

MOBILITY AS A MULTIPLIER: UNLOCKING THE ECONOMIC POTENTIAL OF INCLUSIVE TRANSPORT.

Institution of
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KEY FACTS AND FIGURES

- £88.2 billion potential annual economic boost from removing transport barriers to employment for disabled people
- 2.8 million additional people could enter the workforce if employment parity is achieved
- £20–24 billion – the estimated total cost at today’s prices to deliver a fully inclusive rail network
- Up to £34.17 billion annual fare revenue potential from increased public transport use
- £176.4 billion total GVA potential from closing the disability employment gap
- 50% of disabled professionals have turned down jobs due to transport barriers
- £446 billion annual spending power of disabled people and their households ('Purple Pound')
- Up to £1–2 billion annual taxpayer savings from shifting specialist transport to mainstream networks
- £216 million annual cost to the NHS from missed appointments, with transport a key factor
- 135,000 tonnes of CO₂ emissions could be reduced annually through increased public transport use

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Introduce an enhanced capital allowance**
130% tax relief to incentivise private investment in accessibility beyond minimum standards.
- **Create a national open accessibility data platform**
A single, real-time, open-access system for transport accessibility data across the UK.
- **Embed inclusive design in engineering standards**
Make accessibility a core requirement in education, professional accreditation, and Continuing Professional Development.
- **Make co-production the default**
Require meaningful collaboration with disabled and under-represented groups in transport design and delivery.

SECTION 1 ACCESSIBLE TRANSPORT, STRONGER ECONOMY

A modern public transport system should enable opportunity, growth, and mobility for all, yet the UK’s network is not delivering for those who depend on it most. For too many Britons, it acts as a barrier, limiting access to work, education, and community life, stifling productivity, slowing progress to Net Zero, and costing the economy billions in untapped potential. Disabled people, women, older adults, neurodivergent students and workers, families, rural communities, and LGBTQ+ passengers can find travel difficult or even impossible. These challenges arise not only from physical barriers, such as limited step-free access and inadequate facilities, but also from fragmented information, inconsistent standards, and a lack of user-centred design. Together, they underscore the scale of change required to create a transport system that is truly inclusive and fit for the future.

This accessibility gap is not just a social issue, it is an economic one. Inaccessible transport restricts access to jobs, education, and services, harms wellbeing, and reduces participation in society, ultimately constraining economic growth and productivity. Yet the economic benefits of improving transport accessibility for all are rarely taken into account when making decisions about investment in infrastructure. While construction costs are calculated, social benefits such as greater access to services, jobs and tourism are often undefined or even ignored.¹ Nevertheless, as the UK population ages, demand for inclusive transport will only increase. While reform and investment present a clear opportunity, progress has been slow due to fragmented responsibilities and inconsistent implementation. Engineers are central to solving this challenge, yet to do so, a more coordinated, system-wide approach is needed.

In this report the Institution of Mechanical Engineers (IMechE) sets out a clear vision for transforming transport accessibility across the UK. It examines the persistent physical and systemic barriers faced by disadvantaged groups, explores the challenges that continue to limit progress, and identifies the vital role of engineering in making public transport more inclusive. Crucially, the report demonstrates how government and the wider transport sector can drive meaningful change by embedding data-driven decision-making, ensuring existing systems are fit for purpose, and prioritising upskilling and cross-sector collaboration to build the inclusive design expertise needed to deliver a truly accessible transport network for all.

¹ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *Economic Benefits of Improving Transport Accessibility*, (2017), p.9: https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2017/05/the-economic-benefits-of-improved-accessibility-to-transport-systems_e052c5fa/9c73ac17-en.pdf.

SECTION 2: THE ECONOMIC CASE FOR INCLUSIVE TRANSPORT

The transport sector is undergoing significant change. British railways are moving to public ownership; local authorities, combined authorities, and city mayors are being granted devolved powers to shape and manage public transport in their regions; vehicles are evolving to incorporate artificial intelligence, automated operating systems, and other technological advances; and buses and other modes of public transport are going electric to achieve Net Zero carbon emissions. Underpinning all this, HM Government is currently reviewing legislation for accessibility in transport provision to reconcile standards and responsibilities.

As the Department for Transport (DfT) has now finalised the strategic direction for an integrated national transport system, this section sets out the case for policymakers to be bold and ambitious in their plans for new legislation to reconcile accessibility standards and responsibilities. As the following analysis demonstrates, such a move is not merely a social obligation, but a potentially powerful lever to deliver sustained economic growth, unlocking billions in untapped productivity and securing the UK’s transition to a high-participation, Net Zero economy.

