

Thistle Assistance Card

Disability Equality Scotland briefing paper



## Overview

Disability Equality Scotland is a national charity working to achieve full access and inclusion for disabled people in Scotland.

We promote access in its widest sense. This includes access to the built and natural environment and access to the same opportunities as are enjoyed by others in our communities thus promoting a life of dignity, respect and independence. This extends beyond physical access to include access to information, access to inclusive communication and inclusion in decision-making, whether with planners over inclusive design or transport providers about accessible travel.

Our aim is for every disabled person to have the opportunity to participate in a fulfilling life and for their voice(s) to be heard.

We represent the views of individuals with any type of impairment, as well as disability organisations and groups who share our values.

We are a membership organisation and as such listen to the views of disabled people and champion on their behalf. We work to influence the policies of the Scottish Government, which affect how disabled people live, and work to encourage others to be inclusive and informed in their attitudes towards disabled people.

We are also the umbrella organisation for all disability Access Panels in Scotland and the principal provider of support and guidance to the Access Panels presently representing disabled persons at a local level throughout Scotland. Access Panels are committed to improving access and equality in its widest form, which means access to the physical environment,

Education, Housing, Health, Transport, Leisure & Recreation and Social Justice amongst other areas.

## **Thistle Assistance Card**

Thistle Assistance is an initiative to help people feel safer and more comfortable when using public transport. The Thistle Assistance card and app are recognised by many public transport operators across Scotland, from buses and trains to planes and ferries. Passengers simply show the personalised card or app to transport staff and they should understand what additional assistance you require.

The Thistle Assistance card and app are free to use for anyone who needs it. The card and app symbols and instructions encompass a range of disabilities and impairments. It allows passengers to discreetly communicate what additional needs they might have to transport staff.

A new website will soon be launched to promote Thistle Assistance. Ahead of the launch, the Accessibility Team at Transport Scotland wanted to find out the current level of awareness and usage of the Thistle Assistance Card.

To meet this objective, Disability Equality Scotland ran a weekly poll of its members on the topic of the Thistle Assistance Card. The aim was to understand whether Disability Equality Scotland's members had firstly heard of the Thistle Assistance Card, whether they were a current user of the Thistle Assistance Card and if so, did they find the card useful in accessing public transport.

There was also a follow up question about whether Disability Equality Scotland members knew of any other tools to help people travel more confidently. Here we sought examples of other card or badge schemes.

This paper will share the results of each of these questions and present verbatim comments to qualify responses where appropriate.

The results of this survey will be shared with The Accessibility Team at Transport Scotland, with SEStran, the Regional Transport Partnership with responsibility for the Thistle Assistance Card and with the Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland.

For the week commencing Monday 25 November 2019, Disability Equality Scotland posed the following questions:

**“Have you heard about the Thistle Assistance Card?”**

We received a significant number of responses (243 respondents). The results were as follows:

- YES – 69% (167 respondents)
- NO – 31% (76 respondents)

**If yes, are you a user of the Thistle Assistance Card?**

The results here are slightly skewed in that 175 respondents answered this question; more than the 167 respondents who indicated that they had heard of the Thistle Assistance Card. The results were:

- YES – 40% (71 respondents)
- NO – 60% (105 respondents)

**If you are a Thistle Assistance Card user, do you find the Thistle Assistance Card useful in accessing public transport?**

Again, slightly more respondents (81 respondents) answered this question, than the 71 respondents who indicated that they were current users. However, 17% of respondents to this question said that the Thistle Assistance Card was useful in accessing public transport.

- YES – 17% (14 respondents)
- NO – 83% (67 respondents)

This question allowed respondents to qualify their comments. The following verbatim comments

**Yes – I find the Thistle Assistance Card useful in accessing public transport (17%)**

### **Dependent on driver/transport staff**

While some respondents indicated they found the card useful, this came with the caveat that it was dependent on the driver or transport staff, how they dealt with the customer with the Card.

