
ABSTRACT

Policy Must Be Truly Inclusive for a Fairer World

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The importance of inclusive engagement within infrastructure design

For two years, MP Smarter Travel has facilitated the Accessibility Working Group (AWG) project for Lambeth Council. The aim of the group was to help their planners design infrastructure that makes walking, wheeling and cycling around the borough easier, ensuring that street designs do not present barriers to disabled people moving actively and independently.

MP Smarter Travel facilitated monthly meetings with ten Lambeth residents living with a range of disabilities (including visual and mobility impairments and neurodivergence), collecting invaluable insight into issues such as signage, colourful crossings, continuous footway design, and the positioning and style of benches.

The AWG's design ideas were reviewed by a highways engineer to ensure adherence to legislation. We then presented the findings and recommendations to Lambeth Council for progression through the usual democratic process.

The feedback from the group has informed the council's decisions on how they keep inclusivity central to the layout of their roads, parks and transport facilities. The project has enabled Lambeth Council to reimagine the borough's street space so everyone can experience the freedom to move and travel more actively and independently.

"People with disabilities often don't feel like they're involved. It is nice to feel useful, included and involved in decision making" - AWG member.

Priority area one, Research into conflicting access needs or access frictions: Facilitating residents living with a range of disabilities (including visual and mobility impairments and neurodivergence) to access active travel infrastructure using measures such as signage, colourful crossings, continuous footway design, and the positioning and style of benches has reduced access friction for disabled individuals within the London Borough of Lambeth.

This project has helped Lambeth Council to reimagine the borough's street space so everyone can experience the freedom to move and travel more actively and independently.

Keywords: Accessibility; Disabled People; Accessibility Working Group; Active Travel; Engagement; Street design

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Background to formation of Lambeth's Accessibility Working Group

"All people want is to try and have a full life and get out and about and travel up and down the places, to get where they want to go." (Member of the Accessibility Working Group)

According to Lambeth's *State of the Borough 2022* report, 12.7% of the borough population say that their daily activities are limited to some extent by health problems or disability. With a total population of 317,600 (2021), that is over 40,000 people who face limitations imposed upon them by the environment where they live (Lambeth Council, 2022).

The *Office of National Statistics census 2021* says that 7.8% (23,000) of people in Lambeth identified as disabled and limited a lot, 9.3% (29,500) identified as being disabled and limited a little, and 83% (263,600) identified as being non-disabled people (Office of National Statistics, 2021). This is lower than the national percentage of people identifying as disabled, which is 24%. Using "Disabled under the Equality Act" as an indicator, 13.2% of people in Lambeth identified as disabled, the same as the London-wide percentage (Trust for London, August 2023). London has a relatively young population compared with the rest of the UK. Also, inner London boroughs tend to have younger populations than outer London boroughs. As the prevalence of disability increases with age, this could partly explain Lambeth's relatively low proportion of disabled residents (Trust for London, The age distribution of the population 2024 and 2014). Despite the relatively low proportion of disabled people in this borough, these statistics nevertheless highlight the potential for systemic unfairness that excludes a significant number of people from comfortably carrying out everyday activities that involve leaving their front door. This could be a lack of safe cycle infrastructure for people who want to cycle or badly designed cycle infrastructure that can confuse and endanger pedestrians, including wheelchair users and those who have hearing and sight impairments.

Lambeth Council's guiding principles (Lambeth Council, no date) include making its transport network accessible to everyone. The council says it is "not prepared to accept that many members of our community, including disabled people, are excluded from the transport network because their needs are not met...We need to ensure that the benefits of improved public realm and better conditions for walking and cycling are shared by everyone."

In line with this philosophy, the council commissioned MP Smarter Travel to set up the Accessibility Working Group to support borough planners in designing infrastructure that makes cycling as well as wheeling and walking around the borough easier for everyone and at the same time, not adversely affect disabled pedestrians' ability to navigate the borough's streets.

The Accessibility Working Group brought together a diverse group of disabled Lambeth residents, representing people who have vision, hearing and mobility impairments, and people who are neurodivergent.