1. The infrastructure of economic exclusion

The UK economy is operating below capacity due to systemic barriers in public transport. Inaccessible transport systems impose significant economic costs, hindering productivity and workforce participation while limiting opportunities for equitable growth. Using official statistics cited in this report, we can quantify this lost potential. At present, 5.6 million disabled people in the UK are in employment, but the employment rate for non-disabled individuals remains proportionately 1.5 times higher than that of their disabled counterparts.²

This ‘employment gap’ is not a reflection of a lack of talent or ambition, but rather is in part a consequence of a transport network that remains inaccessible to nearly a quarter of the UK’s working-age population (those aged 16 to 64³). It is self-evident that not all disability related workplace absence can be avoided because some will relate to conditions which cannot be prevented or remedied.⁴ Equally, the ability of a disabled worker to reach their full productive capacity is influenced by how adapted their workplace is to their health condition(s).⁵

2 Department for Work & Pensions, *The employment of disabled people*, (2025): <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/the-employment-of-disabled-people-2025/the-employment-of-disabled-people-2025>. The volume of people reporting health-related inactivity is collected by the Labour Force Survey (LFS). Note that data for Northern Ireland is not available at a Local Authority level.

3 Current measures use the 16-64 age group to represent the working-age population, in line with the headline labour market statistics published by the ONS. However, going forward, the recently specified Get Britain Working outcome metrics will use the 18-66 age group to measure progress against HM Government’s goal for an 80% employment rate and reducing the disability employment gap. This reflects recent increases in the state pension age and the expectation that 16 and 17 year olds will remain in full-time education or training.

4 Department for Work & Pensions, *The cost of working age ill-health and disability that prevents work*, (2025): <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/the-cost-of-working-age-ill-health-and-disability-that-prevents-work/the-cost-of-working-age-ill-health-and-disability-that-prevents-work#:~:text=It%20encompasses%20more%20than%20the,wide%20range%20of%20data%20required>.

5 Joseph Rowntree Foundation, *Unlocking benefits: Tackling barriers for disabled people wanting to work*, (2024): <https://www.jrf.org.uk/work/unlocking-benefits-tackling-barriers-for-disabled-people-wanting-to-work#:~:text=Scope's%20latest%20research%20shows%20that,growth%20and%20security%20for%20all>.

Eliminating the transit barriers that currently exclude

2.8 million disabled people from the workforce could deliver an

£88.2 billion annual boost to UK GDP, turning a neglected labour pool into a driver of economic growth.

Nevertheless, to reach employment parity, a status where disabled professionals participate in the workforce at the same rate as the non-disabled population, the UK would need to integrate an additional 2.8 million people into part-time and/or full-time jobs. Based on the standard Office for National Statistics (ONS) average UK Gross Value Added (GVA) of £63,000 per worker, achieving full parity would inject an extra £176.4 billion into the national economy annually.⁶ However, current trends suggest this potential is being undermined by physical and systemic barriers. Historical downward trends in the disability employment gap have stalled over the last five years, with the gap beginning to widen year-on-year since 2020. This stagnation places the UK’s disability employment gap above the OECD average, undermining the government’s long-term ambition to achieve a national 80% employment rate among disabled people.⁷

The volatility of this workforce is directly linked to transport reliability. Disabled workers move out of employment at more than double the rate (10.1%) of their non-disabled peers (4.6%), while workless disabled individuals find it nearly four times harder to enter the workforce. Research for the Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) indicates that access to public transport is one of the key determinants of disability employment status. Those located near well-provisioned, inclusive transport links are significantly more likely to find and sustain employment, indicating that the employment gap is also a mobility gap.⁸ Indeed, data included in an earlier IMechE report suggests that nearly 50% of disabled professionals have been forced to turn down career opportunities specifically because of transport concerns.⁹ This allows us to calculate a Direct Transport-Linked Gain, the figure reached by applying the 50% transport-related refusal rate to the total potential GVA of £176.4 billion that would be generated if the 2.8 million disabled people currently excluded from the workforce reached employment parity with non-disabled people. If the UK successfully equalised public transport access to remove these barriers for disabled people, the Direct Transport-Linked Gain for the economy would be an annual boost of around £88.2 billion.

6 These calculations are based on the ONS’s employment-weighted mean approximate Gross Value Added (aGVA) per worker of £63,000. ONS, *Trends in UK business dynamism and productivity*, (2025): <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/economicoutputandproductivity/productivitymeasures/bulletins/trendsinukbusinessdynamismandproductivity/2025>. GVA is measured as an average (mean) value per filled job and can be thought of as the individual’s job contribution to Gross Domestic Product (GDP). It encompasses more than the wage as an output, quantifying the wider value the individual brings to a business. It is reasonable to assume that the value of an individual’s output should exceed their wage, considering employment costs and a profit margin. Though it is assumed they will return to full productive capacity if they return to work, in practice some disabled workers will be prevented from returning to full productive capacity due to their disability.

