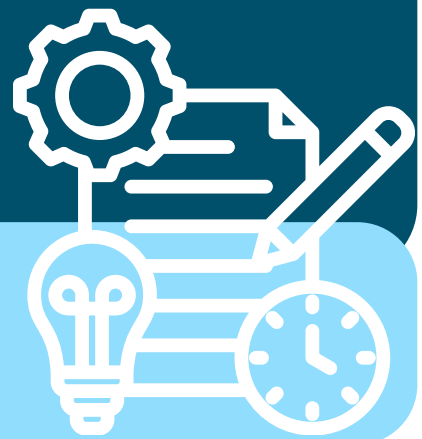


Living with a disability in Blackpool

Executive Summary



Introduction & Methodology



Healthwatch Blackpool collaborated with Blackpool Transport, Trading Standards and Licensing, and services within Blackpool Council, including Integrated Transport and Community and Environmental Services, to gain a greater **understanding into the perspectives** of those with **disabilities** locally. Through Healthwatch Blackpool's information and signposting function, local residents revealed challenges, including **lack of reasonable adjustments**, **limited wheelchair accessible transport**, and difficulties accessing **essential health services**. This project aimed to better understand the experiences of disabled individuals across healthcare, community activities and public transport.

A co-produced **survey** was widely distributed through social media, in-person sessions and on public transport, capturing the voices of individuals with various disabilities. A **mystery shopping exercise** further assessed local transport accessibility. Through this work, Healthwatch Blackpool empowered disabled residents to share their lived experiences, supporting efforts to improve inclusivity across the town.

A mixed-methods approach, guided by a theory of change, was used to understand the experiences of disabled Blackpool residents. We engaged with a total of **207 residents** and worked with a further **9 local residents** through our **mystery shopping** exercise. We spoke with **131 people via survey** responses and **76 people via focus groups** and face to face conversations. Paid advertisements were also utilised through our social media channels to further capture the insights of local residents and target key demographics.

131 through surveys

76 through focus groups

9 mystery shopping
exercise

Community health and care

Highlights



What is working well?

- Health and care support
- Pharmacies
- Specialist services



Access and experiences

- Transportation
- Satisfaction
- Communication
- Reasonable Adjustments



What are the barriers?

- Accessibility
- Communication
- Physical and mobility challenges
- Care and support
- Medication



Improvements

- Health care accessibility
- Service improvements
- Enhanced communication
- Public transport



What is working well?

- 47% shared positive experiences with community health and care services.
- There was particular praise for occupational health, pharmacies and specialist services such as the frailty team, stroke support and cancer care.



“Local pharmacy is working really well – They are fantastic, I can put a prescription order in the day before and get it the next day. Good that you can speak to someone without having to make an appointment. Very friendly.”



Access and experiences

- 80% of individuals found that the distance in which they travel to health and care services was reasonable.
- 23% of respondents identified lengthy waiting times as a challenge when accessing community health and care services.
- The majority of individuals requesting reasonable adjustments reported that their needs were met, often within a reasonable timeframe.
- 20% of participants disclosed that they do not receive any communication from services.



“Waiting times are long, I am judged by services for my disabilities.”



What are the barriers?

- The biggest barriers identified by survey respondents was difficulty making appointments or navigating services, followed by waiting lists and physical accessibility.
- 20% discussed further accessibility issues, such as delayed appointments and difficulties transitioning between NHS services.
- 18% of respondents mentioned communication barriers, such as difficulties in understanding medical terminology, and challenges communicating via the telephone.
- 15% highlighted challenges in relation to transport and building access, such as lack of disabled parking and insufficient wheelchair access.



"Communication barriers – we have to ask for medical professionals to simplify what they are saying."

"A lot of health services don't accommodate the anxiety that accompanies my struggles with autism, phone calls are often impractical for me as I struggle to communicate over the phone."



Suggestions for improvement

- 24% of residents shared inadequate accessibility to services as the main improvement. This includes the physical accessibility of healthcare buildings, with suggestions to involve people living with disabilities in the design of buildings.
- 22% of residents highlighted systematic improvements, such as reduced waiting lists for NHS services, availability of appointments and availability of services for children living with disabilities.
- 20% of individuals highlighted the need for better communication from services, including improved signposting, simpler language and enhanced communication between health services.
- 16% of residents emphasised the need for improved public transport in Blackpool, including an increase in routes to health and community services.