“Although it is very dependent on the driver you get.”

“It’s useful sometimes but most of the time not. Lots of drivers don’t recognise it.”

“A lot depends on the driver.”

“Though it depends on the driver.”

“I’m lucky that although we don’t have many buses it’s normally the same driver so she knows the help I need and nothing is any bother.”

“Sometimes but it depends on the driver. Some don’t know what the card is and think you are trying to pay with it.”

“It lets the driver know I am deaf. It’s not initially obvious.”

### **Use on different modes of transport**

One respondent said that they were not aware that the card could be used on the train, but that they book assistance to ensure their needs are met when travelling.

“I don’t know you could use it on the train and passenger assistance never mention it though during the train journey you’re lucky to see a conductor now so as I book assistance when travelling by train they already know my needs.”

## Quality of the card

Several respondents commented on the quality of the card and indicated a preference for a plastic-style card which would be more durable than the cardboard version.

“You need to keep the card but make them plastic like a credit card. Mine keep disintegrating or I wash it in my pocket by mistake and it’s hard to find somewhere to get a new one.”

“Replacement cards can be hard to come by and when I tell friends I am never sure where they can get one. I got mine at Transport Scotland’s Accessible Travel conference. Could they not be available to order online through the accessible travel hub? This would make sense. Plastic cards please, links the bus pass or saltire card.”

“The paper cards deteriorate quickly, and it can take time to get a replacement. Can they be made available in plastic credit card style to last longer?”

“It is useful but needs to be a plastic card. The paper ones keep falling apart and I need to go to the bus station to get a new leaflet and card. Plastic credit card style cards would last longer and be more durable.”

One respondent suggested that the card could be used to advertise additional information, such as assistance numbers or link to the Hate Crime Charter which is currently being piloted.

“With the launch of the hate crime pilot why don’t you use the back of the thistle card to have freephone assistance numbers in the event of hate crime of feeling unsafe when using public transport. This would tie in both with one card.”

## No– I do not find the Thistle Assistance Card useful in accessing public transport (83%)

The comments from our members commonly fell into distinct categories. For ease, we have tried to group comments together under the following headings:

### Driver awareness

Here our members discussed the attitude and behaviour of the transport staff, most commonly bus drivers and experiences indicated that often drivers were not aware of the card and had little disability awareness.

“Hit and miss depending on bus drivers and stagecoach don’t want to know.”

“Doesn’t make any difference to the accessibility of transport or the help you get from bus drivers i.e. normally none!”

“I need my mobility scooter to get out. It’s quite small but I can’t take it on the bus which limits where I can go. A card that allowed me to take my scooter on the bus would be more helpful. Most bus drivers just laugh when you show them the thistle card. It’s pointless. Sort the other stuff.”

“Showing the transport staff the thistle Card doesn’t make them have a good understanding of you need. Decent awareness training involving disabled people would.”

“Sometimes you get a good driver and it helps. Most times it doesn’t.”

“The communication is hardly discreet when bus driver question what the card is in a loud voice and shout out your disability for all to hear. I stopped using it because it was becoming embarrassing. Why can’t the assistance on buses be like what you get when you go by train? They have got it right.”

“No. I think a lot is to do with your bus driver and not the card.”

“I mainly use First Bus and their drivers are terrible. I have been in Edinburgh and the drivers there are much better. Maybe to do with needing to be nicer to tourists as I seen some being tipped by tourists and you don’t get this anywhere else. I do tip taxi drivers, but they tend to give a better

service. I have never thought about tipping a bus driver. As we are paying a fare should we need to tip to get a good service?”

“I don’t see how a new website will work as the card is hopeless. It’s the attitude of bus drivers that needs dealt with. Some are terrible and very few actually help.”

“The explanation of how the thistle card works is not accurate in real life. It doesn’t work specially with buses. Assistance is good on trains and with ferries but travelling by bus as a disabled person is terrible and very few drivers are good at helping.”