As a result of its diversity, the group was able to look at cycling infrastructure from the point of view of a user and also from the point of view of having to navigate the infrastructure and be aware of people cycling around them. There are challenges from both perspectives.

Creating a group of people that feeds back on issues relating to disability and cycling on a regular basis ensures that issues are kept live and the council can monitor effectiveness, ensure continuous improvement, and, importantly, they can promote embedding inclusive

design from the outset of any policy or design being implemented. Achieving this means local authorities would not continually have to retrofit measures to create fully accessible street environments.

Auditing standards of streets, from materials used to the design of the space, must be rigorous and regular to ensure highways authorities are doing everything they can to make their streets places everyone can navigate easily and safely. From the perspective of travelling by cycle or on foot, a cursory glance at some road infrastructure and people's behaviours in it highlights how the bar for safety and accessibility is often not as high as it should be.

How the Accessibility Working Group functioned

When Lambeth Council's planning team required feedback on the accessibility of a project, for example, shared space, key walking routes, cycle infrastructure and parking, they briefed MP Smarter Travel about the project. MP Smarter Travel brought the Accessibility Working Group members together for a round-table discussion with images, models and descriptions. The agenda was set by the council.

The consultancy organised site visits for the Accessibility Working Group to look at road layout and discuss what works and what could be improved. Members of the group fed back on current and proposed infrastructure and the policies around it. The group has provided feedback on the council's electric vehicle strategy and kerbside strategy.

As well as discussing infrastructure, the group put forward ideas about how best to describe an image for screen readers.

Examples of the group's impact: after feedback from the group about works at Kennington Oval, the council ensured accessible cycle bays were included, not just standard cycle bays. They also installed a range of seating types. Another example is the wall at Streatham Station, which includes a wayfinding mural with highly contrasting colours and is in a prominent position. In Voltaire Road, Lambeth, planters were moved to the kerb to free up pavement space.

With the aim of making Lambeth's streets welcoming places for disabled people, the Accessibility Working Group brought together individuals to act as consultants-by-experience. Their role was to inform the council before it made decisions that affected transport and street design projects. The council paid members for their time in either vouchers or as a direct payment into their bank account depending on their preference. Their transport, where requested, was organised, travel expenses were paid and food was provided at the engagement sessions.

The group's ideas were reviewed by a highways engineer to ensure adherence to legislation before its recommendations were presented to the council for progression through the usual democratic process. The final decision on street and infrastructure design and which recommendations to act upon rested with the council.

Policy must be truly inclusive for a fairer world

Policy can fall short of being truly inclusive, resulting in real-world street environments that present barriers to independent and active travel options for disabled people.

Working with an Accessibility Working Group on a regular basis ensures policy makers consider people's real-life experiences. Having an Accessibility Working Group brings a greater level of accountability for council officers and councillors as to how they implement their planning and design policies. Regular meetings with a focus group like an Accessibility Working Group enables a council to gather on-going feedback about how accessible its design consultation processes are and hear from disabled people about any shortcomings in cycling infrastructure accessibility.

Words and language are critical to meaningful engagement

Inevitably, language plays a huge part in how successful a council is in engaging with its residents. With regard to terminology, both in this paper and in Lambeth Council consultation materials, “Disabled people” is used. This is the preferred choice of language by disabled people as documented in the Social Model of Disability.

From the Social Model of Disability perspective: “A disability is caused by society’s unwillingness to meet the needs of people with impairments. As a result, the term ‘Disabled people’ is used to describe people with impairments who are disabled by barriers constructed by society” (Disability Rights UK, no date).

“Impairment is distinguished from disability. The former is individual and private, the latter is structural and public” (Shakespeare, 2025, The Social Model of Disability).

However, as with any group of people, there is diversity among disabled people. Many disabled people may not relate to the term “Disabled person”. Having monthly meetings with a diverse Accessibility Working Group provides the opportunity to look at the world through the social model, which recognises that systems disable some people. This is the opposite of the medical model of disability, which views people as disabled by their impairments or conditions (Scope, [Social model of disability](#)) rather than around language, as well as the project-specific work on reprioritisation of the urban streetscape.

The accessibility gap that should not exist

There are some sobering statistics around accessibility in the UK.

