take to improve their driver training, bus operators should contact campaigns@guidedogs.org.uk

Talking
Buses:
making
buses
more
accessible
for people
who are
blind or
partially
sighted.





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