

# Dial-a-Ride: From Door to More



**Transport for All**  
Access, Rights, Advice

July 2022

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## Foreword

The ability to get from your living room to the exact place you need to is what Dial-a-Ride uniquely delivers. It provides mobility for disabled and older people where other transport services cannot.

Of course, ensuring continual advancements are made in access to all forms of public transport is essential, but even if there was an overnight transformation in access to our Tube and train network, the need for Dial-a-Ride would still very much remain.

By providing a door-to-door service Dial-a-Ride provides transport for people who simply cannot get to their local bus stop, let alone a Tube or train station. Yet while recognising the vital importance of Dial-a-Ride, we cannot overlook that the service is inconsistent and has a number of failings, most notably in its booking system. Huge telephone waiting times to simply make a booking are unacceptable; as are the high number of refused trips faced by Dial-a-Ride members. The service is also held back by its refusal to accept regular bookings, or to offer trips over five miles.

When I was first elected a London Assembly Member back in 2008 it became very obvious to me that Dial-a-Ride was not fully delivering for Londoners. I undertook in my first year at City Hall to reach out to Dial-a-Ride users and find out far more about the service. In the last 14 years I have repeatedly asked Mayoral Questions about the performance of Dial-a-Ride, seeking to put a spotlight on where changes are needed. I have also been joined by my colleagues on the London Assembly Transport Committee in key investigations into its performance.

In this report Age UK London and Transport for All have ensured Dial-a-Ride users have been listened to and given a voice. The report highlights how highly valued the service is, but equally how frustrating it is when the service does not work.

The recommendations from this report must now be acted upon to ensure every Londoner can move around our great city.



**Caroline Pidgeon AM**  
Liberal Democrat  
London Assembly Member



## Introduction

Dial-a-Ride is a free, on-demand and door-to-door bus service for disabled Londoners of all ages. The service, which is delivered by Transport for London, enables users to make the journeys they want to make. For many the service is the only transport available to them.

Since 2021, Age UK London and Transport for All have worked together to listen to Dial-a-Ride users so we can better understand their personal experiences. We are now working with Dial-a-Ride users to call for positive changes to this unique service so that it can make even more difference to the quality of life of thousands of Londoners.

Transport for All runs a helpline which aims to answer questions about accessible transport and streetspace. Over the years, helpline users have reported various concerns about Dial-a-Ride, including long waiting times when calling the booking centre and frequent difficulties securing the trips they want to take. Many Dial-a-Ride users report being unable to get journeys because of the distances involved or because bookings are not available. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, many of Transport for All's members expressed serious concerns about the future of the service, which is often their main tool to get from A to B and a lifeline when it comes to independent travel around London.

During the pandemic, local Age UKs in London reported serious concerns about increasing levels of social isolation among some older Londoners. For many the pandemic exacerbated existing experiences of social isolation. In 2021 Age UK London launched a campaign called Out and About. The purpose of the campaign is to call for positive changes to London's community infrastructure so that more older Londoners felt confident about getting to the places they wanted to and doing the things they wanted to do. Recognising the importance of Dial-a-Ride in tackling social isolation, Age UK London have been hearing from Dial-a-Ride users as part of this campaign.

Our two organisations have joined forces to create a window into the lives of Dial-a-Ride users and their personal experiences with the service. We recruited and interviewed both frequent and infrequent users of Dial-a-Ride, with the aim of producing a report that finds common themes, as well as differences in people's experiences.

We hope these experiences are listened to and acted upon by Transport for London.

Together with other insights they are intended as a reference point to make the Dial-a-Ride service even better. We believe significant improvements are needed.

Dial-a-Ride gives its users, independence, choice and control over their lives. It makes a massive difference to their quality of life and therefore it is vital that the areas of concerns and required improvements highlighted in this report are taken seriously by those with the power to deliver change.



**Caroline Stickland**  
CEO, Transport for All



**Abigail Wood**  
CEO, Age UK London

## Dial-a-Ride usage and customer satisfaction

Since the start of the pandemic, travel patterns have changed significantly. The number of Dial-a-Ride trips taken fell sharply during the pandemic. Although they have been gradually increasing, the number of trips taken each week remains significantly below pre-pandemic levels. In the first three months of 2022 there were 125,925 completed trips <sup>1</sup>.

There are currently 256 buses in the Dial-a-Ride fleet and around 60 additional vehicles contracted through Community Transport organisations used solely for the service <sup>2</sup>.

Customer satisfaction surveys have found levels of satisfaction with Dial-a-Ride to be high. Despite this, data published by Transport for London (2021) show that that the service has the highest number of complaints (per 100,000 journeys) of all Transport for London transport modes and services <sup>3</sup>. The number of complaints has fallen since 2017-18, there has been a significant fall since the pandemic and this is likely to reflect the decrease in demand for the service <sup>4</sup>.

## The research

In total, 14 Dial-a-Ride users were interviewed for this research. The questions were informed by analysis of existing information about Dial-a-Ride together with Transport for All's experiences operating a helpline. The interviews were conducted between November 2021 and March 2022. We did not seek to undertake a representative survey of all Dial-a-Ride users in London. Instead we wanted to understand in greater depth the experiences of a small number of users and the impact the service has on their lives. This report presents valuable qualitative research and is a unique contribution to the understanding of Dial-a-Ride in London.

## Why this report matters

The report shows that Dial-a-Ride can be a lifeline for the Londoners that use it and that it can significantly improve quality of life. There are many things to celebrate from the unique door-to-door nature of the service to the high levels of service from the popular drivers. The research has identified that there are also areas where changes and other improvements could vastly increase the levels of benefit people get from the service and that there are significant frustrations with the service.

Transport for London are working to improve the service. Through this report we hope to contribute to this work and we hope that the voices of Dial-a-Ride users across London, including those interviewed for this report, are heard and more importantly acted upon.