7 OECD, *Disability, Work and Inclusion*, (2022), pp.46, 56-58: https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2022/10/disability-work-and-inclusion_db6df91a/1eaa5e9c-en.pdf.

8 Department for Work & Pensions, *The employment of disabled people*, (2025): <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/the-employment-of-disabled-people-2025/the-employment-of-disabled-people-2025>. Note that data for Northern Ireland is not available at a Local Authority level.

9 IMechE, *En Route To Inclusive Public Transport*, (2025): https://www.imeche.org/docs/default-source/1-oscar/reports-policy-statements-and-documents/imeche-report-en-route-to-inclusive-public-transport-2025.pdf?sfvrsn=ccf75e11_2

To put that in context, while structural modifications to platforms are typically capital-intensive and require temporary platform closures, these costs can be significantly mitigated when works are integrated into broader, high-value refurbishment cycles. Using the 2025 £3 million platform upgrade at Dunkeld and Birnam station as a baseline proxy across the roughly 6,000 station platforms throughout the UK, the total cost for a nationwide level boarding rollout is estimated at £18 billion.¹⁰ In addition, the most recent government calculation, as set out in the Access for All programme, estimates the cost of installing step-free access across the network at between £2 billion and £6 billion in total.¹¹ When these figures are combined, the total gross investment for a fully inclusive rail network sits at between £20 billion and £24 billion. In practice, this £20-24 billion capital requirement would not be drawn down as a single lump sum, but as a sustained investment over a multi-decade delivery cycle. Current engineering estimates suggest that a comprehensive, network-wide upgrade to full level boarding could take until 2070 to complete.¹² Crucially, however, the economic benefits are not deferred until the final station is complete. Instead, the benefits scale incrementally with every upgraded station. As more and more excluded individuals gradually gain access to the network over time, the £88.2 billion annual GVA dividend would materialise in compounding stages as a recurring annual benefit to the UK economy. When measured over a 60-year appraisal period (the standard benchmark for major infrastructure projects defined in HM Treasury's Green Book), the cumulative returns on investment therefore significantly exceed the initial sunk cost.¹³

2. Capturing the decarbonisation dividend

The transition to a low-carbon economy depends fundamentally on a large-scale modal shift from private vehicles to high-capacity public transport. However, this shift remains impossible for a significant portion of the population if the transport network itself is physically or systematically inaccessible. By removing these barriers, the Government can unlock a dual dividend, addressing long-standing social inequities while simultaneously accelerating the UK's progress toward Net Zero.

When the transport network is engineered to be inclusive by design, it ceases to be a point of friction and becomes a driver for national emissions reduction, as increased ridership amongst disabled professionals directly displaces carbon-intensive private transport journeys. Extrapolating from modelling cited in our previous report, which estimates that a 10% increase in the general population's use of public transport yields a 335,000 tonne reduction in UK CO₂ emissions per annum, achieving employment parity for the 2.8 million UK disabled people of working-age could lead to an estimated reduction of over 135,000 tonnes of CO₂ emissions annually.¹⁴

10 Network Rail, *£3m investment will close the gap for Dunkeld and Birnam passengers*, (2024): <https://www.networkrailmediacentre.co.uk/news/gbp-3m-investment-will-close-the-gap-for-dunkeld-and-birnam-passengers>; Network Rail, *Dunkeld and Birnam station raised to new heights with platform upgrade*, (2025): <https://www.networkrailmediacentre.co.uk/news/dunkeld-and-birnam-station-raised-to-new-heights-with-platform-upgrade>.
11 House of commons Transport Committee, *Access denied: rights versus reality in disabled people's access to transport*, (2025): <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5901/cmselect/cmtrans/770/report.html>; Leonard Cheshire, *Get on Board 2020: Making the economic case for 'levelling up' inclusive transport*, (2020), p.5: <https://www.leonardcheshire.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/Get-on-Board-2020-policy-report.pdf>.
12 Leonard Cheshire, *Get on Board 2020: Making the economic case for 'levelling up' inclusive transport*, (2020), p.5: <https://www.leonardcheshire.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/Get-on-Board-2020-policy-report.pdf>.
13 HM Treasury, *Green Book: UK Government Guidance on Appraisal*, (2026), p.33: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/698dbcd17da91680ad7f4308/The_Green_Book_2026.pdf.
14 Institution of Mechanical Engineers, *En Route To Inclusive Public Transport*, (2025), p.21: https://www.imeche.org/docs/default-source/1-oscar/reports-policy-statements-and-documents/imeche-report-en-route-to-inclusive-public-transport-2025.pdf?sfvrsn=ccf75e11_2. This estimate is underpinned by Dr Crispin Cooper's TrafRed methodology, which assumes a systemic 'modal shift' driven by increased rail frequency, integrated bus-rail timetabling, and improved urban bus speeds. As the UK continues to electrify its transport infrastructure, with a projected 2% annual increase in rail electrification and a target to electrify 50% of metropolitan bus fleets by 2030, the carbon efficiency of each newly integrated professional journey will continue to improve: <https://colab.research.google.com/drive/1vXBFImUc3E3wcrwsZ-pfQL7i8LUKD2md?usp=sharing#scrollTo=0zuj-GdY6weX>. See also, Green Alliance, *Mind the gap: cutting UK transport's climate impact - Methodology*, (2025): <https://green-alliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Mind-the-gap-methodology.pdf>.