“You see simply show the card to staff and they will help. This is not the case on most occasions they don’t help. They don’t wait until you sit down before driving away and when you press the button to get off they get impatient if your walking is slow as they are running to timetables. It’s worse if it’s their last run before heading to the bus depot because they don’t want kept late as they don’t get paid.”

“Doesn’t really make any difference. Better training for drivers is the answer.”

“Some drivers are helpful. Some not so.”

“Many drivers don’t know what it is so a bit pointless.”

“I didn’t find it helped that much and there is still a lot of confusion about travelling with my guide dog, mainly when by bus - rail seems okay. The thistle card doesn’t help at all with this.”

“I didn’t know you could use the thistle card on trains and ferries. That said a lot of bus drivers claim they haven’t seen it so maybe we start with driver awareness.”

“I am visually impaired and have tried to use it and then asked the driver to let me know when it is my stop as there are no announcements on the bus but the driver always forgets to tell me and I often miss my stop. This is very frustrating as I want to travel independently but this makes it so hard.”

“Most drivers don’t recognise the thistle card but if you ask them to give you time to sit down they do.”

“Bus drivers don’t take any notice. It’s their attitude that needs to change.”

“I tried this on my local bus in Falkirk from California to Bathgate but the driver hadn’t seen the card before. My daughter was with me and tried to explain but the driver wasn’t really interested.”

“Doesn’t make any difference. Good disability awareness training would be much better and then every passenger would get a better service and the drivers were more aware of people’s needs.”

“Bus drivers are not very helpful. Always in. Hurry to drive off.”

“Really depends on the driver and how helpful they are. Don’t think the card or showing it makes much difference and most don’t know about it or what it’s for.”

“I don’t know why they have a bit on the back for extra information because the bus drivers don’t even look at the front of the card and most don’t know what it is.”

“Most bus drivers don’t know about it and it is embarrassing to explain in front of other passengers.”

“I have tried using it as I need time to get to a seat and also to put my money away as I need to put this away before I can use my stick to walk. Even when I have tried using the cars drivers never give me enough time. Sometimes other passengers help though.”

“The real crux is good driver training. If this was right and buses were designed right we wouldn’t need a card to declare our disability.”

“It really depends on the helpfulness and mood of the bus driver on the day. If you get a good driver then help us good but some are rude and impatient even if you try to use your assistance card.”

“I have an indication that I should be on a seat before the bus moves however it very rarely happens.”

“It’s not backed by awareness training for bus drivers.”



## Inaccessible transport

For many of our members, the Thistle Assistance card made little difference to their ability to travel independently, because issues remained with the accessibility of public transport. For example, wheelchair users have difficulty accessing the bus when there is only one available space. Verbatim comments are below.

“It’s the whole public transport system we need to get more accessible, especially buses, types, routes and costs of bus fares and train fares. The card doesn’t have an impact on any of this and until these issues are sorted transport will continue not to be accessible for disabled people.”

“It’s the accessibility of transport and lack of buses that’s the problem and a card won’t fix that.”

“The thistle card doesn’t make transport more accessible. Only transformational change will.”

“The card does not make any different as public transport is in the main not accessible. It also costs too much particularly the train and if you don’t have a bus pass.”

“Problem is the accessibility of the transport, buses, and a thistle card doesn’t fix that. Also many drivers don’t bother and just look at you if you show them the card. I stopped using mine.”

“Showing the thistle card only helps with a handful of drivers. That assuming you can get on the bus as the often don’t let you on (wheelchair user) if someone is sitting in the space or a buggy is there. Even if you have a thistle card so doesn’t make any difference.”

“I am a wheelchair user and often can’t get on the bus as the 1 space is taken. The card can’t help with this.”

“It’s the basics that need to be right. No point in the thistle cards when buses are not accessible and some bus drivers have no training or awareness of your needs. You need to get the basics right first.”