## Methodology

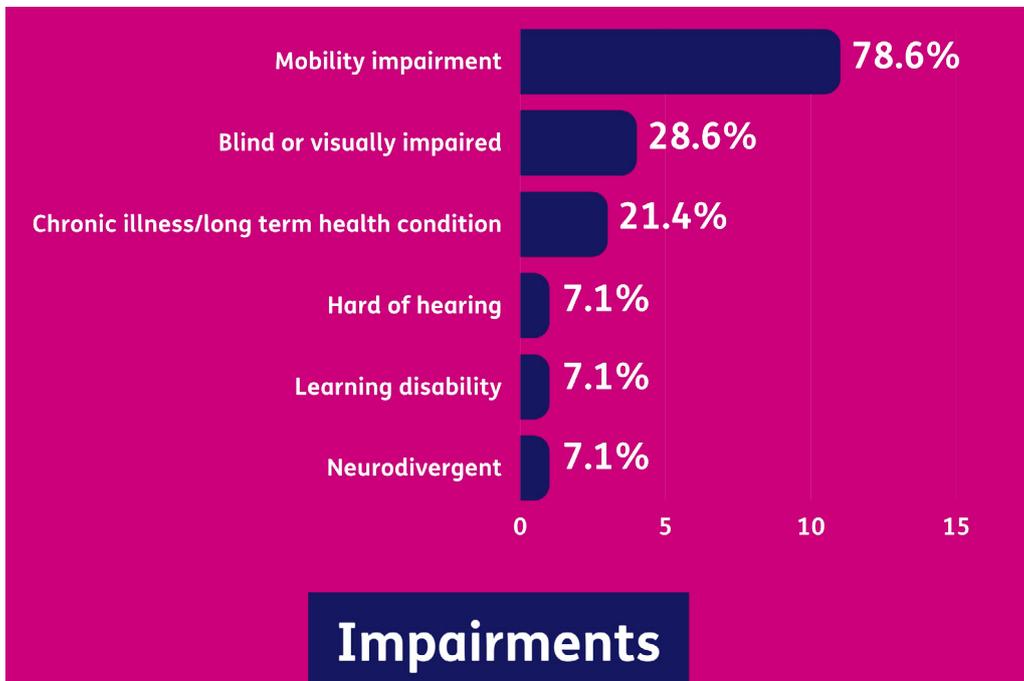
Qualitative research on Dial-a-Ride is rare. The research sought to capture Dial-a-Ride users' experiences with the service. We heard from 14 participants with a range of impairments and across all age groups. We interviewed 13 participants via Zoom or by phone and one participant provided their answers via e-mail. The interviews all lasted between 20 and 50 minutes and were semi-structured, with all participants asked a set of core questions. This structure enabled the conversations to flow freely.

The interviews were transcribed using Grounded theory (emergent design) to analyse the data <sup>5</sup>. This research method is widely used for the analysis of qualitative data, and it allows for the development of theories after collecting the data through the identification of common themes. We chose this method due to its flexibility, and to reduce researcher bias where possible. We identified seven main themes and 23 subthemes, which we organised into a qualitative coding framework. This framework allowed us to capture insights, verbatim quotes and guided the structure of this report.

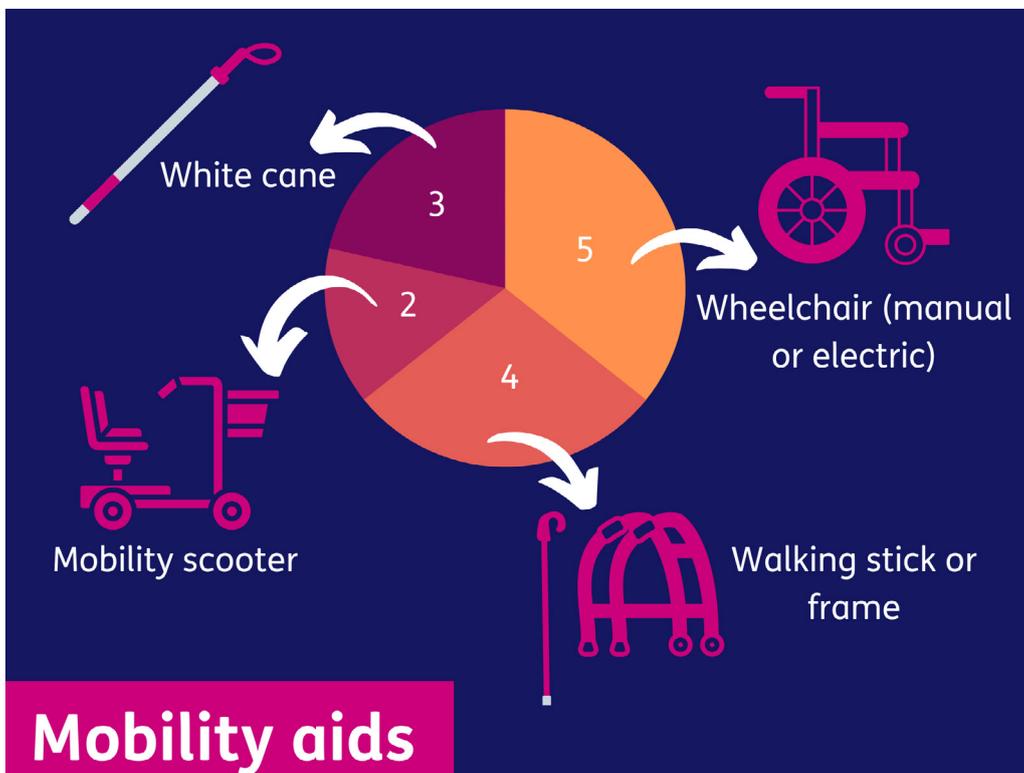
As with any research, there are a number of limitations when it comes to producing accurate reports. The sample size was 14 people and is therefore not representative of a large number of Dial-a-Ride users. The pandemic meant that participant recruitment at the time of the research was challenging and limited to online and phone channels. This impacted our ability to reach some Dial-a-Ride users including digitally excluded Londoners.