"Let real disabled people look at the accessibility instead of others deciding what's acceptable and accessible for us. Council's enforcement of making all buildings suitable for wheelchairs and disabled people like they are supposed to be. In all areas transport ,buildings, healthcare. Have discussions with the actual disabled community. Accessibility isn't a choice for us it's a need and supposed to be a right."



Community activities

Highlights



Types of groups

- Sports and physical activities
- Art and theatre
- Social
- Health and wellbeing
- Some do not participate in any



What is working well?

- Social benefits
- Physical benefits
- Variety of activities

Barriers



- Lack of signposting from social workers/ PA's
- Lack of general advertising
- Accessibility
- Personal barriers e.g. mental health, stigma, support from carers

What is missing?



- More physical/ sport options
- Activities for neurodiverse, visually impaired and deaf individuals.
- Signposting



Types of groups

- The most popular community activity, highlighted by both survey and focus groups, was sports and physical activities.
- 20% shared that they attend groups related to art and theatre.
- 15% shared that they attend groups specifically designed for socialising.
- 14% of survey respondents did not attend any community groups.

"I go to Warren manor – I enjoy it. We do sports and activities to keep us as active as we can."

What is working well?

- 65% of people said the best thing about community activities was the social aspect, citing feelings of acceptance, safety and belonging.
- 14% felt that there was a good range of activities available in Blackpool for people living with disabilities.
- 10% of individuals shared that the physical aspect of attending community sports facilities/activities was beneficial.

"Feel safe, you're not judged, get to have a laugh being around people that are like me makes me feel comfortable. People like me that are also autistic its nice to be around people like me. Similar interests."



Barriers

- The biggest barrier identified was awareness of activities, experienced by 40% of individuals. When asked, 78% had not been signposted to activities by a social worker/PA.
- Many people shared that they rely on 'word of mouth' to find out this information.
- 35% of respondents experienced accessibility issues when trying to attend community activities, including the physical access of buildings, financial barriers, transport issues and inaccessible times of groups.



"Activities for disability groups are often during the day, the assumption seems to be if you have a disability you don't work."

"I don't know where any of them are. I'd access them if I knew where they were. I can get to them my daughter takes me."



What is missing?

- 25% of individuals felt there is a need for more physical activities and sports related options for people living with disabilities in Blackpool, including more dance classes, team sports and more accessible facilities.
- 20% shared that support for certain disabilities such as autism, visual and hearing impairments, was missing in Blackpool.
- 17% felt that easily accessible groups were missing, and that improvements needed to be made to the size of groups, their location, transport to groups and also the timing of groups.
- A small number of individuals felt that support for young people living with disabilities was also limited.



"There isn't support out there for those with sight or hearing issues."



Transport

Highlights



What is working well?

- Some staff are helpful and patient
- Some feel transport is accessible
- NoW cards are beneficial



Impact on access to healthcare

- Hospital transport is difficult to access
- Limited bus routes and the lack of wheelchair spaces can impact access to healthcare appointments
- Availability of taxis



Barriers

- Buses and trams are sometimes not accessible
- Some staff are unhelpful and unsupportive
- There can be overcrowding on buses/trams
- Lack of available wheelchair taxis
- Cost of taxis is expensive

What is missing?

- Improvements to accessibility features
- Increased awareness and training for transport staff
- Accessible information



What is working well?

- 38% of individuals praised transportation staff in Blackpool, emphasising their helpfulness and patience towards individuals with disabilities.
- 35% shared positive experiences regarding the accessibility of public transport in Blackpool, including floor level trams, buses lowering for easy access, use of ramps and availability of braille.
- A small number of individuals shared the positive impacts of having a NoW card, allowing them to travel freely and affordably.

“The trams are now at floor level and buses will lower for ease on and off. People tend to leave the front access seats empty available for disabilities.”

Barriers

- The most commonly reported barrier was safety concerns, followed by lack of assistance and accessibility.
- On buses and trams, the biggest barrier was accessibility. This included physical accessibility, such as the position of bars or steps, as well as restrictions on timetables and NoW cards.
- Individuals with visual impairments reported inconsistent use of audio announcements, including them being too quiet or completely unavailable.
- 24% reported inconsistent treatment by bus drivers as a barrier, with a small number sharing overcrowding as a significant problem.
- For taxi users, the biggest barrier raised was the availability of wheelchair taxis. The high cost of taxis was also identified, with some sharing that this impacts their access to health services.
- A small number of comments referenced challenges accessing hospital transport.