There are 16.1 million disabled people in the UK. That is 24% of the total population (Department for Work & Pensions Family Resources Survey, 2022–2023).

Less than half of disabled people say it is easy for them to physically access outdoor spaces versus 78% of non-disabled people. About a third of disabled people report having difficulty physically accessing outdoor spaces like parks, countryside and woodland (Activity Alliance, 2023–2024).

Statistics for England show that, while 68.9% of non-disabled people are active for 150+ minutes a week, just 48% of disabled people have this level of activity (Sport England, Active Lives Adult Survey, 2023–2024).

Disabled people with mobility impairments make 38% fewer trips than non-disabled people—the recognised “accessibility gap” (The Motability Transport Accessibility Gap Report, 2022).

These figures point to huge amounts of evidence that thousands of people across the country are missing out on the social and health benefits of being able to get around actively and independently.

Understanding the challenges faced by disabled people regarding travelling by cycle in their neighbourhood

Each Accessibility Working Group meeting enabled Lambeth’s transport planning team and others across the council, such as the regeneration team, to gather valuable data and insight into the barriers disabled people face on their everyday journeys around the borough.

London has seen an evolution in cycling infrastructure over the last decade.

Along with continued investment in infrastructure, Transport for London (TfL) reported in 2024 that cycle journeys in London increased by 26% compared with 2019 ([Transport for London, 2024](#)). In 2024, there were 1.33 million daily journeys. In 2025, TfL announced £87 million in investment for London boroughs ([TfL, 2025](#)) to increase cycling in the capital. Funding will be for measures including School Streets and new cycle routes. The vision is

for people to choose active travel over motorised transport. Cycling is a major part of this transition.

Policy commitment to promoting active travel and making streets more welcoming places for people who cycle is a huge step towards healthier places to live and work. However, it is worth bearing in mind that a significant number of people do not have access to these benefits and are negatively impacted by the built environment around them. This includes cycle lanes both in separated and shared spaces and dockless cycles for hire, all of which are playing their part in increasing the number of people cycling in London.

One of the members of the Accessibility Working Group regularly cycles their journeys as a preference over public transport. Busy buses and trains present them with challenges, including anxiety. Cycling frees them from these challenges. Their insight is very informative, as it offers a disabled person's perspective of navigating streets in Lambeth by cycle.

They highlighted how important it is for shared use space to include in its design, clarity in where pedestrians should be and where people travelling by cycle should go.

Some members of the Accessibility Working Group want to try non-standard cycles and build their confidence on the road. For people who have not yet started cycling, infrastructure that makes them feel safe is vital to supporting potential behaviour change.

National guidelines already exist, so why is there a need for an Accessibility Working Group?

The Department for Transport published its document, *Inclusive Mobility, A Guide to Best Practice on Access to Pedestrian and Transport Infrastructure*, in 2024. Of course, authorities must comply with the Equality Act 2010.

Active Travel England has published design guidelines on making wheeling and cycling infrastructure as inclusive as possible.

We know that, just as with any section of society, there is huge diversity among disabled people and their specific needs. Before local plans are put into action, it is common practice that local people feed into the decision-making process.

However, disabled people are sometimes not included or heard.

In 2023 the *Disabled Citizens' Inquiry* found that inadequate infrastructure is unfairly discriminating against disabled people (York, 2023).

Sustainable transport charity, The Walk, Wheel, Cycle Trust (formerly Sustrans), partnered with Transport for All to share research and recommendations to help "put the views and ideas of disabled people at the heart of policy, investment and practice for walking and wheeling" (Sustrans et al., 2023). In their *Disabled Citizens' Inquiry*, 79% of the disabled people who took part said that a panel of disabled people that reviews walking and wheeling policy and holds the government to account would help them walk or wheel more.

Speaking to members of the Lambeth Accessibility Working Group, many disabled people felt isolated and ignored. They can feel forgotten. Just as keeping in continued dialogue with disabled people about language and terminology is important, it is vital to keep the conversations going about infrastructure proposals, changes to the street environment, and also how they can be supported in accessing consultation documents so they can have a stake in their community and fully take part in the democratic process. This is just as much the right of disabled people as of non-disabled people.

