

EN ROUTE TO INCLUSIVE PUBLIC TRANSPORT.

Institution of
**MECHANICAL
ENGINEERS**

Roundtable summary
March 2026

Improving the world through engineering

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For more information contact

IMechE Policy team

policy@imeche.org

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

IMechE held a roundtable to bring together key stakeholders in the transport sector to discuss the Institution's new report, 'En route to inclusive public transport', and identify the next steps.¹ This report provides a summary of the discussion.

1.2 Report summary

Millions of people are affected by inaccessible public transport in the UK—women, disabled people, older adults, families, those living in rural areas, and members of the LGBTQ+ community may find it more difficult or stressful to travel, and at times impossible. The National Centre for Accessible Transport (ncat) reported that over 90% of disabled people face barriers on at least one mode of transport.² This can limit access to education, employment, volunteer, health, leisure and tourism opportunities. All of which help our communities and economy to thrive. A Motability report from 2022 shows the annual economic gain of closing the transport accessibility gap is £72 billion.³

Clearly, changes are needed to improve the transport network, but the sheer number of stakeholders makes the system a highly complex landscape of regulations, standards and initiatives. Current reforms to simplify the system, alongside a real focus on economic growth and Net Zero offer an opportunity to invest in the future of transport.

IMechE are calling to government and the wider transport sector to make ambitious changes across three key themes: data, innovation, and skills and co-production. A whole system approach to transport accessibility is needed to address challenges and remove key barriers. Stakeholders must act to ensure outcomes are enabled by data, existing systems are fit-for-purpose, and upskilling and partnership is prioritised to grow inclusive design expertise.

2 DISCUSSION THEMES

The transport sector is undergoing significant change right now. The Department for Transport (DfT) is actively finalising the strategic direction for an integrated national transport system, the railway is moving to public ownership, and buses and other modes of transport are going electric. While mode shift to more sustainable transport options remains important to achieving Net Zero targets for the sector, as per the transport hierarchy, commitment to accessibility is strengthening thanks to signalling from DfT. However, when accessibility is at odds with capacity and therefore revenue, challenges still remain.

2.1 Greater accountability through data and standards

Nationally, there is no or very little standardisation to achieve a minimum level of service provision in public transport. Those standards that do exist need to be refreshed and appropriately enforced.

For example, new standards for information on buses introduced in October 2024 are a welcome step, but there is no such standard for bus stops, meaning they often lack necessary travel information.⁴ Only 16% of bus stops from a Campaign for Better Transport survey had an up-to-date road map, and the same proportion had digital information.⁵ Even across short distances like between central Manchester and the outskirts of Greater Manchester, bus stops can vary greatly.

New or updated standards must be technology neutral and consider the incentives for innovation. Standardisation as a blanket rule is generally seen as a barrier to innovation. However, setting minimum requirements could promote consistency while allowing space to innovate above and beyond that level.

This approach lends itself to national standards that set minimum expectations and key standards for accessibility, with variation across devolved and local authorities. While having a denser transport network than the UK, Switzerland has clear national standards across transport modes. A similar approach could give the sector a baseline to collectively aim for that allows for local variation and tailor-made approaches.

Devolved nations already benefit from some flexibility to adopt standards and regulations that best fit the geography and community being served but this can also mean devolved transport systems are difficult to navigate and lack consistency.

Currently, DfT is looking at legislation for accessibility in transport provision to reconcile standards and responsibilities and have also announced they will develop an Accessible Travel Charter, but it is unclear whether this will have much impact on accountability if made voluntary.⁶ Mandating accessibility standards could be seen as a barrier to growth, but government must also acknowledge that inaccessible transport is itself a barrier to growth.

Data is vital to monitor and evaluate policy interventions for improving transport services and good transport data exists nationally but is not necessarily joined up. Norway is a great example of harnessing public transport data, but it is a much smaller and less complex transport network than the UK.

With all the real-time information and tracking currently available, the sector should focus on using and managing this data effectively. Producing a UK-wide app for joined-up journey planning is one option to consider but, more realistically, local

transport authorities should be thinking about how best to use open data for a more inclusive transport network.

Transport for London (TfL) has produced a holistic framework for measuring the accessibility and affordability of their transport services. Standards are also being developed by their own Inclusive Design Centre for Excellence. However, people's lives do not stop at transport boundaries. There is an opportunity for TfL's and other localised approaches to be synthesised and applied through the forthcoming Integrated National Transport Strategy for England to ensure a consistent and seamless experience for multimodal journeys across providers.

2.2 Technology and innovation to drive progress

Accessibility has historically been the catalyst for many technologies that have now become part of the fabric of society—so much so, their access-driven origins are not necessarily common knowledge—for example, the telephone and electric toothbrushes. The path forward should be no different as we innovate our way to a more inclusive society.