“We took a taxi to Alder Hey. We had to pre-book it and they kept sending taxis with no clamp like bombers. They kept saying they can strap him in but without the clamp it isn't safe.”

Impact on access to healthcare

- 37% of individuals shared that bus routes and their frequency impact access to healthcare, including unpredictable bus schedules, lack of direct bus routes to healthcare services and inconvenient transfer times.
- 30% of individuals shared that transport does not impact their access to healthcare, with positive comments regarding buses in particular.
- 15% felt the accessibility of transport services does impact their ability to access health and care services, including limited wheelchair spaces on buses, and difficulties securing taxis.

“Yes because if you need to get to an appointment you would struggle to get a taxi. Also only one or two wheelchair spaces first come first served.”

What is missing?

- 43% felt that accessibility improvements needed to be made, including allowing mobility scooters on trams, enforcement of priority seating by bus drivers, and increased space on buses.
- 25% of people highlighted the need for increased training for transport employees, particularly around hidden disabilities.
- 23% of residents suggested improvements to information accessibility, particularly for those who are visually impaired and neurodivergent.

“Some form of talking timetables or a dedicated phone line for accessing bus times information if you are visually impaired.”

“Drivers and conductors need to be properly trained to understand that verbal communication might not always be an option, and that just because I do not remove my noise cancellation does not mean I am rude. I imagine this also impacts deaf people, as if they cannot lip read or simply cannot see the driver's mouth they would be unable to communicate with them.”

Mystery shopping

Highlights



Experiences

- Buses and trams were mixed, due to inconsistent accessibility and staff support.
- Taxis were very positive due to staff care
- Rideability was generally positive



Accessibility

- Accessibility of buses and trams is mixed
- Accessibility of taxis is very good
- Accessibility of Rideability is very good

Staff and safety



- There were mixed experiences of bus/ tram drivers, with negative experiences due to lack of training
- Shoppers felt safest in taxis
- Rideability staff generally demonstrated care

Suggestions for improvement



- Increased accessibility features
- Training of staff
- Companion passes for carers



As part of our efforts to understand transport accessibility, Healthwatch Blackpool organised a mystery shopping exercise. During our consultation phase, we recruited 9 participants with disabilities, who were regular transport users. The mystery shoppers undertook journeys on local buses, trams, taxis, and the Rideability service, documenting their experiences in post-journey surveys. Participants received Love2shop vouchers as a thank you gesture for their participation. Healthwatch Blackpool is deeply grateful for the time and feedback provided by our mystery shoppers.

Buses & trams

Overall, our mystery shoppers shared mixed experiences when using public buses and trams in Blackpool.

Accessibility

- Mystery shoppers generally found reasonable adjustments like ramps and priority seating were made. However, some experienced issues with the quality of these adjustments (e.g. unstable ramps) or inconsistencies in their provision.
- The majority reported that information was clear and accessible, however some individuals reported a lack of braille/large print on timetables.
- Experiences of access to priority seating was mixed, with some finding that these seats were readily available, whereas others had to either ask people to move, or were unable to access this due to overcrowding or prams.



Staff and safety

- Mystery shopper experiences with staff varied, with some reporting knowledgeable and caring interactions, while others noted a lack of confidence in using ramps and understanding the laws around service dogs.
- The majority of our mystery shoppers shared that they either did not feel safe, or responses were mixed. For those who did not feel safe, this was attributed to the drivers themselves or overcrowding on the mode of transport.

Barriers and improvements

- Overcrowding was the main barrier reported by mystery shoppers, alongside the cost of fares and instances where bus driver knowledge gaps led to negative experiences, such as humiliation.
- Most mystery shoppers believed bus accessibility needs improvement, specifically regarding space, seating, ramp access and driver training, with other suggestions including companion passes for carers.



"I use the app, so the information is clear and available, and there are live updates which help a lot. There were also timetables at the bus stop indicating which routes and times were available."

"With the first bus, I don't think he would have waited - he would have just set off. I didn't feel safe being on that bus at all I felt intimidated by the driver."



Taxis

Overall, our mystery shoppers shared positive experiences when accessing taxis and wheelchair taxis in Blackpool, at different times of the day. In general, they reported short waiting times and accessible vehicles, with staff who provided additional support when needed.