Comments from AWG members about the project:

"People with disabilities often don't feel like they're involved. It is nice to feel useful, included and involved in decision making."

“It’s good to know that Lambeth are taking on board what we are saying and it’s good to see that some of the changes have already been implemented. It makes me feel like some people are listening.”

Within recommended standards, there is a spectrum of requirements, starting with the minimum standards that must be implemented through to what could be regarded as a gold standard.

In Active Travel England’s Gear Change (Department for Transport, 2020), a minimum standard of width for a cycle lane is 1.5 m. Anything less should not be used. However, Wheels for Wellbeing argues that this width is not wide enough for non-standard cycles. In their Inclusive Cycling report (Wheels for Wellbeing, 2020), they say the ideal width for a one-way cycle lane would be 2 m to accommodate non-standard cycles. This is included in Cycle Infrastructure Design Local Transport Note 1/20 (Department for Transport, 2020).

The minimum standard provides a benchmark of where to start. Ensuring infrastructure is above the minimum standard puts disabled people at the centre of design usability. This is not a tick-box exercise. Going beyond the minimum means designs take into account local factors such as the existing streetscape, volume of traffic or transport links that may affect the accessibility of a proposed design. It also makes room for meaningful engagement with disabled people.

Highways authorities must ensure that infrastructure is significantly above the minimum standards. Everybody should be able to use all public infrastructure to easily travel around our villages, towns and cities. Every pavement and cycle lane should be wheelable and navigable for everyone, so nobody is disabled by their surroundings.

Working with the Accessibility Working Group, we gave the members the opportunity to explain how the infrastructure could be changed to make it more accessible for them. The highways engineer would work this feedback into his designs while ensuring official guidance was also followed.

For many disabled people, a cycle is their mobility aid, as often cited by the Inclusive Cycling charity, Wheels for Wellbeing. Their research shows that the majority of disabled people who cycle (75%) find cycling easier than walking, and the same proportion use their cycle as a mobility aid as they would a wheelchair or mobility scooter (Wheels for Wellbeing, no date). While many disabled people use regular bicycles, many also need to use non-standard cycles which require more space to manoeuvre. So, inaccessible changes to infrastructure can directly impact many disabled people.

Where there is a minimum and a preferred distance, the minimum can always be deemed to be good enough, even though it potentially excludes people who use their adapted cycles as a means of being able to travel independently and actively. It is also worth noting that for people with visual impairments, a tandem may also be one way they can travel (Department for Transport, 2020). High-standard cycle infrastructure can transform people’s lives, increasing their independence and self-confidence.

Lack of accessibility means disabled people often experience problems reaching their destination. The percentage of people affected in this way is highest among people with visual impairments (64%). Fifty-eight per cent of people who have hearing impairments, 55% of people with mobility impairments and 55% of people with learning disabilities are also negatively affected in this way (Sustrans, Transport for All, 2023).

A member of the Lambeth Accessibility Working Group, who is visually impaired, describes the challenges he experiences navigating London’s busy streets in a blog. He says: “When you’re non-disabled, you don’t think twice about dodging out the way of a scooter, swerving a

street sign that's in the middle of the pavement or avoiding roadworks and slippery surfaces. But for some of us, this is a big deal and can be dangerous or have a negative impact on self-confidence and how some people may feel about going outside their front door." (Adom, 2025).

Even though there are legal requirements to abide by, it is vitally important to always keep live discussions going with disabled people about proposed changes to the street environment. *Gear Change* states: "Public consultation is not a mandatory requirement, however, engagement with those likely to be affected is strongly recommended, particularly groups representing Disabled people" (Department for Transport, 2020).

Engagement is not compulsory, but seeing the effectiveness first-hand of Lambeth's Accessibility Working Group, every planning and highways authority should set up such a group to gain detailed insight and create fully inclusive streets and access points. In designing a place that enables disabled people to travel easily, we create a place that is welcoming to everyone.

Challenges faced by visually impaired people in navigating busy streets

Hard infrastructure to separate cycles from motor traffic, for example, protected cycle lanes, the increase in the number of cycles on London's streets and changes to street layout can present extra challenges to people with visual impairments as they navigate their way around the busy urban environment.