## The Dial-a-Ride users we spoke to

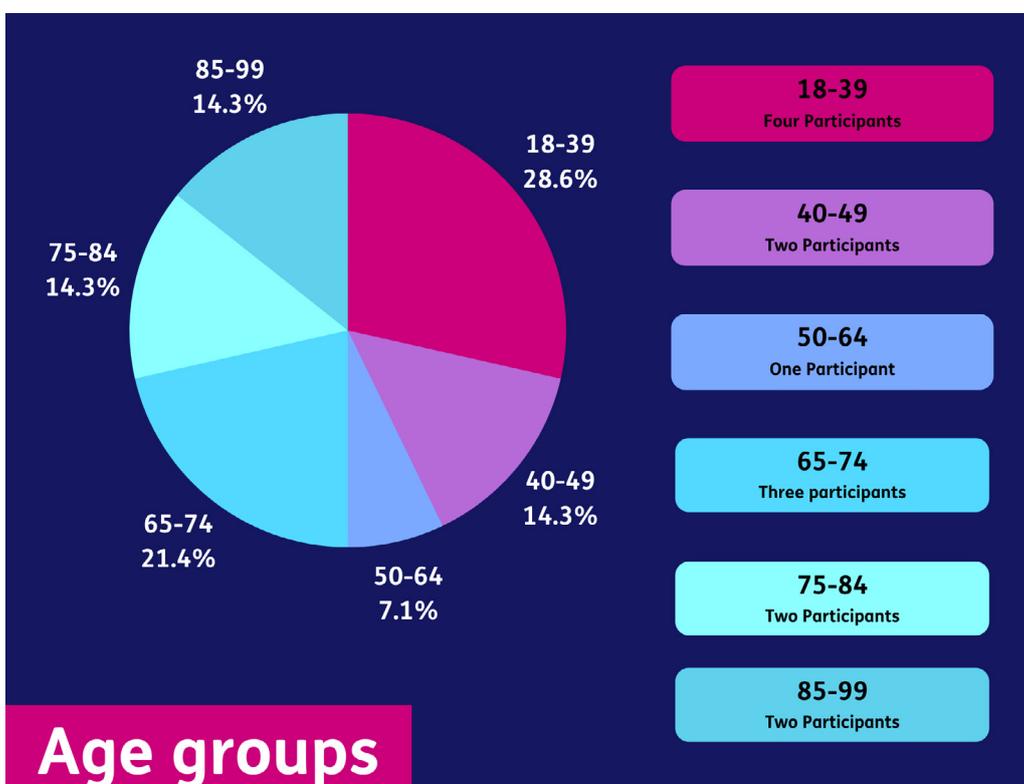
Interviewees were recruited through different accessible channels. The graphs below show key demographic data from the research sample.



This graph shows the impairment types represented by the research sample. Some of our participants have multiple impairments. Of the 14 participants, 11 had a mobility impairment; three had a chronic illness or long term health condition; four were blind or visually impaired; one participant was deaf or hard of hearing; one participant had a learning disability and one participant was neurodivergent.



This graph shows the mobility aids used by research participants. Some interviewees used more than one mobility aid. Five participants were manual wheelchair or electric wheelchair users; four used a walking stick or walking frame; three used a white cane and two used an electric mobility scooter.



This graph shows the age group categories which research participants belonged to. Four participants were in the 18-39 age group; two were in the 40-49 age group; one was in the 50-64 age group; three were in the 65-74 age group; two were in the 75-84 age group and two were in the 85-99 age group.

We are very grateful to the 14 interviewees for their time and support. Their participation is anonymous and pseudonyms have been used throughout this report. We mention an impairment type by the quotes in the main body of the report where we deem it relevant in the context of the quote.

Our thanks go to:

**Alan** (Impairment: Blind and deaf or hard of hearing; Mobility aid used: White cane and hearing aids; Age group: 65-74)

**Angela** (Impairment: Mobility impairment; Mobility aid used: Walking frame and electric mobility scooter; Age group: 40-49)

**Azra** (Impairment: Mobility impairment, learning disability and neurodivergent; Mobility aid used: Wheelchair; Age group: 18-39)

**Carol** (Impairment: Mobility impairment; Mobility aid used: Electric wheelchair; Age group: 50-64)

**Dana** (Impairment: Mobility Impairment; Mobility aid used: Walking frame; Age group: 18-39)

**Derek** (Impairment: Mobility impairment; Mobility aid used: Wheelchair; Age group: 18-39)

**Jamal** (Impairment: Visual impairment; Mobility aid used: White cane; Age group: 18-39)

**June** (Impairment: Mobility impairment; Mobility aid used: Three-wheel walker; Age group: 85-99)

**Norman** (Impairment: Mobility impairment; Mobility aid used: Walking stick; Age group: 85-99)

**Patricia** (Impairment: Mobility impairment; Mobility aid used: Walking stick; Age group: 65-74)

**Paul** (Impairment: Mobility impairment and chronically ill / long-term health condition; Mobility aid used: Wheelchair and crutches; Age group: 40-49)

**Roy** (Impairment: Blind; Mobility aid used: White cane; Age group: 75-84)

**Sharon** (Impairment: Mobility impairment, chronically ill / long-term health condition and visual impairment; Mobility aid used: Electric mobility scooter; Age group: 65-74)

**Trina** (Impairment: Mobility impairment and chronically ill / long-term health condition; Mobility aid used: Wheelchair; Age group: 75-84)

1 Caroline Pidgeon AM. Question 2022/1726, 'Dial-a-Ride (2)', [question to the Mayor of London by London Assembly Member Caroline Pidgeon, 2022](#)

2 Caroline Pidgeon AM. Question 2022/1729, 'Dial-a-Ride (5)', [question to the Mayor of London by London Assembly Member Caroline Pidgeon, 2022](#)

3 Transport for London, [Customer service and operational performance report Quarter 1 \(1 April – 26 June 2021\)](#)

4 Caroline Pidgeon, AM. [Question 2022/1730, 'Dial-a-Ride \(6\)', question to the Mayor of London by London Assembly Member Caroline Pidgeon, 2022](#)

5 Glaser, B and Strauss, A. The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research. Mill Valley, Bryant, Antony, and Kathy Charmaz eds. The SAGE handbook of current developments in grounded theory. Sage, 2019.

# Key Issues

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## Essential to quality of life

Dial-a-Ride users interviewed for this report spoke of the service as essential to maintaining a decent quality of life. For many users it is a service fundamental to their independence. Dial-a-Ride helps to ensure more Londoners are able to do the things they want to do.

Several of the users interviewed for this report described how Dial-a-Ride made the difference between being stuck at home or being able to get out and about. We heard from many interviewees about how it is Dial-a-Ride that enables them to 'get out of the house'.

“ It gives me independence. Without Dial-a-Ride I'd probably be stuck at home doing nothing. ”  
Dana

“ It's essential to my quality of life, to enable me to participate in the things that I need to do to support my wellbeing. ”  
Alan

“ It's important, it gets me around places for appointments, meetings, workshops, and it's very reliable and also it's free. ”  
Jamal

“ We need Dial-a-Ride buses for those people that rely on and need them. Otherwise you have no quality of life and become even more isolated. ”  
Alan



The interviewees use Dial-a-Ride for a wide range of activities. Most often the service is used for everyday activities like shopping. We found it is also common for the service to be used for appointments such as exercise classes and physiotherapy. These are appointments that are essential for managing health conditions and as part of ongoing rehabilitation.