Inclusive transport can be an engine for Net Zero decarbonisation.
Increasing disabled access to the public transport network could reduce UK CO₂ emissions by over **135,000 tonnes** a year.

3. The return on inclusion

Disabled people and their households in the UK have a combined annual spending power, often referred to as the 'Purple Pound', estimated at over £446 billion annually, roughly half of which, £223 billion, is spent on the high street or in destination outlets such as the retail, leisure, hospitality, and domestic tourism sectors.¹⁵ However, a significant portion of this liquidity is constrained by inaccessible transport, with many individuals reducing or foregoing trips due to reliability, safety, or usability concerns. Research at Cardiff University suggests that transport-related friction causes disabled consumers to abandon 1 in 5 potential high street trips, reducing disposable income expenditure by up to 30% and consequently removing a stimulus to local economies.¹⁶ When an inclusive transport network enables these journeys, it triggers a powerful multiplier effect that extends far beyond the initial fare. For instance, an accessible route that allows a family to visit a local shopping centre or regional tourist attraction generates a wave of economic activity that supports not only the immediate business but also the associated logistics, service industries, retailers, and local tax base. We calculate, based on the above cited study, that if improved accessibility enabled even a modest 10% increase in journeys among disabled people and associated groups, it could unlock up to £22.3 billion in additional consumer spending annually across the retail, leisure, and tourism sectors, providing a massive, non-inflationary stimulus to local economies and high streets.

Inaccessible transport acts as a direct tax on the UK high street.
With one in five high street trips abandoned due to transport barriers, even a **10% increase in trips taken by disabled people** would unlock **£22.3 billion** in annual consumer spending for local economies across our retail, leisure, and tourism sectors.

15 The Purple Pound, *Unlocking the Economic Power of Disability*, (2025): <https://wearepurple.org.uk/the-purple-pound/>; VisitBritain, *Discover the Value of the Purple Pound*, (2025): <https://www.visitbritain.org/business-advice/make-your-business-accessible-and-inclusive/discover-value-purple-pound>.
16 Deborah Edwards, Judit Csontos, Elizabeth Gillen, Tom Wharf, Catherine Purcell, BetiJane Ingram, Jacob Davies, Rhianon Tudor Edwards, Adrian Edwards, Ruth Lewis, *The Impact of Changes in Active Travel Infrastructure on Disabled People: A Rapid Review*, (2025), p.5: https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/184086/1/Post-print_RR0048_Active%20Travel%20Rapid%20Review_Jan%202026%20%281%29.pdf.

The commercial case for inclusive design is underscored by a persistent and costly disparity in public transport network usage. Data from the National Centre for Accessible Transport (ncat) and Motability confirms that, all things being equal, disabled individuals in the UK consistently take 38% fewer trips than their non-disabled counterparts, a disparity that has remained virtually stagnant for over a decade.¹⁷ This suppressed demand represents a significant, untapped market for transport operators. By failing to mitigate the reliability and usability concerns that cause disabled people to opt out of public transport opportunities, transport businesses are effectively forfeiting millions in potential revenue each month. Bridging this gap is not merely a matter of compliance, but a strategic imperative to unlock an upsurge in passenger numbers. Beyond the immediate increase in ticket revenue, closing the 38% gap could serve as a catalyst for wider economic participation, driving increases in workforce attendance, generating significant healthcare savings through increased exercise, reduced social isolation, and direct NHS cost savings such as cutting missed appointments, as well as activating latent consumer spending across the national economy. We calculate that if just half of the 2.8 million additional disabled workers who comprise the 'disability gap' used public transport for commuting to and from work three days per week, it would generate approximately 4.1 billion additional passenger journeys per year. Assuming a conservative average fare yield of £2.50 per journey, this equates to over £10.25 billion in additional annual fare revenue for providers across the network. If the full parity cohort, all 2.8 million disabled people of working age, were integrated into the workforce and utilised public transport for a standard five-day two-way commute, the economic impact would scale to approximately 13.67 billion additional passenger journeys annually, generating an additional £34.17 billion in direct annual fare revenue. These calculations highlight that the fiscal return on inclusive transport offer an important pillar for the network's long-term commercial viability.