The point about protected cycle lanes in the previous paragraph perhaps demonstrates the importance of good design. The general findings are that protected cycle lanes are certainly safer for people who cycle (Adams and Aldred, 2020 Transport Findings). Shared space can increase stress and avoidance behaviour for some visually impaired and neurodivergent people (Lawson, 2022, *Journal of Public Space*).

One of the members of the Accessibility Working Group has been living with severe visual impairments for over three years. The loss of most of their sight changed their life as they had to make adjustments to achieve everyday tasks that non-disabled people tend not to think about.

Being part of the Accessibility Working Group has been hugely important to this person. It is also vital for policy makers and highways engineers within local authorities to hear about the everyday experiences of their visually impaired residents.

In his blog for MP Smarter Travel, Andre Adom made the point that we all feel better when we think we can exert a little influence on shaping our surroundings and be part of the decision-making process that affects where we live and work.

He asserts that if local authorities' engagement is exclusive, they will only ever operate within a narrow perspective. Making engagement inclusive makes it a much richer and more informative experience for everyone.

"If engagement is exclusive, you only get a narrow perspective. Making it inclusive is far richer. Nearly a quarter of the population in the UK is disabled. That's over 16 million people. There are two million people registered as blind in the UK. So we're talking big numbers of people who are often excluded or feel unable to take part in discussions about policies and decisions that affect them." (Adom, 2025)

When MP Smarter Travel asked Andre about what he thought was a particularly important aspect of the group, he said that it is a safe space where people can be open, and if they disagree with each other, it is always done respectfully.

The differing points of view highlight what should be obvious and what has already been raised in this paper. There are bound to be conflicting demands and views within an Accessibility Working Group. After all, everyone is different, has different needs and experiences the world differently from each other. That is what makes the group's work interesting, inspiring and necessary. All the members of the group are focused on the overall objective of working towards a street environment that is welcoming and benefits everyone.

An Accessibility Working Group raises awareness of these challenges that disabled people have to overcome every day.

Working with innovators for an inclusive future

MP Smarter Travel developed an exciting partnership between the Accessibility Working Group and The Engineering & Design Institute (TEDI), London. Third-year undergraduate engineer (at time of writing), Nicholas Solly attended the monthly Accessibility Working Group meetings multiple times.

Nicholas worked on printing 3D models of street infrastructure, designed to improve the representation of complex street designs. He took the prototype models to the Accessibility Working Group meetings. Group members took their time to hold the models and provided feedback on any changes that could be made to ensure they are useful tools for the public engagement process.

He worked with the group on a number of rounds of testing before finalising the models.

The 3D models are particularly valuable for people who are visually impaired. Nicholas creates models that have form and also texture. They are modular 3D maps. Somebody should be able to pick up the model and know it represents a T-junction or a parklet or a piece of cycle infrastructure, the types of road surface that are proposed and where planting could go. Members of the group can take the pieces apart and reassemble them to show how they would redesign the site in question for it to work better for disabled people.

Through touch, these maps help visually impaired people build a clearer understanding of the sites that the council is asking for comment on. They help people to provide the council with more precise feedback. Textured pieces help to differentiate between drop kerbs, pavements and roads. There are also pieces that represent features such as crossings, seating and street bins.

At the moment, this is at a prototype stage, but this work will provide councils and disabled people with another way to understand and visualise infrastructure design and ideas. TEDI is hoping that these models will become the norm in local government public engagement for wider inclusivity in the democratic process.

The power to influence policy and have an impact in Lambeth

The Accessibility Working Group is already having an impact on Lambeth's proposed street designs in the Kennington Oval area of the borough.

Lambeth Council asked members who were going to use the area to give feedback on graphics in three streets. These graphics were all located in pedestrianised areas.

Group members told Lambeth officers that keeping the graphics on the road rather than on the pavements would be helpful. High contrasting colours, larger graphics, keeping infrastructure such as planters and seating tight to kerbside to make the space easier to walk and wheel through, and clear signage were all points of influence they had on the design.