“Dial-a-Ride is important to me because I can go to places like the exercise group, and shopping. If there’s no Dial-a-Ride I cannot go out.”  
Alan

“It’s not easy for me going out. I need a lot of help from Dial-a-Ride for them to take me shopping or to attend the stroke project which I go to on Thursdays and dance classes as well.”  
Paul

## Accessing support

Dial-a-Ride can open doors to support that might be inaccessible otherwise. In one interview, a interviewee spoke about using the service so they could attend a social club at a church. Another interviewee took a bus to attend a local group for people that were blind or had a visual impairment. It is clear from many of the interviews that Dial-a-Ride can bring people with shared experiences together, giving people the chance to talk with others going through some of the same situations.

“We meet all the people there. We talk to them because they are people like me.”  
Trina

“Dial-a-Ride is the only way I get out. I go to this group at the church. If I don’t go there, I don’t go out.”  
June



## Other transport is not an option

During interviews, we found that one of the key reasons why Dial-a-Ride is regarded as so essential is because other forms of regular public transport such as buses or trains are simply not an option.

“ I always used to get on the bus but I can't get buses now. ”  
June

“ I can't walk any distance and I can't get on other transport or anything. ”  
June

“ Dial-a-Ride, it is important to me because it gets me from A to B. It takes me to the places that I can't access using certain bus routes. ”  
Angela

Interviewees told us that other forms of transport, many of which they had used frequently in the past, were now physically inaccessible. For some, the experience of using other modes of transport could be extremely stressful. One interviewee that uses a mobility scooter spoke about why she found regular bus travel stressful.

“ With the scooter, I get quite panicky. I get worried that I'm either taking up too much space, or I'm not parked properly. So I'm an obstruction, or I haven't got the room to turn to get myself out. So I'm holding up the buses. ”  
Sharon (Impairment: Mobility impairment, chronically ill/ long term health condition, visual impairment)

“ Normal taxis, they refuse to take my walker and they say 'your driver is not trained, you need a carer with you at all times'. But I don't always travel with a carer. ”  
Dana

Along with buses, active travel like walking or wheeling is one of the modes of travel that provides particular challenges. An interviewee who is blind described walking on pavements as an experience that could be very frightening because they feared e-scooter users riding on the pavement.

“ I've nearly been knocked down by an e-scooter on the pavement. I can't see and travelling around on my own with my white stick is becoming more dangerous. I'm becoming more frightened to walk along the streets in my neighbourhood. If I need to pick up something from a shop it's easier to use Dial-a-Ride. ”  
Alan (Impairment: Blind and hard of hearing)

Many Dial-a-Ride users are former drivers but are no longer able to drive. One interviewee spoke about how being unable to drive was a key reason for using Dial-a-Ride.

“ Before I had a stroke I used to drive. But now I can’t drive because of my motor skills and because I get eye pain. I’m not allowed to drive for medical reasons. ”  
Dana

## The importance of a door-to-door service

One of the crucial differences between Dial-a-Ride and other forms of transport is that it is a door-to-door service. It is often the first and final part of a journey or interconnecting parts of a journey, such as from a station to a supermarket, that provide the biggest challenges. As a result, the door-to-door support offered by Dial-a-Ride is vital.

“ Dial-a-Ride is door-to-door so I don’t have to get dropped off half a mile away from where I’m going. So whatever my destination is, they’re not dropping me around the corner. They’re not dropping me to the nearest bus stop, it’s direct and that’s quite important. ”  
Angela

Interviewees also found Dial-a-Ride more reliable than other modes of transport.

“ I know I can rely on them if anything happened compared to other transport I might use. Dial-a-Ride is more reliable. ”  
Dana

## During the pandemic

While some interviewees used Dial-a-Ride rarely during the COVID-19 pandemic, others found the service more essential than ever. Journeys such as those for shopping, non-hospital appointments, to pick up prescriptions or to visit family were among those taken by interviewees during the pandemic. The users we spoke to said that they found the service considerably safer compared to other forms of transport.

“ It was good and safe. Because they were carrying only one person. ”  
Patricia

## Improving quality of life

Dial-a-Ride can play a vital role in both reducing social isolation and the risk of it developing. Many of the interviewees rely on Dial-a-Ride in order to make the journeys to places where they could connect with others. It is a service that brings people together with friends and family.

“ So Dial-a-Ride lets me go to places. It lets me socialise with my friends, see my family and go shopping. It basically gives me independence. ”  
Dana

“ I use Dial-a-Ride for visiting friends. It's social, it gets me out. ”  
Sharon

One of the ways that Dial-a-Ride can improve quality of life is by enabling people to socialise and go to leisure activities which can be so important to wellbeing.

“ I use it to go to social evenings, whether that be a pub or a theatre. I also use it to visit leisure facilities like the gym. ”  
Angela

Dial-a-Ride doesn't just take people to places where they can connect with others. The buses themselves are also places of connection and friendship. Many users have known fellow passengers for a considerable amount of time and have built a relationship with them. An interviewee described the moment when they saw fellow passengers upon the easing of COVID-19 measures as one of relief.

“ It was great to see friendly faces again. Because you get to have that regular contact. You see a driver that you know, things like that. So that was nice. ”  
Angela



## Enabling active lifestyles

For many interviewees, Dial-a-Ride enabled them to be more physically active and to get to places where they could exercise. It was common for interviewees to take Dial-a-Ride to formal exercise classes, but also to places like parks where they could easily and safely go for a walk or wheel.

“ When the weather was good, they used to take me to the walks in Clissold Park. ”  
Norman (Mobility impairment)

“ I also use it to take me to leisure facilities like the gym. ”  
Angela

“ With Dial-a-Ride I attend the stroke projects which I go to on Thursdays, dance and some other classes which I attend. Dial-a-Ride is always there to do that for me. ”  
Paul (Mobility impairment, chronically ill/ long term health condition)

One interviewee said that they planned to use Dial-a-Ride more in the future so that they could go to the gym regularly and take part in other activities to improve their health.