Accessibility

- Reasonable adjustments were made for those with mobility issues and visual impairments in all mystery shopper trips.
- Drivers demonstrated proactive assistance, aiding with vehicle entry, escorting individuals to their door, checking on wellbeing, and ensuring additional aids were available, such as ramps and hearing loops.
- There were no issues pre-booking taxis.

Staff and safety

- All mystery shoppers had positive experiences with staff, who demonstrated knowledge of disabilities and proactively assisted passengers.
- All mystery shoppers felt safe throughout their journeys, largely due to drivers ensuring they were safely belted in, driving slowly and checking on wellbeing.

Barriers and improvements

- Mystery shoppers reported no barriers when accessing taxis.
- One individual suggested a line for disabled people to call and request reasonable adjustments, prior to their journey.



"I asked the driver if he could escort me to the door which he did and he helped me get the key in the door."

"The taxi driver made effort to make me feel secure by driving slower, and was very efficient with using the ramp to cater for my wheelchair. She ensured the brakes were on the chair when in the hackney and made me feel at ease."



Rideability

Mystery shoppers generally praised Rideability's accessibility and safety, citing helpful drivers, accessible seating and easy booking. However, one shopper reported witnessing a driver not aiding a passenger, and another shopper mentioned missing trip information.

Accessibility

- Mystery shoppers reported that accessibility was good, including driver assistance, availability of rails, and accessible seating and safety features, such as seatbelt checks by drivers.
- Pre-booking was reported by all mystery shoppers as an easy process.
- Information was generally clear and accessible, however one shopper reported missing trip information.

Staff and safety

- All shoppers felt safe and secure on Rideability vehicles.
- The majority reported positive experiences of staff.
- One shopper reported a negative experience, where a driver failed to assist a passenger who had mobility issues, which resulted in an accident.

Barriers and improvements

- Mystery shoppers reported experiencing no barriers during their journeys, and had no suggestions for improvement.



"All drivers on Rideability are very helpful - only exception was one driver. Didn't help anyone on or off the bus. One lady fell getting off on a Cleveleys trip. He was still in the driving seat while passers by helped."

"The ease with which I was able to access it, the driver could not have been more helpful. The bus was nice and clean and upholstery bright."



Conclusion

Feedback on **community healthcare** was mixed. Some residents praised services such as **occupational health**, **local pharmacies**, and **specialist care teams** for their quality and support. However, many reported significant issues including **long waiting times**, **inaccessible facilities**, and **transportation barriers**, all of which hindered their ability to access care. **Communication** was also highlighted as a major barrier, with some services failing to communicate effectively, using overly complex **medical language**, or not providing information in **accessible formats**.

Community activities were generally seen as beneficial, providing **social connections** and supporting **well-being**. **Sports** and **social groups** were popular, but **awareness** of available activities was low due to poor **signposting** and lack of **accessible information**. Barriers such as **physical access**, **financial difficulties**, and **transportation issues** further limited participation. Residents suggested the creation of an **information hub** to centralise details about available activities, as well as more **tailored offerings** for people with specific disabilities, including **neurodiverse** individuals and those who are **visually impaired** or **deaf**. Some also called for better provision of activities for **young disabled people**.

Transport feedback was also mixed. **Trams** and the **NoW card** received some positive mentions for **accessibility**, but **buses** were frequently criticised due to **physical design** issues, **restricted travel times**, and **inconsistent audio announcements**. **Taxis** were described as both **costly** and **difficult to access**, especially for **wheelchair users**. These transport **challenges** were said to directly affect residents ability to attend **healthcare appointments**. The **mystery shopper** exercise reflected many of these concerns, with **taxi** and **Rideability** services praised for **accessibility** and helpful staff, while **buses** and **trams** delivered inconsistent experiences. Suggestions included better **driver training** on **disability awareness**, improved **ramp design** and more **priority seating** to improve **accessibility**.

In order to achieve a more **inclusive** Blackpool, significant and coordinated improvements across community healthcare, activities, and transport need to be made. Persistent **accessibility barriers** such as **physical**, **financial**, and **informational issues** continue to negatively impact **disabled residents**. Prioritising and implementing **recommendations** based on their **lived experiences** is crucial.

Recommendations

Community health and care

1. Enhance accessibility of community health care services:

- Improve the accessibility of healthcare services by ensuring ramps, lifts, wider doorways and parking spaces are readily available, enhancing inclusivity for people with disabilities.
- Include individuals with disabilities in the planning and designing of healthcare buildings to ensure they are accessible for everyone.
- Address lengthy NHS waiting times, with an emphasis from residents on reducing these to improve quality of life.
- Ensure clear and accessible signposting information within healthcare services.