“Doesn’t make any difference to having very few buses and not being able to get on the ones that do service the route because they are coaches.”

## Transport in rural areas

Respondents living in rural areas of Scotland had concerns over the frequency and accessibility of the available transport. Comments here relate to the infrequency of the service being more of a concern than using the Thistle Assistance card.

“I live in the North of Scotland and buses are few and far between (mainly coaches that are not accessible as I have poor mobility but don’t use a wheelchair). I have tried using the thistle card on stagecoach buses but the drivers either don’t know what it is or are not interested. Some are very rude. You should focus on training the bus drivers to understand people’s needs and be respectful. The card is useless and drivers don’t do anything if you show it.”

“There are not many buses where I live and I frequently use local transport schemes.”

“There would need to be a bus service for me to use it and there isn’t (rural Scotland). Also, I can’t use my bus pass either for the same reason and this is discrimination. People who live outwith rural Scotland get the benefits of the bus pass and we don’t. An inequality that needs to be addressed. Will the accessible travel framework or new transport strategy look into this inequality?”

“I live in a rural area of Scotland and there are very few buses and bus stops are too far away from where I live. I used Community Transport and they are great. Don’t need any cards as the drivers are excellent and understand what help you need and how to help you. Very patient and nothing is any trouble. Pick you up from your door too.”

## Surrounding infrastructure more of an issue

For other respondents, key areas of concern related to the surrounding infrastructure, the idea of the 'first and last mile' of travelling door-to-door which caused more issues. Some comments suggested that making the infrastructure more accessible should be a greater priority for Transport Scotland than the Thistle Assistance card.

"I am blind and the pedestrian crossing in Glasgow, to get to the bus stop or train station, are not safe and have poor structures and tactile. This is one of the main barriers for me."

"The pavements, bus stops and some bus drivers are the problem."

"The first problem is the paths and pavements to the bus stop. These are not well maintained and also have obstruction to navigate if you have a mobility or visual impairment, and this is a MAJOR barrier to accessible travel. Let's not focus on a card. Prioritise getting the paths and pavements accessible then the actual bus stop structure. This needs sorted before we even have a chance of getting to the bus far less on and off."

"I would rather the bus stops and kerbs were better designed and the bus drivers were trained to pull in close to help you board. They always leave too big a gap and I can't manage down off the kerb then up a higher step onto the bus. I can manage when they pull up to the kerb and lower the bus but lots of bus drivers don't want to do this."

## Waste of resources/Driver training better

Some respondents felt that the investment into the Thistle Assistance card scheme would be better spent on improving the accessibility of public transport and disability awareness training for staff. Respondents felt this would have more impact than a website or app.

"The card doesn't work and spending money on a new website won't make any difference to people trying to access and use public transport. Stop playing and start focusing on getting public transport accessible for disabled people."

“New website design won’t make a bit of difference and just another waste of money. So frustrated at all the money being spent on websites and apps and I still can get out and about independently or with the use of my mobility scooter as I am not allowed on public transport with it (with the exception of Edinburgh trams) - look at the things that are causing barriers and stop tinkering around and spending money on useless websites and apps that don’t remove the barriers.”

“The money should be spent on something that’s people focussed not another app or website that doesn’t make a difference. Access to buses and disability awareness is what needs attention not yet another app or website that make no difference. Invest in people.”

“Don’t see the point in spending money launching a website for a card that has little effect. Better spending the money on better driver training.”

### **Comments relating to the card**

One respondent commented on the physical quality of the Thistle Assistance Card and another suggested that it should be incorporated into the concession travel card, so passengers only need to have one card.

“My husband has this card. It is a bit basic really and also cardboard which doesn't last long in any wallet. I can't say this has been helpful. One travel card is needed with information on it. If you have more than one, how can you expect (in queues eg getting onto a bus) staff to read it all?”