“ I don't go to the gym as much as I used to but I want to make that into a regular thing to help me improve myself. ”  
Dana

## A free service

Several interviewees mentioned the fact that Dial-a-Ride is a free service. This contrasts with other forms of assisted travel such as the London Taxicard service, which offers disabled Londoners journeys with lower fares compared to standard taxi fares.

“ It's important because it's a free service. The biggest selling point is, it's free. ”  
Derek



# Getting the best from the service

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## Booking availability

At the time of writing, Dial-a-Ride users were able to make one 'advanced booking' per week and could make an unlimited number of 'next day' bookings. 'Same day' bookings are also offered but availability is often very limited. Some interviewees mentioned that they could get bookings most of the time, whilst others reported that it was often difficult to get the booking at the time they wanted and that this had a huge impact on them. 10,823 requests for bookings were refused in the first three months of 2022, this is 7% of the total requests made during this period)<sup>1</sup>. Sometimes this could prevent them from making the journeys they wanted to make.

“ Sometimes they say they haven't got any vacancies for that time and they say they'll ring me back if they get a cancellation. They do sometimes ring me back and say they've got a cancellation but I can't always get the time I want. ”  
June

“ Well, if you use Dial-a-Ride, you will hear this message “one return journey” [a week] ”  
Roy

A number of interviewees mentioned that they are contacted if availability opens up as a result of a cancellation.

“ What they do offer is to put you on 'stand-by'. And if a journey comes up, they contact you. ”  
Angela

Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been limits on the number of bookings available to users. Some interviewees mentioned that it was not always clear how many journeys they were entitled to and when.

“ There was just one booking per week [available to customers] and they didn't let us know. I didn't even get an email or anything. It is just word of mouth sometimes. ”  
Angela

The pandemic resulted in a significant decrease in demand and many of the interviewees said that they didn't need Dial-a-Ride as much during the pandemic. Interviews for this report took place in January and February 2022 when there were significant COVID-19 measures in place. Some interviewees spoke of how they looked forward to using Dial-a-Ride like they had before the pandemic.

“ I would like it to go back to where it was, before the pandemic and to be given the opportunity to have two or three bookings per week. It’s not just the swimming pool. But going back to where we were before with visits to the community centre and to see my family. ”  
Alan

The inability to get the required booking can be stressful for many people that rely on Dial-a-Ride. One interviewee spoke about the stress they felt not knowing whether they might get the booking they wanted. The interviewee would ask their support worker to make bookings on their behalf because they could find the experience stressful.

“ They tend to disappoint and it raises my anxiety which is not very good for my health. ”  
Paul

## Regular bookings

In the past, Dial-a-Ride users could request regular bookings for activities organised at the same time and place, for example a weekly exercise class. However, at the time of writing regular bookings are not offered, and cannot be requested by users themselves. For many of the interviewees this was a source of frustration.

“ I had a regular booking before COVID, but then they stopped all the regular bookings. I was alright when there was a regular booking, I knew what time they were coming and I didn’t have to phone every week. ”  
June

Some expressed their frustration at being unable to ask for a regular booking and therefore having to spend more time calling the contact centre to make the same booking request each week.

“ I have unsuccessfully tried quite a few times to ask for a regular booking. To be taken to the Swiss Cottage swimming pool once a week on Tuesday, without me having to keep on phoning up every week and, sometimes waiting half an hour just to make the same booking. I find that very difficult. ”  
Alan

Most of the interviewees we spoke to preferred to make bookings over the phone. Some users said they were less likely to make an advanced booking by email because there could be a wait of up to two days for the booking to be confirmed. This is frustrating, and the uncertainty makes it difficult to plan ahead without being anxious that you might need to cancel arrangements.

“ You’re on a 48 hour wait to see if you’ve got (the booking requested), so you can’t make any other plans and that’s frustrating. ”  
Angela

The difficulty faced when trying to get a same day booking meant that some of the users interviewed found that they couldn’t be as spontaneous as they would like or make different plans if personal circumstances changed.

“ I’d love to phone up on the day and book it like you do a minicab. But you can’t. ”  
Angela

## Late arrivals

Although most interviewees reported that buses arrived on time, we did hear from some users that the bus arrived late on some occasions. For some, this had a significant impact and required them to change plans or miss important events.

“ By the time we reached the stroke project, they had already finished. ”  
Trina

“ But if the driver arrives too late and I’m unable to get to my destination, for example, for an appointment, then I have to cancel that appointment. So there’s a problem there. ”  
Alan

For those that receive support from a carer at home, punctuality was of added importance. The time many carers are able to spend with the people they support is usually very limited, with some sessions being as short as 30 minutes. Delays that take up valuable time can mean some people don’t receive the support they need.

## Limits on the distance that can be travelled

Dial-a-Ride journeys are restricted to short distances. Information published by Transport for London refers to ‘local journeys’ without reference to specific distances. Despite this, there was a common perception among the users we interviewed that journeys were restricted to five miles. Many interviewees told us that they believed journeys over five miles could not be made and that journeys were also limited to the borough where they lived. For some Dial-a-Ride users, the inability to get journeys longer than a few miles restricted access to certain services and prevented them from doing the things they needed to do. Limitations around journey lengths can be very frustrating because it can limit choice and access to better services. One interviewee told us about being unable to go to places in a neighbouring borough.

“ If you live on the outskirts of a borough or near the border with another borough, the nearest good shopping centre might be in the other direction. It just so happens to be in a different borough but the actual journey itself is same length, if not shorter. ”  
Angela

An allowance for journeys longer than five miles was something that several interviewees wanted to see.

“ I would like Dial-a-Ride to consider extending how far we can travel and whether or not we can go out of the borough. ”  
Angela

“ I think the mile radius is quite short as well. Five miles? If that was increased to 10 it would be much easier. ”  
Derek

“ It is very bad! I have had problems with the five mile limit of Dial-a-Ride for 12 years. I would like to go 10 miles. ”  
Azra

The restrictions on the distance of journeys often forced interviewees to take other less convenient forms of transport to the places they wanted to go. These journeys could be quite challenging.