Within the existing transport system, opportunities must be seized to build back better when systems, assets or infrastructure are being upgraded. For Merseyrail and the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority, the procurement of new fleets acted as a catalyst to improve the accessibility of train journeys by implementing a new sliding step technology that enables step-free access from platform to train across the network. While less people reportedly now need assistance to travel, the complexity of support required has increased as staff are now freed up to provide this. This project's success is now encouraging consideration of a similar national approach for step-free access.

Innovation should be embraced to free up time to provide more wrap-around support to those that need it. Transport Focus research shows the quality of information and number of people present to give that information have the greatest impact on people during disruption.⁷ When a service or process is made more efficient or automated, rather than remove the essential human element, the staff member's time is freed to help improve the experience.

For smaller companies seeking to support the sector in an innovative and inclusive-first approach, the challenge is appetite, scale and roll out of innovation across the network. One size does not fit all when it comes to the varied needs of disabled people, older adults, women and other disadvantaged groups, but tailoring services and products can be difficult. Certain things are also out of the control of third parties or may change on any given day, e.g. elevator functionality and escalator directionality, impacting the reliability of accessibility features like wayfinding products.

Emerging technology that could greatly benefit key groups who experience barriers to accessing transport, like autonomous vehicles, should be designed to be inclusive to enable widespread use. Meeting this consumer demand is not only for the benefit of individuals but commercially too. With autonomous vehicles potentially on the horizon for public transport, following taxi pilots starting this year, there is an opportunity to embed inclusive design into new policy, standards, regulations and designs from the start.⁸ Government has some responsibility to enforce accountability in both existing and emerging areas.

Approaches to adopt new and emerging technology must recognise and mitigate the potential impact of digital exclusion. Disabled people, older people, and people experiencing domestic violence or homelessness may be more likely to be affected

by digital exclusion according to London Travel Watch, so removing staff who are able to provide support in person can significantly impact these people.⁹ At the same time, technology will always change, and there will always be people who cannot or will not use it for any number of reasons, so the need for inclusive solutions is enduring.

2.3 Having the right skills and experiences at the table

Accessible by design should be at the heart of a public transport strategy going forward. At a local and national level, the sector must break the mould of how things have always been done to forge a new path to a more inclusive transport system.

Advocates consistently call for more co-production, not just consultation, to improve the accessibility and inclusivity of transport networks. It is easy to pick apart or throw out fresh perspectives further down project lifecycles, so co-production must be embedded early on and in every stage of policymaking. Bringing disabled people, women, families and other potentially disadvantaged groups into the fold from the outset means that experiences inform solutions. Too often problems that occur could have been avoided if disabled people had been included in decision-making. Co-production can not only help close the transport accessibility gap but also the digital divide.

Alongside prioritising the voices of those with lived experience, people with the right skills need to be working to design and run transport services. Professionally registered engineers are bound by standards requiring them to demonstrate awareness and promote equality, diversity and inclusion.¹⁰ These standards are currently being reviewed by the Engineering Council. This presents an opportunity to improve the standards engineers are held to and the wrap-around support provided by drawing lessons from other similar organisations. For example, the Royal Institute of British Architects have a national register of access consultants and run annual seminars relating to inclusive design. Collaboration across organisations to invest in training and upskilling across the sector is also vital.

3 CONCLUSION

Improving the accessibility and inclusivity of the UK's transport network is generally a strategic priority for the sector. Key changes could be implemented to ensure this priority is reflected in practice.

Implementation of minimum national standards for accessibility supported by better use of available data could be valuable to ensure accountability across the transport network. However, this must be balanced with incentives for innovation to enable new technologies to be brought to market without undue regulatory pressure or limitations, given scale and roll-out is already a challenge, particularly for smaller companies.

These technologies are essential to supporting disadvantaged groups to access transport services independently and with dignity. The human element of service provision remains just as important and can be enabled by initiatives to improve accessibility overall and free up staff capacity.

Ensuring the right skills and experience are able to contribute to any given project helps to ensure transport services and emerging technologies are available to as many people as possible and mitigate negative impacts for disadvantaged people. Greater collaboration and knowledge sharing across the sector would help to embed co-production and inclusive design skills further.

3.1 Next steps for IMechE

3.1.1 SUPPORT STANDARDS REFRESH

Encourage government to review standards for accessibility in the transport sector alongside the current regulatory review.

Support the Engineering Council to review standards relating to equality, diversity and inclusion for professionally registered engineers.

3.1.2 CALL FOR BETTER DATA USE

Promote use of open data across transport providers to collaboratively improve seamlessness and accessibility of journeys.

3.1.3 CONVENE STAKEHOLDERS

Continue to convene engineers in the transport sector with other key stakeholders to ensure technological developments are aligned with sound policy and that the benefits are spread widely throughout society.

4 REFERENCES

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/institution-of-mechanical-engineers

**Institution of
Mechanical Engineers**

1 Birdcage Walk
Westminster
London SW1H 9JJ

+ 44 (0)20 7222 7899
enquiries@imeche.org
imeche.org