“Doesn’t make any difference but why 2 cards if you have a bus pass? Could your bus pass not prompt that you need more time to get to seat. This would be more discreet.”

### **Negative experiences using the card**

There were other respondents who had experience of using the card and found that it had made no difference to their travel experience. Some had since stopped using it.

“I tried using it, but it didn’t make any difference.”

“I tried using the card but it doesn’t make any difference.”

“Don’t think it makes a difference.”

“It doesn’t work on the ground.”

“Doesn’t really make any difference. Quality of journey still hit and miss.”

“I used to try and use it but it didn’t really help.”

“Doesn’t make any difference. Stopped using it. No point.”

### **Suggestion for future**

One respondent suggested that Disability Equality Scotland should lead on the Thistle Assistance Card. We will endeavour to work closely with SEStran to promote and advertise the Card on our Accessible Travel Hub and are happy to discuss a potential roadshow event in early 2020 to discuss the findings of this poll in more detail to help SEStran shape the Assistance card scheme.

“Disability Equality Scotland should be the lead organisation for the thistle card. I have been to several of their workshops and they understand the transport barriers for disabled people and they are national with a voice all over Scotland and through the access panels. They also have their accessible travel hub that is useful.”

### **Are you aware of any other tools helping people to travel more confidently (for example, a different card or badge scheme?)**

Yes – 16% (39 respondents)

NO – 83% (201 respondents)

“Why can’t we just have 1 thing across all modes of transport and places, like Sainsbury’s sunflower lanyard. Makes it easier and the message stronger and if you’re out and about you don’t need to keep looking for different, cards, apps, lanyards etc to get help. One nationally recognised symbol/thing across everything. Transport, shops, hotels.”

“None and that shows the depth and breadth of the problem. Another tokenistic, lip service service. It’s not a new website we need it’s more basic actions to make transport accessible.”

“Some English bus companies assess you for taking your scooter onto the bus, it would be good if we had this in Scotland as it would make me feel more confident travelling and I would happily go for the assessment to get the car to take my scooter on the bus, this would be a lot more help than the thistle cars is.”

“But there should be more things to help like being able to get on the bus with your scooter even if you need it accredited or to take a competence test re getting on and off.”

“Guide Dogs used to do training but only when you were getting a dog. It would be good if there was more confidence building training for disabled people.”

“The bus pass helps but again it relies on bus being available and not being coached.”

“I’ve seen some from bus providers in specific areas - also some badges designed by disabled people.”

“Access Panel. I contact my access Panel if I need any advice or assistance with transport and they are always really helpful. The prompts the accessible travel hub for information but they also give tips and advice on how to make the journey easier and avoid pitfalls and it helps me prepare for the journey better and feel more confident. I live in Perth.”

“The assistance you get when you travel by rail is great. Why can’t bus companies do the same? I can’t even get on most buses with my wheelchair and if someone or something is in the space then drivers won’t even challenge them or ask them to move their stuff so I’m told I can’t get on. There was a court ruling on wheelchair versus buggy and still bus drivers do nothing. They should look to learn from rail services.”

“Accessible Travel Hub.”

“Some council used to training to travel and that made a difference but it was stepped because of cut back. Use the money to do that not for another app or website.”

“Accessible Travel Hub.”

“My friend told me about a taxi card scheme in Edinburgh that gives you discounts if you disabled. This would be helpful as in Aberdeen I need to get a taxi to the bus station.”

“Accessible Travel Hub hosted by Disability Equality Scotland and Sponsored by Transport Scotland. This is a good place to get information. I tried booking a journey with Traveline Scotland before but you can’t even select that you are a wheelchair user so you can’t use this to book a journey which is not acceptable and is a disgrace as I believe the Scottish Government fund it. The Accessible Travel Hub has good and useful information.”

“All buses and trains should have visual and audio stop alerts. That would be helpful.”

“You can book help in advance when going by train and that a good service. It would be good to be able to do this for bus.”