“ It's dependent on where I'm going, you see, because Dial-a-Ride only goes to a certain area. If I wanted to go further, then I'd have to use maybe a black taxi. ”  
Carol

## Inefficient routes

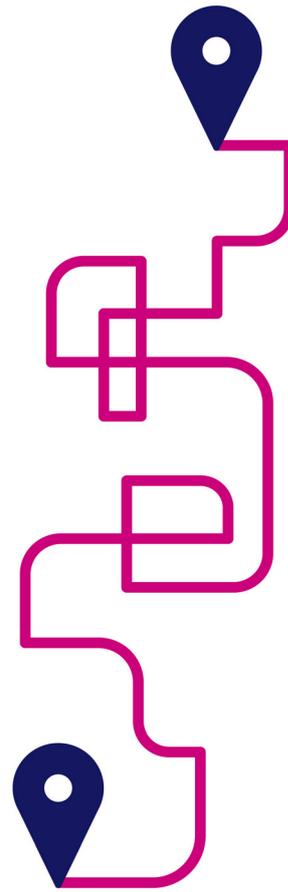
Many of the interviewees felt that the scheduling of Dial-a-Ride journeys was inefficient and could be improved. Some interviewees felt their journeys were unnecessarily long because the bus would drive very close to their destination before continuing and returning to the area later on.

“ The other improvement would be the scheduling. This happened to me just yesterday, it would have taken me five minutes to get home but it took me nearly 40 minutes because of the way the scheduling was done. ”  
Dana

Drivers were not blamed for this and many of those interviewed had sympathy for the drivers. Interviewees recognised that even the drivers saw that the routes assigned for each journey did not always appear to make sense.

“ We'll drive past someone's house and they'll say 'driver I live here, can you not drop me off first?'... 'No, sorry, can't do that. I've got to follow my route'. ”

“ It does seem crazy that it could near someone's home and they might be on the bus for an extra 20 minutes or half an hour even. ”  
Angela

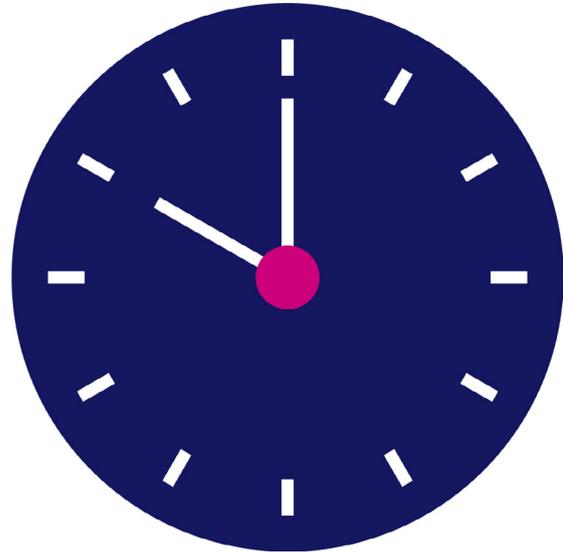


## Operating hours

Dial-a-Ride services do not currently run past 22:00. This has a particular impact on the social lives of many users and the type of activities they can do in the evenings. For some, this is one of many ways disabled people can feel excluded from certain activities, particularly in the evenings.

“ There’s a lot of places that because you’re disabled they shut off. It leaves you feeling (and I joke about it) yeah, ‘I forgot I am disabled, I’m not allowed to have a social life, am I, after 10 o’clock’. You know, I don’t go out after seven now.... For me, life is for living. I’ve had MS for about 13 years and you can’t let things get you down. Things like the timings is a big thing. You just want to carry on like nothing’s a problem. But unfortunately shifts determine when you can travel and when you can’t.

Angela



## Booking journeys

### Waiting for a long time

When asked about the telephone booking system, almost all of the Dial-a-Ride users we spoke to reported that they often had to wait a considerable amount of time before their call was answered. Several interviewees mentioned experiencing waiting times of 15, 20 and even up to what felt like 40 minutes. The long waits led to frustration and prevented people from getting on with the rest of their day. Some interviewees found the process quite draining, with the act of holding the phone to their ear for long periods of time very tiring.

“ I feel bad, sometimes I am tired holding the telephone. ”  
Patricia (Mobility impairment)

One interviewee tried to mitigate the impact of the long waits by placing the call on speakerphone. Whilst this was helpful to them, it might not be an option for some people, including those that use adaptive telephones.

“ It can take 40 minutes. Getting through is quite annoying, especially if I don’t call early in the morning. I used to hold the phone up near my ears, but it was quite annoying and I can’t always hold the phone so I just put it on loudspeaker. ”  
Dana

One interviewee who would occasionally make bookings by phone whilst on board a bus said that drivers would be surprised by the length of calls.

“ Even drivers, are like, ‘are you still on the phone to them?’ ”  
Dana

Two interviewees said they tried to call as soon as the booking line opened at 09:00 in order to avoid long waits. Despite this, they would often still have to wait for a long time. The intermittent recorded message whilst they were waiting for an answer was mentioned.

“ They keep telling you that your call is important to them and they will get back to you. You’re sitting there glued to the phone waiting and waiting. I mean, it’s usually 10 minutes or a quarter of an hour, but sometimes it’s twenty minutes or half hour. I’ve picked up the phone just after nine to make an appointment for the following week and they’re still not answering. They can’t be that busy at nine o’clock in the morning? ”  
June

One of the reasons for the frustration caused by long waits was because the process meant the user couldn’t get on with the rest of their day.

“ Sometimes you could be on the phone for over half an hour, which is very inconvenient. Especially like for me, I have carers who attend me or I might have a hospital appointment to go to. ”  
Dana

In one case, an interviewee spoke about friends that had found the long waits so frustrating that they decided they no longer wanted to use Dial-a-Ride.

“ I know lots of friends that have given up using Dial-a-Ride because they can’t hold on the line for as long. I’ve got this 97-year-old friend and she’s very sprightly, very with it and it’s because she has to hang on and hang on that she’s given up using Dial-a-Ride. ”  
Sharon



It is important to note that we did hear from some interviewees who said that they didn't always have to wait for a long time. However when the interviews took place in January and February 2022, many felt there had been an increase in waiting times compared to other points at earlier stages of the pandemic.

“ I normally get through straight away but sometimes I've had to wait in the queue and it's taken quite a long time. ”  
Jamal

“ It used to be that you could get through in five minutes but now it's 15 to 20 minutes. So it's got worse, much worse. ”  
Alan

Some interviewees chose to make telephone bookings at certain times because they had identified them as the times when waits would be shorter.