2. Improve communication methods used by community health services:

- Implement a variety of communication methods that meet individual needs, such as face-to-face conversations, accessible digital systems, and clear and understandable written materials in the appropriate format.
- Health professionals should use clear, simple language and avoid using medical terminology.

3. Implement a holistic, person centered approach to community healthcare services:

- Improve communication between healthcare services (primary and secondary care) so residents can receive the care they need, without confusion or delays.
- Address medication delays and ensure people receive clear and understandable information about how to manage their medication.
- Ensure that staff are trained in providing reasonable adjustments, and that reasonable adjustments are consistently offered.

Recommendations

Community activities

4. Improve awareness and information of community activities for disabled people in Blackpool:

- Raise awareness of Blackpool Council's Local Offer webpage which forms a central information hub, listing all available community activities, including details on accessibility, location, and contact information.
- Use a variety of communication channels to promote activities, such as online platforms, community notice boards, and collaborations with local organisations.
- Actively encourage social workers and healthcare professionals to maintain a current awareness of local activities suitable for people with disabilities, so they can ensure regular signposting to appropriate provision.

5. Enhance accessibility to community activities:

- Community activities should consider the physical accessibility of activity venues, ensuring ramps, lifts and accessible toilets are available.
- Where possible, community activities for people with disabilities should be either free, or offered at a discounted rate, to help remove financial barriers.
- Ensure activities are available throughout the day and evening to accommodate for those who work during the day.

6. Expand the community activity provision in Blackpool, particularly physical activities, and activities for neurodiverse, visually impaired, hearing impaired and young people with disabilities:

- Increase the availability of physical activities and sports for individuals with disabilities, including specialised equipment and trained staff.
- Ensure there are activities available for specific disabilities, such as autism, visual impairment, and hearing impairment.
- Develop the offer of community activities specifically for young people with disabilities.

Recommendations

Transport

7. Improve the accessibility of transport in Blackpool:

- Ensure buses are as accessible as possible, including those with disabilities in future service design, to ensure wider aisles, secure wheelchair spaces, and easier-to-use ramps are incorporated.
- Address time restrictions on NoW cards, to ensure people with disabilities who are in full time employment can utilise the benefits of this provision.
- Ensure audio announcements for visually impaired passengers are consistently available and at an accessible volume.
- Increase the number of wheelchair-accessible taxis, especially during peak times.
- Ensure taxi companies offer alternatives to automated phone systems, allowing people with disabilities to speak directly to an operator if needed to request reasonable adjustments.
- Improve the efficiency of hospital transport services, by coordinating transport for those patients who live in close proximity to share a journey.
- Consider the introduction of a companion pass for carers to travel for free or at a discounted rate when supporting the care recipient.

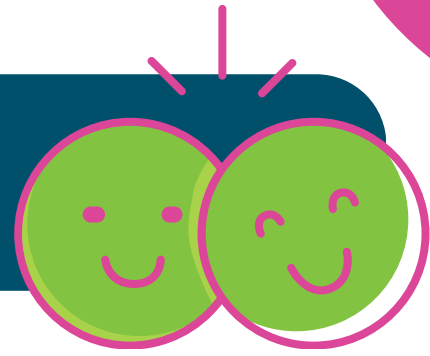
8. Enhance staff training of all transport employees in Blackpool:

- Implement mandatory disability awareness training for all transport staff, focusing on both visible and hidden disabilities.
- Increase awareness of how to assist passengers with mobility aids and service animals.

9. Improve information accessibility on transport services:

- Provide clear and accessible information about public transport schedules, routes, and accessibility features. Use a variety of formats to display this information, such as audio announcements, braille, large print, and digital platforms, to ensure information is accessible for everyone.
- Ensure that trip information regarding upcoming Rideability journeys is visible and accessible for Rideability passengers.

Thank you



Healthwatch Blackpool expresses **sincere gratitude** to all who contributed to this project. The **valuable insights** shared by **community members** through surveys, focus groups, and the mystery shopping exercise have been instrumental in shaping our work.

We also extend our thanks to the **local organisations** that generously welcomed us into their activities and forums, and to **Blackpool Transport** and **Rideability** for their support in promoting the project and helping to facilitate the mystery shopper exercise.



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