“Accessible Travel Hub - an app of this would be good. Traveline app is hopeless.”

“Accessible travel hub.”

“I have attended a few local meetings where first bus have been there. The listen but it doesn’t make any difference so are they really listening or paying tokenistic lip service.”

“If you’re online there is information on the accessible travel hub. I also tried traveline scotland but it doesn’t take account of your mobility needs so not any use to disabled people.”

“Accessible Travel Hub.”

“Travel training. This get really positive reviews and would benefit from being more widely available, it would also be useful for those transitioning from able bodies to disabled as starting to use public transport when recently disabled is a very anxious and stressful time and many newly disabled people disconnect from using public transport thereafter.”

“Guide Dogs and DeafBlind Scotland to familiarisation training which helps.”

“My neighbours help and travel with me when they can to make sure I’m okay”.

“Didn’t even know the thistle card could be used on trains and ferries.”

“Could the accessible travel hub not give details on this and push it out to members. You could also apply for a card here too.”

“Neate box. Not helpful for all the many people who do not want to declare their health condition and just want to travel independently. most people But tools are needed.”

“Guide dogs used to do some training but I think this stopped.”

“I have seen some of the initiatives from Brighton and Hove bus company including awareness and confidence building through mock up scenarios (buses and bus stops). The feedback is very positive but I haven’t found anything similar in Scotland and have contacted a few bus companies but none of them do this. It would be a great and worthwhile initiative to help people and build their confidence to use the bus.”

“My friends son got travel training and it made such a big difference though it was from a one time funded pilot so nobody else can get it.”

“When I phoned to use the local transport scheme in Badenoch and Strathspey they asked me about all my needs including mobility and anxiety etc. Since then the volunteer drivers that come are always really helpful and know what I need which makes it less stressful and a fun journey instead of stressful. I can’t thank them enough for volunteering their time and I look forward to my days out. It seems strange that you get a better service from volunteers than you do from paid drivers from big bus companies. Big isn’t always better.”

“I have a Scottish Entitlement Card.”

“We need more than a card to improve our chance of getting a bus. Drivers attitudes are terrible. They can’t be bothered and won’t help when someone is in the wheelchair space and they won’t move them so I normally can’t get on and have to let 2 or 3 buses go by and forget trying to be allowed on a bus in a wheelchair during peak travel times. It just won’t happen. Bus services need an overhauling. They continually fail disabled people.”



“Nothing other than asking friends and family to help out.”

“Support from our local community groups and the community transport scheme.”

“Buddy schemes in Oban. a buddy travels with you until you are more confident.”

“No but there is a need.”

“I seen a recent article about wearing badges and I would not wear a badge to say I need a seat.”

“Passenger assistance for rail and assistance at airports but you need to book this in advance.”

“Bus pass.”

“Travel training schemes and they work well where available. My daughter got help with to and from work them more routes and can travel more on her own now. The travel training was a god send.”

“I think some bus companies and supermarkets is lanyards. This would be more visible and less likely to lose or damage. The paper cards get damaged easily.”

“I am aware of a Badge idea being introduced in places like London and Nottingham. That simply information people you require a seat on public transport. This is something that might work well along with Thistle Card idea. As it is only the driver or ticket examiner that sees the card the Badge draws attention of other passengers. Maybe a National Scotland wide scheme could be looked at.”

“Free bus pass and blue badges scheme.”

“My local social work used to do travel training and this was helpful but it stopped because of cut backs.”

“NOT sure how this helps people use public transport more safely or confidently (it certainly does not change how I feel using public transport and it does not change attitudes of staff) but in terms of my attempting to express and explain my difficulties and needs for support, rather than staff assuming I am drunk or on drugs, I use the "Headway - Brain Injury Identity Card".

“Disability Railcards Bus passes Blue Badges.”

“Lothian buses have a similar scheme.”

“Only blue badge scheme.”

Disability Equality Scotland  
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