Following discussion with the group, graphics were removed from one of these streets where Accessibility Working Group members thought they would be problematic. In all cases, the council kept every crossing point—the space between two drop kerbs—clear and free of colour.

Members were concerned that cycle parking located in a pedestrianised area could be a trip hazard. The council is locating new cycle parking on the kerbside. Cycle spaces will be provided for standard, larger and adapted cycles.

One of the streets where a school is located experienced increased congestion during school drop-off and pick-up times, which can make travel through there difficult for disabled people. The council has introduced a School Street outside this particular school and another. This makes the street more accessible for people walking and wheeling their journeys at busy times.

The council tested different types of seating in consultation with the group. Members said that seating with no backrest would be difficult to sit on, as it could bring on conditions such as vertigo. Getting onto backless seating is also difficult for people using mobility aids. They found that seating with a back and armrests was easier to use. Also, installing seating that faces inwards towards the pavement rather than outwards, towards the road, was found to be easier for those walking along the pavement who wanted to stop for a convenient rest.

In response, Lambeth Council has ensured that much of the seating will have backs and armrests once the street designs are finally approved.

It is important to include that some people raised concerns about the risk of anti-social behaviour and how seating might create an environment that would encourage people who are being anti-social to congregate around the seating. However, accessibility for disabled people was prioritised over this concern.

Changes to other street layouts following feedback from the Accessibility Working Group include removing planters from the pavement to create more space for walking and wheeling. There are plans for more tactile surfaces and street furniture too. The proposed positioning of a parklet in relation to a tree so that the parklet is fully accessible has been taken into consideration in shortlisting locations.

The council has also made changes to consultation documents. These include greater prioritising of features on maps so they are clearer to read with increased colour contrast on maps, using reds and blacks. All images now have accompanying text explaining what the proposed changes are, and all visualisations clarify who is exempt from driving through the filter.

Hear from Lambeth officers and members of the Accessibility Working Group about how the group's feedback is making a difference for disabled people (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ynDyFUNMw4s> [3:54])

"It's been great to make people feel like they've got a chance to help make lives better in each London borough." (Member of the Accessibility Working Group)

"...the group helps us think of things above and beyond some of the standard design guidance from the offset." (Council officer)

In Lambeth, through working with the Accessibility Working Group, a best practice accessibility guide was developed for Lambeth to use internally. The group also fed into the borough's kerbside strategy.

More Accessibility Working Groups

MP Smarter Travel has used its learnings from its work in Lambeth to recommend a project-specific Accessibility Working Group for a larger-scale public realm infrastructure project in Brent. Setting up the Lambeth group has been a positive experience and should be replicated in all councils to ensure street space is as welcoming to disabled people as it is to everyone else and that engagement materials are presented in a fully accessible way.

Conclusion

It is unacceptable that thousands of people are disabled by the decisions made about the design of public space. Often, design fails to meet current accessibility guidance. As discussed, many disabled people use a cycle as a preferred form of transport and mobility. Cycling, whether on a standard or adapted cycle, not only helps people with their transport needs and keeps them independent, but it also provides a form of exercise that is good for physical and mental health.

Cycling and the infrastructure around it, if not properly considered, present challenges to disabled people. Texture, sound cues and detectable infrastructure such as kerbs are important elements of design that keep people safe. Separating cycle and pedestrian infrastructure is also a way of ensuring people with visual impairments can feel safe and secure when navigating their streets.

Keeping in regular conversation with a diverse group of disabled people like Lambeth's Accessibility Working Group is essential for every local authority. This is so authorities can strive for continuous improvement in policy and consultation, and achieve the highest design standards to embed equity into the system and create a street environment that is welcoming for everyone.

Organisations that have been involved in the work of the Accessibility Working Group

- Lambeth Council Regeneration team
- Lambeth Council Transport team
- MP Smarter Travel
- Sustrans worked on the colourful crossings research
- MUF Architecture
- The Engineering and Design Institute, London (TEDI)
- City Infinity

Competing Interests

Authors, Bronwen Pickering and Amy Cunningham are employees at active travel consultancy, MP Smarter Travel. At the time of writing, Lauren James was employed at MP Smarter Travel. She is currently working for WSP.

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