Closing the 'disability gap' in the workforce represents a transformative commercial opportunity for the UK transport network, with the potential to inject between

& £10.25 billion
& £34.17 billion

in additional annual fare revenue through increased ridership alone.

From a budgetary perspective, inclusive transport acts as a workforce enabler. Every individual who moves from long-term unemployment into the workforce generates a net gain to the public finances of approximately £15,000 per annum through a combination of PAYE contributions and lowered benefit dependency.¹⁸ This figure represents the cumulative exchequer impact of increased direct tax receipts and the simultaneous reduction in welfare expenditure.

17 National Centre for Accessible Transport, *Understanding and identifying barriers to accessing transport*, (2024), p.5: <https://www.ncat.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/ncat-Understanding-and-identifying-barriers-to-accessing-transport-Full-Report-Accessible-PDF-FINAL-Dec-24.pdf> ; Motability, *The Transport Accessibility Gap*, (2022), p.5: https://www.motabilityfoundation.org.uk/media/iwaidhvk/motability_transport-accessibility-gap-report_march-2022_final.pdf.

18 Department for Work & Pensions, *Improving Employment Support*, (2021): <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/shaping-future-support-the-health-and-disability-green-paper-evidence-pack-july-2021/chapter-2-improving-employment-support#:~:text=Benefit%20to%20the%20exchequer%20of%20a%20disabled%20person%20in%20work&text=Society%20could%20benefit%20%C2%A321%2C000,in%202021%20to%202022%20prices.>

With half of all disabled professionals saying they had to decline job offers due to transport issues, resolving these barriers for just

5% disabled people currently excluded from the workforce
would unlock a **£2.1 billion**

annual dividend for HM Treasury through reduced welfare spending and increased tax receipts.

Such a structural shift from social security dependency to active tax participation, underscores the role of accessible infrastructure as a high-yield asset for long-term fiscal stability. Given 50% of disabled people of working age have declined a job offer due to transport barriers, the potential return on investment for inclusive engineering is considerable.¹⁹ Under a conservative estimate, resolving transport barriers for just 5% of the 2.8 million disabled people currently excluded from the workforce would return 140,000 individuals to active employment, generating a recurring £2.1 billion annual gain for HM Treasury. A moderate projection of 10% of this population would equate to 280,000 people transitioning into the labour market, yielding a £4.2 billion fiscal dividend through increased tax receipts and reduced welfare dependency. In a more ambitious scenario, where systemic inclusive design unlocks the potential of 20% of those currently excluded from the labour market, the exchequer impact would scale to £8.4 billion annually. These figures demonstrate that even marginal improvements in transport accessibility do not merely represent a social good, but a high-yield return on investment for the taxpayer.

In parallel, inclusive design reduces system-wide costs. Beyond unlocking new labour market entrants and delivering decarbonisation gains, inclusive transport also generates a strong fiscal and commercial return through increased network usage and avoided costs. Demand for specialist services, such as paratransit, assisted travel, and bespoke provision, is significantly more expensive per journey than mainstream public transport. Shifting even a portion of these journeys onto fully accessible mainstream public transport services could therefore deliver substantial savings for the taxpayer. Between Department for Education (DfE) SEND transport, NHS Patient Transport, and Local Authority Social Care transport such as Dial-a-Ride, the government spends around £5-7 billion annually on segregated, specialist journeys in England alone.²⁰ Assuming just 20% of current supported trips were absorbed into the mainstream public transport network, this could yield operational savings in the order of £1-2 billion annually, saving money for the NHS and stretched Local Authorities while also providing disabled passengers with greater autonomy and independence.

19 House of Lords Library, *Challenges faced by people with disabilities*, (2024): <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/challenges-faced-by-people-with-disabilities/>.

20 National Audit Office (NAO), *Home to School Transport*, p.4: <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Home-to-School-transport.pdf>; Association of Directors of Adult Social Services (ADASS), *2025 Spring Survey*, p.6: <https://www.adass.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/ADASS-Spring-Survey-Final-15-July-2025.pdf>; National Health Service (NHS) England, *Improving non-emergency patient transport services: Report of the non-emergency patient transport review* (August 2021), p.4: <https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/B0682-fnal-report-of-the-non-emergency-patient-transport-review.pdf>.