“ I have to say, when you've been using it for a while, you tend to find peak times and not so peak. I find between half past one and half past two is a good time. It might be some days, you wait just five minutes and other times it's fifteen. It's just pot luck, sometimes it's awful. ”  
Angela

In 2019, the average waiting time across the year when booking a journey during peak times (09:00 – 11:00) was three minutes and 56 seconds. It was four minutes and 30 seconds during off-peak hours (11:00 – 16:00) <sup>2</sup> Conversely, in 2021 the average waiting time across the year during peak times was three minutes and 38 seconds and 58 seconds during off peak times. <sup>3</sup>

## Cost of calls

The cost of the calls was also a consideration, and some interviewees were very conscious that the longer waits would see larger phone bills. An interviewee told us they were thankful for the unlimited minutes on their mobile phone contract.

“ It wouldn't be so bad if it was a free phone number but it's going on your phone bill. ”  
Carol

“ I've got unlimited minutes but I can imagine it being quite annoying for other people who don't have the minutes. And it might feel like a waste of money for them. ”  
Dana

## Calls being cut off

Some interviewees mentioned calls to the booking line being cut off before they were able to speak to a call handler. In 2021, there were three months when the number of abandoned calls reached over 3,000 <sup>4</sup>. One user said they had waited until a recorded message announced that they should try again later. On some occasions, the reason for a line being cut was unknown. Even though these occasions were rare, they were a cause of deep frustration.

“ It can just cut off which is quite frustrating because then I have to restart it again and wait for another half an hour or 40 minutes. I do normally get connected but sometimes I don't. ”  
Dana



## Speaking to the contact centre team

Whilst many interviewees had positive experiences of the contact centre team, some had found call handlers to be rude or impatient on occasions. One interviewee that had had a stroke which had affected their speech told us of their frustration at a call handler who had not made enough effort to understand what they were asking.

“ I had speech problems so my voice was quite slow and some of [the call handlers] were like ‘we can’t hear you and if you don’t speak up we’re going to cut the phone’ and I thought that was really rude. Then I say can you hand me to your manager if you can’t hear me and then all of a sudden they can hear me, only then they would listen to what I’m saying. I don’t think it should be like that. Why should someone get annoyed and angry just to be heard? ”  
Dana

A number of interviewees praised the service they received from call handlers.

“ When you ring them up they are always very polite. ”  
Norman

One interviewee noted that whilst they found the process of making a booking frustrating, they were positive about the call handlers themselves.

“ I’ve always found that the staff, when I’ve spoken to them, have been very helpful. ”  
Sharon

One interviewee that used adaptive technology for phone calls spoke about how important it was to have the option to make bookings by phone.

“ The telephone system is vital for me, absolutely vital. That’s how I manage, I do not use smart devices or anything like that. I use an adapted landline telephone, because of my hearing loss. I have special personal listeners and headphones over my hearing aids. ”  
Alan

## Reasons for some booking refusals are not always clear

Some interviewees reported that booking requests could be refused without a clear explanation. One example of a type of booking that can be refused are those that require a drop-off at a health centre or community hospital for sessions such as an exercise class or physiotherapy.

Dial-a-Ride cannot be used to get to hospital appointments. However, interviewees reported that contact team members were sometimes turning down requests for journeys that should have been permitted (e.g. to a local health centre) because of misunderstandings about the destinations.

“ Sometimes they say, I’m very sorry, we can’t do this journey. But they don’t give an explanation of why. ”  
Norman

“ It was every week for a set time and if I didn’t go the consultant would be like ‘why are you not going, it’s important for you?’. Then I’d be like well Dial-a-Ride is not taking me there. As soon as [the contact centre] hear you say ‘hospital’ they say no you’re not allowed but it’s more of a clinic that’s in the hospital. ”  
Dana

## Staying informed

We heard that it could be difficult to find out about changes to the service and other Dial-a-Ride updates. At the time of the interviews in January 2022, a large number of the Dial-a-Ride users we spoke to had not received any newsletters or the ‘In Touch’ magazine (produced by Transport for London for Dial-a-Ride users) for a considerable amount of time. It was quite common for interviewees to be unsure about what updates they should be receiving and how.

A lack of communication was particularly problematic during the COVID-19 pandemic when there were changes to Dial-a-Ride availability and operating hours.

“ We used to have a newsletter come out with Bank holiday timetables and when to book, etc. But because of the pandemic, that’s all gone a little bit haywire. ”  
Sharon

Interviewees told us that the main ways that they would receive information about Dial-a-Ride during the pandemic were either word of mouth updates from fellow passengers and drivers, or on the recorded message that can be heard on the telephone booking line.

One interviewee recalled that they had assumed the service was not running at all until they happened to pass a bus in the street.

“ I assumed that you couldn’t use Dial-a-Ride at all. Then I saw a driver one day, and he went, yeah, we’ve been doing journeys such as to the chemist to pick up prescriptions and things like that. I didn’t even know that I could ring up and say I need to get to the chemist. ”  
Angela

During the pandemic, many interviewees relied entirely on messages recorded for the telephone booking line.

“ The last time I used Dial-a-Ride they did have a message on their phone line to say to ring on a certain date if you wanted Christmas journeys. ”  
Carol

“ Now my way of learning about it is through the message when I’m calling direct. Otherwise, I wouldn’t know if they’ve extended the service or reduced the service or made changes. It’s through that automated voice message when we call. ”  
Dana

It was not just the hardcopy magazine that was missed. Information in accessible formats is crucial for many Dial-a-Ride users.

“ I used to receive a CD in the post with Christmas booking times etc. Now I get a recorded message on the phone. ”  
Alan (Impairment: Blind)

### Updates about booked journeys

On the day of a journey, Dial-a-Ride users will receive a text message to say what time their bus is expected and the name of the driver. A number of the interviewees mentioned how useful this was.

“ You get a text message to say your driver will be with you. Say you’ve ordered it for 10am and your driver will be arriving at 9.51am because they’re allowed 15 minutes either way, that’s fine. I’d be ready for that time. I try to be ready for them and I think that’s where the text message is helpful. ”  
Sharon

Text messages and calls are also received if a bus is expected to be late. This is something that many interviewees mentioned was very useful. Interviewees had found that traffic congestion was the main reason for late arrivals and there is an acceptance that this is something beyond the control of the service.

