



Independent Review of York City Centre Disabled Access Offer

Introduction

Disabled Motoring UK (DMUK) was invited to carry out a desk based independent review of York City centre disabled access offer. The City of York Council (CYC) has an ambition to make the city carbon neutral by 2030 and removing vehicular access (or significantly reducing it) will undoubtedly help towards achieving this ambition. CYC has also taken seriously its responsibility to keep its citizens safe by implementing government guidance on Safer Public Places regarding city centre access.

In response to the Coronavirus pandemic the CYC Executive have adopted a one-year Covid-19 Economic Recovery strategy which includes an extension to the city footstreets and extended the hours they are in force. This enables the council to protect its citizens by creating extra space for social distancing, allow businesses to continue to operate safely using the extra space and fits with the council's carbon neutral ambition as well protecting citizens from security risks.

The CYC has undertaken significant engagement with the local community including citizens with restricted mobility pre-covid-19, and since the outbreak urgent changes were implemented to protect the health and safety of the public in general.

Access

York is a beautiful historic walled city which attracts many thousands of visitors each year. One in five of those visitors will have some form of disability. In the UK, approximately seven million people of working age have a disability, which all adds up to an awful lot of spending power. This is known as the "purple pound" and is reckoned to be worth around £249bn to the UK economy. Whatever landscape CYC wants in the future for its city centre, it must be open and welcoming to people with disabilities. Not only must it do this from a legal perspective, but it is vital from an economic perspective as well. As part of its ambitious plans for the future of the city centre CYC should include ambitious aspirations for accessibility and inclusivity. There is no reason why York cannot create a model of accessibility that others can use as a blueprint to follow.

There will need to be investment to make that happen, but the long-term benefits will more than justify the initial investment.

Engagement with the local community has already taken place and is ongoing. This must continue. It is vital that issues and concerns are discussed and addressed where possible. Openness and transparency with all stakeholders, including those with restricted mobility is key to fostering trust and understanding between all parties affected by the changes. An Equalities Impact Assessment was carried out as part of the temporary footstreet extension scheme and as a result 56 new Blue Badge disabled parking spaces have been put in place at different locations, 40 of which are at Monk Bar Car park. There is considerable support in favour of the footstreet extension scheme but there are also concerns from disabled groups and individuals that need to be addressed. People with disabilities are often thought of as one homogenous group but this is a fundamental error. Unfortunately it is also a common error. Disability is a word which covers a multitude of different conditions both mental as well as physical and within any one of those conditions there will be varying degrees of severity of the condition. It therefore stands to reason that there is no one solution that will suit all disabilities. There is no point wasting time and effort trying to find a single solution (many have tried and failed) but rather the strategy should be to adopt a flexible approach and find multiple solutions that benefit a much wider proportion of the disabled community. When vehicular access to streets is taken away, disabled citizens quite understandably feel shut out and discriminated against. Often the reason is that they park their vehicle in the street to carry out a particular action, for example to visit the bank or post office or a particular retailer. Therefore it is logical to make sure that measures are put in place to allow that action to continue for that person. In the vast majority of cases an alternative solution can be found and suggested, often with help and co-operation from the individual or group concerned.

Every city is unique and will have its own challenges and York is no different. In places the street architecture does not help those with restricted mobility and this has to be taken into consideration. Cobbled streets and uneven or slippery surfaces are not helpful to wheelchair and powerchair users and no more so for ambulant disabled people. However the extra space that footstreets provide will be welcome for most disabled citizens provided the surfaces are in good condition. Navigating the city landscape from parking areas to the footstreets and city centre is a big concern and accessible routes need to be signposted. All accessible routes must first and foremost be safe for people with disabilities to use. They should have rest areas (a place to sit so the person can rest) at regular distances, dropped kerbs at appropriate points and hand/guard rails fitted where necessary. All routes must be tactile to assist those with visual impairments. For those not able to make the distance from the parking area to the centre, a low speed (20mph max), green (EV), free, accessible shuttle vehicle should be provided to transfer disabled people from the parking hubs to the centre and footstreets. This service might be provided with the help and co-operation of access providers like Shopmobility and other community transport providers. It is commendable that CYC has provided a free taxi shuttle service from Monk Bar car park where 40 new disabled bays have been provided to the centre, but this should be seen as a temporary

measure not a long-term solution. The service is being used and appreciated, which can be evidenced by the complimentary comments made by those who use it. However it has to be acknowledged that the taxi shuttle service will not help everyone. Many of will not even know of its existence unless there is significant publicity of it.

Public Transport

Using public transport as an alternative means of gaining access to the city centre is an option that may be realistic for some disabled citizens, however for many it will not be an option at all. An audit of accessible transport provision must be undertaken as part of the planning for future city access. Not only should buses, taxi's and trains be accessible and offer a good service, the routes to and from their terminus and drop off points must be accessible. Often disabled citizens are put off from using these methods of transport as they have to book in advance to get assistance or when attempting to use the transport find there is no space available for them to use. A large amount of disabled people have reported having a bad experience (very often multiple poor experiences) when trying to use public transport and many do not trust it as a safe means of transportation. There is a substantial amount of work to do to gain trust in public transport and assurances will need to be made that journeys will be safe, regular and reliable. Many disabled citizens will plan their journeys in advance for a variety of reasons and having the confidence of knowing that their journey to and from their desired destination will happen is incredibly important to them.