Similarly, missed appointments cost the NHS approximately £216 million a year, a sum equivalent to the salaries of 2,325 full-time GPs.²¹ There are many reasons why some patients do not, or are unable to, attend scheduled appointments. The evidence shows that patients from the most deprived deciles, older people, those managing mental health conditions, and individuals from minority ethnic backgrounds are disproportionately more likely to miss planned consultations. Significantly, these are the same cohorts with the poorest longitudinal health outcomes.²² A Review by NHS England found that “Transport issues” is one of the most common reasons patients cite for missing an appointment, indicating that a logistics failure is also a clinical one.²³ Apart from the de facto ‘non-attendance tax’ imposed on the NHS by missed appointments, these absences also add significant pressure to NHS services that are already struggling to match patient demand with capacity levels. Providing more accessible, reliable transport links is therefore not merely an infrastructure improvement opportunity, but offers a potential intervention to improve NHS efficiency, reduce patient backlogs, and ensure more equitable access to healthcare as well as better population-level long-term health outcomes.

The state spends roughly **£7 billion** a year on specialist transport for disabled and older passengers, a costly shadow network necessitated by inaccessible public transport systems. Shifting just **20%** of these journeys to a more inclusive public transport network could save **£1-2 billion** annually, easing pressure on the NHS and local authorities while giving disabled people greater independence.

Taken together, these effects indicate that the financial return on inclusive transport investment is both immediate and compounding, combining increased consumer spending, additional fare revenue, and system savings. Even assuming the conservative lower bound estimates in this report, the UK could realise an annual return on inclusion of between £33.55 billion while an upper bound estimate would contribute £58.47 billion.²⁴ When contrasted with the relatively low marginal cost of embedding accessibility into new infrastructure and rolling stock, this represents a benefit-cost ratio that positions inclusive transport as one of the highest-impact investments available to the UK Government.

21 NHS Confederation, *Would charging patients for missed appointments help fund the NHS?*, (2023): <https://www.nhsconfed.org/articles/would-charging-patients-missed-appointments-help-fund-nhs>.
22 House of Lords Library, *Challenges faced by people with disabilities*, (2024): <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/challenges-faced-by-people-with-disabilities/>.
23 NHS England, *Reducing did not attends (DNAs) in outpatient services*, (2023): <https://www.england.nhs.uk/long-read/reducing-did-not-attends-dnas-in-outpatient-services/>.
24 The total estimated return of £33.55 billion to £58.47 billion is a composite metric. It aggregates (i) a £22.3 billion consumer stimulus, (ii) a £10.25 billion-£34.17 billion farebox uplift based on ONS employment parity data, and (iii) £1 billion-£2 billion in operational expenditure (OPEX) efficiencies within the £7 billion specialist transport sector. Calculations assume a conservative 10% journey uplift and a 20% migration from specialist to mainstream services.

SECTION 3: UNLOCKING THE MACROECONOMIC POTENTIAL OF PUBLIC TRANSPORT

Policy Recommendations

Public transport in the UK currently lacks consistent national standards, resulting in variable service quality and accessibility across modes and regions. While recent steps towards reform are welcome, many gaps remain. National minimum standards, designed to be technology-neutral and flexible, could provide a baseline for accessibility and service consistency while allowing local and devolved authorities to innovate and tailor provision to community needs. Effective use of data is critical. Although high-quality transport data exists, it is fragmented and underutilised, limiting the ability to monitor and improve services. Lessons from across the UK nations and regions, as well as the international examples cited in our previous report highlight the potential of coordinated, holistic, accessibility frameworks, and joined-up journey planning to create a more consistent, inclusive, and accountable national transport network.²⁵

Accessible by design - the engineering practice of building products and services so they are usable by as many people as possible from the outset rather than adapting or retrofitting them later - should be at the heart of a public transport strategy going forward. To do this, co-production must be embedded from the outset at a local and national level, bringing disabled people, women, older adults, neurodivergent students and workers, families, rural communities, LGBTQ+ passengers, and other potentially excluded or disadvantaged groups into every stage of policymaking. Ensuring that lived experience shapes solutions from the start prevents avoidable problems and helps close the transport accessibility gap, creating public transport networks that truly serve all users. Transport services must also be designed and delivered by people with the right skills. The Engineering Council’s current review of professional standards provides a critical opportunity to move beyond voluntary compliance, strengthening the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) standards that bind registered engineers and enhancing the institutional support required to deliver inclusive national infrastructure. Sector-wide collaboration, training, and upskilling will be vital if we are to embed inclusive practices across transport and ensure services meet the needs of all users.

This section sets out a series of policy recommendations to help bridge the gap between infrastructure design and economic participation (see page 12–13), ensuring that the UK’s transport network acts as a catalyst for social parity and a high-growth, Net Zero economy.