“ Sometimes they will come a bit late. That’s because a bus could be broken down or there might be traffic. Usually they do come when they say they will come. And now they’ve changed the system, you get a text message, to let you know your driver might come in, like 10 minutes, 15 minutes. I think that’s really good. ”  
Dana

We heard concerns that not all Dial-a-Ride users will have a mobile phone, or might have a phone but find it difficult to use when they are out and about. This can mean that not all users will be aware of sudden changes or if a bus might be late.

“ A lot of the customers don’t have a mobile phone or can’t see it, so they might not find text messages convenient. Because I keep my phone on me I find it a really good thing because it means, if they say it’s in 15 minutes, I could get ready. I’ve got control again. ”  
Dana

## Drivers

The overwhelming majority of interviewees were very happy with the bus drivers. We heard from several users who spoke of the drivers as helpful, courteous and often willing to go the extra mile.

“ I think the drivers are really nice and really helpful. And they’re really well trained. I do feel comfortable with them. ”  
Dana

“ Absolutely, you couldn’t want for better drivers with Dial-a-Ride. I find them very helpful, very chatty when you want them to be, you know. Dial-a-Ride drivers are excellent. ”  
Angela

It was however noted that some drivers were not always friendly or willing to chat. One interviewee mentioned that they worried some drivers did not allow sufficient time for someone to get to the door when they were being picked up. One interviewee who is blind and has a hearing impairment described this scenario.

“ The problem is sometimes I can’t hear the door. It’s so quick. So if I say to them I’ve got hearing difficulties and I wear powerful hearing aids, just ring the doorbell for three or four seconds or intermittently, so that I have time to get to the door. ”  
Alan (Impairment: Hard of hearing and blind)

1 Caroline Pidgeon AM. [Question 2022/1726, ‘Dial-a-Ride \(2\)’, question to the Mayor of London by London Assembly Member Caroline Pidgeon, 2022](#)

2 Caroline Pidgeon AM. [Attachment MQ2019 19607 – Question 2019/19607, ‘Dial-a-Ride’, question to the Mayor of London by London Assembly Member Caroline Pidgeon, 2019](#)

3 Caroline Pidgeon AM. [4775 - Dial-a-Ride Calls attachment – Question 2021/4775 ‘Dial-a-Ride \(2\)’, question to the Mayor of London by London Assembly Member Caroline Pidgeon, 2021](#)

4 Caroline Pidgeon AM. [4775 - Dial-a-Ride Calls attachment – Question 2021/4775 ‘Dial-a-Ride \(2\)’, question to the Mayor of London by London Assembly Member Caroline Pidgeon, 2021](#)

# Recommendations

In the research, interviewees were asked what improvements to Dial-a-Ride they would like to see. Based on their responses to this question along with information gathered from the interviews as a whole, we would like to see Transport for London work to deliver the following improvements. We believe action to improve the service must be based on proactive engagement with a diverse range of Dial-a-Ride users. This is their service.

What needs to be improved	Recommendations for improvements
<p>It is common for Dial-a-Ride users to be refused bookings because the distances are deemed to be long. Many Dial-a-Ride users say that they cannot travel over 5 miles even if the journeys are essential. This means users are often unable to go to the places they want to go to.</p>	<p>Allow Dial-a-Ride users to make longer journeys and ensure this is communicated to users and call centre staff.</p>
<p>There are often long waits for calls to the telephone booking line to be answered.</p>	<p>Users that have waited more than 10 minutes for their call to be picked up are offered a call-back within an hour.</p>
<p>Users are not receiving newsletters and other communications that include service updates and other useful information about the service.</p>	<p>Ensure newsletters and other communications including the In Touch magazine are distributed at regular points throughout the year to all Dial-a-Ride users unless they have requested not to receive them.</p> <p>Ensure all communications are available in a range of accessible formats including as audio CDs and in hardcopy format for users without internet access.</p>
<p>Many Dial-a-Ride members are unable to get the bookings they want.</p>	<p>Implement changes that enable Dial-a-Ride users to be guaranteed a minimum of three return journeys per week.</p> <p>Reduce the number of booking refusals as a proportion of total booking requests by 10% between September 2022 and September 2023.</p> <p>The design of any new booking and scheduling system must be based upon meaningful consultation and testing with a range of Dial-a-Ride users that reflects the diversity of Dial-a-Ride users.</p>
<p>Operating hours restrict when passengers can make journeys in the evening.</p>	<p>Extend operating hours to midnight on weekdays and to 1am on Friday, Saturday and Sundays (and Bank Holidays)</p>

Many people who could benefit from Dial-a-Ride are unaware of the service.

Undertake specific marketing and outreach activities to raise awareness of Dial-a-Ride with activities designed to reach those that would benefit most. With high levels of digital exclusion among older and disabled Londoners, ensure marketing activities are planned to reach all those that would benefit but do not have access to the internet.

Confusion around requests for health appointments that are not at NHS hospitals.

Build into the booking system an option to manually review destinations permitted for non-urgent medical appointments. Improve staff training to increase understanding around the destinations permitted for non-urgent health appointments and provide clearer information to Dial-a-Ride users on permitted destinations.

There are long waits for email requests to be confirmed.

All email requests for next day bookings to be confirmed by 17:00 on the day of the request.

Buses arriving later than the 30 minute (15 minutes either side) window.

Set a target to reduce late arrivals by 25% by September 2023 and publish data on the percentage of late arrivals.

Scheduling can result in longer than necessary return journeys for some passengers.

Commit to review the scheduling system and other available options to ensure routes are as efficient as possible for the largest number of passengers possible.



## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all of the Dial-a-Ride users who have given their time and shared their experiences. This is their report.

We would also like to thank the Age UK London and Transport for All staff teams for their support and hard work on this report. With particular thanks to Dee Byrne and John McGeachy at Age UK London and Emma Koprena, Alisha Pathania, Madeleine Stewart and Yragael Drouet at Transport for All who have led work on this report. We would also like to thank report designer Esme McKay.

We would also like to thank The Mercers' Company who have helped fund this report.

## About us

### Age UK London

Age UK London is a charity that campaigns for an age-friendly London. We campaign for specific change to improve the lives of older Londoners. We also work to ensure that their experiences, needs and contributions are heard and taken into account by decisions makers.

### Transport for All

Transport for All is the only disabled-led group striving to increase access to all modes of transport and street space across the UK. We are a pan-impairment organisation, guided by the passionate belief that all disabled and older people have the right to travel with freedom and independence.



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