Parking

York has approximately 7,500 Blue badge holders and there will be considerably more Blue Badge holders visiting the city throughout the year. Nationally it is estimated for every disabled bay there are 38 Blue Badge holders. The Blue Badge eligibility criteria changed in August 2019 to include people with hidden (unseen) disabilities and as a result Blue Badge applications are expected to rise. This will put increasing pressure on existing disabled bays. It is therefore paramount that disabled bays are kept available for genuine Blue Badge holders and not abused. It is commendable that the CYC has a policy of enforcement and that it prosecutes Blue Badge abuse and misuse. This is definitely an excellent deterrent that works and must continue. It also sends a very clear and strong message to the local community that Blue Badge abuse in York will not be tolerated. Currently parking for Blue Badge holders in council controlled car parks is free of charge, again this is highly commendable, but taking this approach does tempt other motorists to try to "get away with it" by parking in the bays which denies genuine Blue Badge holders the bay and increases levels of abuse and misuse. A future policy of charging a concessionary rate for parking should be considered. This would help reduce the temptation to abuse the bays and protect more bays for genuine users. An example of a concession which makes a reasonable adjustment would be "The first hour is free for Blue Badge holders". This would allow for the extra time needed for disabled citizens to gain step free access to goods and services without being penalized due to their disability (a reasonable adjustment).

If the temporary footstreets are to remain in place post pandemic, consideration should be given to creating “parking hubs” for Blue Badge holders as close to the limits of the closed off areas as possible. Accessible routes and assistance providers can then be provided to assist disabled citizens complete their journey into the closed off footstreets and city centre from the parking hubs. The ratio between off street council owned car parks and privately owned car parks in the city is approximately 50/50. Unfortunately, due to time constraints it has not been possible to ascertain the number of accessible bays and what charging mechanisms are in use in the privately owned car parks. An audit of private owned car parks is required so a true picture of the accessible parking offer in the city can be established.

Summary and recommendations

The extension of the footstreets will be a genuine concern for some disabled citizens who would normally park their vehicles in those streets on a regular basis to carry out a particular action/task. CYC has taken steps to provide extra alternative parking spaces elsewhere and provided a shuttle service at no cost to the user. It is vitally important that communication remains open and ongoing to try to overcome any difficulties posed by the footstreet extension until a full physical access audit can be carried out. This is the only way CYC can truly understand the impact of the measures and find solutions to mitigate those impacts which will inform future decision making on the future of the footstreets and the Local Transport Plan.

The future access of York city centre and footstreets needs to be given equal gravity when considered alongside the security and carbon neutral plans and all three streams should be considered together as part of the master plan, ensuring that York remains an open, inclusive, economically vibrant and safe place for citizens to enjoy.

Recommendations

1. It is recommended that as soon as it is safe to do so, a detailed on-site audit of accessibility is carried out by a qualified access auditor. This must be a comprehensive audit of the area (not just the footstreets) including access routes from the station, bus stops and car parks.
2. CYC should consider appointing an Access Officer to work with the council on access issues and ensure inclusivity in decision making. The Access Officer should also be a liaison for local disabled citizens and groups. This position would be ideally suited to a qualified Access Auditor with lived experience of disability.
3. An audit of accessible local public transport should take place to establish what the access offer is and how it can be improved for the future. Again this piece of work should be carried out by a qualified Access Auditor with lived experience of disability.

4. It is recommended that CYC develops a close working relationship with access providers like Shopmobility, dial-and-ride and other community transport providers. Although it is understood that CYC does provide some funding to Shopmobility, the links need to be strengthened and developed to ensure an excellent service can be provided to customers.
5. An audit of privately owned car parks in York should be carried out to establish the true number and availability of disabled parking spaces in the area and what (if any) concessionary charges are made to Blue Badge holders.
6. In CYC car parks consideration should be given to introducing a concessionary charge for Blue Badge holders. This can only be justified if the car park manages the disabled parking provision and protects it for genuine Blue Badge holders. All CYC car parks should be safe places for citizens to park and leave their vehicles and therefore it is recommended that CYC invests in a safer parking scheme owned by the British Parking Association.
7. If footstreets are to remain post Covid-19 and CYC are continuing to focus on carbon reduction initiatives and security protocols, it is recommended that as part of the master plan CYC should consider identifying "Parking Hubs" to welcome visitors to the city before continuing their journey into the centre via other transport methods e.g. walking, cycling, assisted travel from the hubs using low speed EV shuttle service.
8. It is recommended that CYC invests in accessible routes from parking and other transport hubs into the center and footstreets. These routes should be signposted and meet all the criteria required to ensure a safe transition from the transport hubs to the centre for citizens with restricted mobility. An access audit of these routes should be carried out and recommendations made.