25 Institution of Mechanical Engineers, *En Route To Inclusive Public Transport*, (2025), pp.38-39: https://www.imeche.org/docs/default-source/1-oscar/reports-policy-statements-and-documents/imeche-report-en-route-to-inclusive-public-transport-2025.pdf?sfvrsn=ccf75e11_2.

1. An inclusive infrastructure enhanced capital allowance

The Challenge:

Operators and infrastructure owners sometimes treat accessibility upgrades as a regulatory burden rather than a business opportunity. As a result, many meet only minimum legal standards, creating a compliance ceiling that overlooks diverse needs. Costly retrofits, such as step-free access or Changing Places toilets, require significant upfront capital expenditure so are frequently delayed, leaving a fragmented and inaccessible transport network for disabled people and other vulnerable demographics and at the same time limiting innovation.

The Solution:

We propose an Enhanced Capital Allowance (ECA) for inclusive infrastructure, allowing businesses to claim 130% tax relief on beyond-compliance accessibility investments. Similar to the existing successful super-deduction models, this policy would allow private businesses to claim 130% tax relief on investments in 'beyond-compliance' accessibility engineering. This mechanism aligns perfectly with the Chancellor's strategic goal of crowding in private investment to modernise public services and infrastructure. By de-risking the capital outlay for high-spec accessibility assets, the government can accelerate the national rollout of inclusive features, such as tactile paving, sensory-friendly environments, and universal boarding solutions, without relying solely on direct taxpayer funding, while at the same time incentivising innovation.

The Engineering Ask:

HM Treasury, in collaboration with DfT and the Engineering Council and engineering bodies, including IMechE, should establish a rigorous technical schedule of qualifying 'beyond-compliance' assets. This schedule would provide engineers and developers with a clear list of eligible high-performance accessibility features that exceed standard regulations. To qualify for the 130% allowance, projects must be certified by a professionally registered engineer to ensure they meet these enhanced universal design standards. This fiscal lever could help transform accessibility from a line-item cost into a high-yield investment in the UK's long-term transport and economic capacity.

2. A national open data standard for accessibility

The Challenge:

At present, the engineering of an inclusive transport network is hindered by fragmented, inconsistent, and often non-existent accessibility data. Without a unified overview of the network's physical constraints and real-time failures, engineers cannot design effective intermodal solutions, and disabled passengers cannot travel with confidence. Bridging this data gap is essential to move from ad hoc fixes to a truly integrated, inclusive system.

The Solution:

We recommend a government-owned, open-access platform as a single source of real-time UK transport data. Building on calls for a national accessibility register, this would bring together static infrastructure data such as standardised platform gaps, lift locations, and tactile paving, with real-time updates on accessibility failures, including out-of-service lifts and ramp delays, alongside intermodal mapping to make last-mile connections transparent. Such a high-quality, unified dataset would enable operators and manufacturers to identify and resolve accessibility issues before they impact passengers, while open Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) would support third-party development of real-time, door-to-door digital navigation tools. It would also provide planners and HM Treasury with a robust evidence base to target investment where it delivers the greatest social and economic return.

The Engineering Ask:

The DfT should establish an open-access digital platform to serve as a single source of real-time UK transport data and require all transport operators and infrastructure owners to provide standardised accessibility data to this national platform as a condition of licensing and funding.

3. Embed inclusive design into engineering education and professional development

The Challenge:

The engineering workforce needs a stronger baseline understanding of inclusive design to complement specialist expertise. At present, accessibility is too often treated as a secondary consideration, outsourced to external consultants or addressed late in the design cycle by accessibility panels. This may be due to a lack of emphasis on inclusive design in training and education for engineers which results in a process that prevents inclusive design from being a foundational priority at all levels of project delivery. Without broad education in these principles, UK infrastructure will continue to rely on costly retrofits to serve the country's diverse population.

The Solution:

We recommend embedding inclusive design throughout an engineer's career, from initial qualification to senior practice. Course accreditors should work with universities to integrate inclusive design into core curricula rather than bolt-on courses. The engineering sector and professional engineering institutions, including IMechE, should partner with educators and organisations representing disabled and disadvantaged groups to provide lived-experience insights, ensuring technical solutions are genuinely human-centred.

The Engineering Ask:

The Engineering Council should embed inclusive design into the Accreditation of Higher Education Programmes (AHEP) and UK Standard for Professional Engineering Competence (UK-SPEC), making it a core requirement for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and professional registration. Demonstrated competence in inclusive design for professionally registered engineers will indirectly build the expertise of other non-professionally registered engineers whom they work with, better equipping them to deliver truly accessible national infrastructure.

4. Prioritise co-production to optimise design and reduce long-term costs

The Challenge:

Neglecting diverse passenger needs in the initial design phase leads to costly retrofits and mid-life upgrades. This approach wastes taxpayer money and increases the carbon intensity of projects through redundant construction and material waste.

