

DOOR-TO-DOOR SUSTAINABLE TRAVEL

Remembering the bike and the wheelchair

It concerns me that too often in the deliberations of the NWPTUF we tend to look at different modes of public transport in isolation instead of looking at complete door-to-door journeys, from any A to any B within the region or beyond. That after all is the service provided by the private car with which we have to compete, and only by looking at access to a bus, train or indeed aircraft can we maximise the potential of that mode.

To illustrate the point, to get to my nearest station, Blackburn, I nearly always use a bike, taking about 5 minutes, and I can do this with quite a lot of luggage. By bus however it takes a lot longer and, at the best they are only half-hourly. There are none after 6pm or on Sunday. A taxi costs £4 to £5 in each direction, hardly a cost effective solution. Walking would take up to 30 minutes for an able-bodied person. With so many advantages for the bike, why then is bike-rail and bike-bus not given greater emphasis?

The situation in the North West is particularly dire. Very few stations have cycle parking, and much of what there is inappropriate for long stays, especially overnight. Of the stations I have checked, only Bolton, Bromley Cross and Lancaster have lockers, for example. This compares very badly with the South East, for example, and East Anglia. Consequently I tend to take my bike with me on the train even when I don't need it at the other end. But then provision on the Pendalinos is ridiculously small and Virgin's booking system hopeless, especially this year. Northern Rail, I am happy to report, is far more flexible and it is excellent that the company has just launched its Cycle Users Forum, which will meet twice yearly in Huddersfield. Problems within stations are also significant, with probably the majority of small stations having only steps to one or more of their platforms.

We have similar – far worse, really – problems with buses. In rural areas, bus stops should have secure cycle parking, not to mention all bus stations. And why can't our longer distance buses take bikes like so many abroad do, just subject to luggage space being available?

But what about access to airports? From this point of view, Manchester Airport is great, at least by rail. Not by bus or coach, however, and

probably not by road. In contrast, Liverpool's John Lennon Airport is a nightmare by any method. Just why should Liverpool's airport buses generally refuse to take bikes whereas there is no problem at Bristol Airport's, for example? Each airport should have an accessibility plan, including access by bike.

It is not however just about bikes, but other mobility aids such as wheelchairs and mobility scooters. The scooter in particular is very similar to a bike, useful for getting to a station. But there is nowhere to park them, and they are not allowed on the trains themselves. And there is no question of course of a disabled person manhandling his scooter up steps! The wheelchair user is one bit better served in that he or she is allowed on the train, provided the platform is accessible. Unfortunately, many ramps are just too steep, up to three times the recommended maximum gradient – 5% - for short stretches! Even if on board provision is wonderful, there will be very little use by the disabled if access to and from that train, all the way from one front door to the other, is just too difficult.

Public transport can only be considered as one part of any journey. To maximise its potential, and the potential of all sustainable modes, it is important to look at journeys in their entirety and to include and promote forgotten modes such as the bicycle, and excluded people such as many disabled. Even the NWPTUF needs to start thinking bike far more in its monitoring and reporting, and too consider services for all classes of user, not just able-bodied passengers.

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