The Solution:

We recommend making co-production the default standard, partnering with all relevant affected groups and stakeholders to design accessibility into transport services from the start. This should be a continuous, meaningful process, guided by the expertise of organisations representing disadvantaged groups and accessibility standards created by and for disabled people.

The Engineering Ask:

Local leaders, including Mayors and Councillors, should formally commit to the Accessible Transport Charter to prioritise inclusive collaboration. The DfT and local authorities should require evidence of meaningful co-production for funding, and procurement should favour bids with well-supported partnerships with accessibility experts. Embedding users as experts throughout the design and delivery of infrastructure projects will ensure the engineering sector can create a public transport network that is accessible, cost-effective, and optimised from its inception.

SECTION 4:
CONCLUSION:
INCLUSIVE BY DESIGN

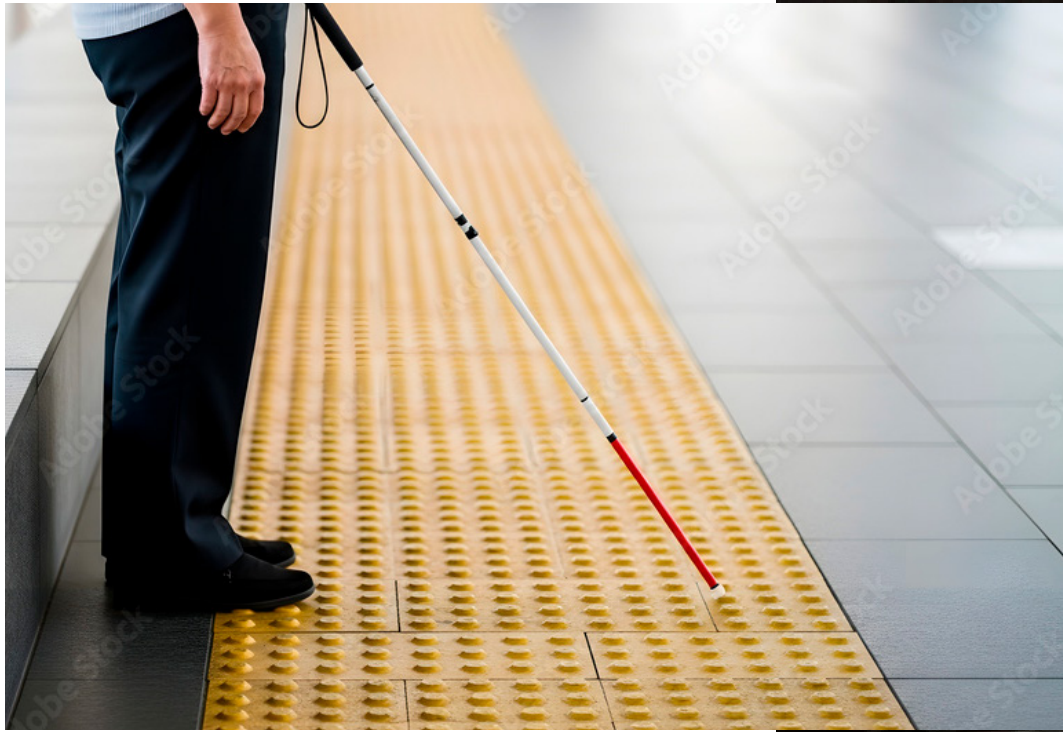
Turning accessibility into economic and social strength

Universal access to public transport can serve as a cornerstone of the UK’s economic, social, and environmental future. At present, gaps in public transport accessibility exclude millions of people from the workforce and civic life, imposing a multi-billion-pound burden on businesses and the public purse. Yet this is not an insurmountable problem.

As this report has shown, investing in a truly inclusive transport network represents one of the highest-impact growth opportunities for the UK economy, with the potential to unlock £88.2 billion in annual GVA while significantly strengthening national fiscal resilience.

Realising this Return on Inclusion requires a decisive shift away from fragmented, reactive retrofitting toward a coordinated, system-wide strategy. We must move beyond compliance and instead embed universal access at the heart of transport design. This change, however, necessitates a robust national standard underpinned by a reliable single source of real-time UK transport data, an engineering workforce upskilled in inclusive design, and a commitment to co-production that places the lived experience of disabled users and other disadvantaged demographics at the heart of the design process. While engineers can drive this transformation, its success depends on a coordinated approach aligning industry, regulators, and government behind sustained, long-term investment and planning.

The potential reward is clear: a transport network that is inclusive by design, drives economic growth, and accelerates environmental sustainability. By addressing these barriers now, the UK can transform a long-standing structural weakness into a national strength, creating a transport system that not only moves people, but powers the prosperity of the entire country.





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