



**Comments from Imtac about the Department for Transport (DfT) Call for Evidence on the Review of the Public Service Accessibility Regulations 2000 (PSVAR)**

**(September 2023)**

Imtac is committed to making information about our work accessible. Details of how to obtain information in your preferred format are included on the next page.

## **Making our information accessible**

As an organisation of and for Deaf people, disabled people and older people Imtac recognises that the way information is provided can be a barrier to accessing services and participation in public life. We are committed to providing information about our work in formats that best suit the needs of individuals.

All our documents are available in hard copy in 14pt type size as standard. We also provide word and pdf versions of our documents on our website – [www.imtac.org.uk](http://www.imtac.org.uk). In addition, we will provide information in a range of other formats. These formats include:

- Large print
- Audio versions
- Braille
- Electronic copies in PDF or word
- Easy read
- Information about our work in other languages

If you would like this publication in any of the formats listed above or if you have any other information requirements, please contact:

Michael Lorimer  
Imtac  
Titanic Suites  
55-59 Adelaide Street  
Belfast BT2 8FE

Telephone/Textphone: 028 9072 6020

Email: [info@imtac.org.uk](mailto:info@imtac.org.uk)

Websites: [www.imtac.org.uk](http://www.imtac.org.uk) and [www.accessibletravelni.org](http://www.accessibletravelni.org)

Twitter: [@ImtacNI](https://twitter.com/ImtacNI)

## **About Imtac**

The Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee (Imtac) is a committee of disabled people and older people as well as others including carers and key transport professionals. Its role is to advise Government and others in Northern Ireland on issues that affect the mobility of Deaf people, disabled people and older people.

The aim of Imtac is to ensure that Deaf people, disabled people and older people have the same opportunities as everyone else to travel when and where they want.

Imtac receives support from the Department for Infrastructure (herein after referred to as the Department).

## **Introduction**

Imtac welcomes the current call for evidence to provide the basis for the review of PSVAR. We recognise that the introduction of accessibility standards for buses and coaches in the early part of this century has been transformative, enabling many more disabled people to routinely use public transport. PSVAR has also delivered transformative benefits to other passengers including people travelling with young children and older people.

Despite this the regulations were never ideal, they balanced the requirements of different passengers, the requirements of operators and the physical space constraints of the vehicles themselves. Some access constraints have been obvious from the introduction of PSVAR in 2000 and these constraints have become more apparent as demand for accessible travel has increased. Two decades since their introduction, a review of PSVAR is overdue.

## **Imtac's work on bus and coach design**

Our comments on the current call for evidence are informed by extensive input to bus and coach design linked to bus and coach procurements undertaken by the operator of most public transport services in Northern Ireland, Translink. We have published several papers<sup>1</sup> on vehicle design relating to specific procurements, as well as a

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.imtac.org.uk/imtac-comments-proposals-2020-translink-goldline-vehicle-procurement>

general paper with a series of design principles we believe should inform future vehicle design<sup>2</sup>. Our work in this area is informed by the lived experience of disabled people using buses, user testing of existing vehicle designs, monitoring innovation in vehicle design elsewhere and engagement with manufacturers, including Wrightbus, Plaxton and Van Hool.

Imtac's advice on vehicle design is also informed and underpinned by the obligations placed on the UK Government by the UN Convention on the Rights of People with a Disability (UNCRPD)<sup>3</sup>. Article 9 of the UNCRPD places the following obligation on signatory states:

“To enable persons with disabilities to live independently and participate fully in all aspects of life, States Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure to persons with disabilities access, on an equal basis with others, to the physical environment, to transportation, to information and communications, including information and communications technologies and systems, and to other facilities and services open or provided to the public, both in urban and in rural areas.”

It is our contention that the current shortcomings of PSVAR contribute to a situation where disabled people still cannot access public transport services on an equal basis to others.

## **Comments on the Call for Evidence**

### *Scope of services*

In relation to the questions relating to the current scope of services covered by PSVAR the Committee has in the past raised its concerns<sup>4</sup> about the lack of regulation in the small bus sector (9 to 22 seats). We believe that it is unacceptable that there are no accessibility standards for these vehicles, particularly as small vehicles are used to deliver many transport services, such a dial-a-rides, traditionally used by disabled people. We are also aware of providers of scheduled bus services using smaller vehicles which provide lesser access standards (including no dedicated space for wheelchair users) compared to operators using larger buses. This too is unacceptable.

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.imtac.org.uk/recommendations-imtac-future-translink-bus-procurement>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities-2.html>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.imtac.org.uk/position-paper-small-bus-design-and-accessibility>

We believe it is essential that clear accessibility standards are developed for small buses (9 to 22 passengers) and recommend that this type of vehicle be brought into the scope of PSVAR.

Imtac is broadly supportive of the development and greater use of demand responsive transport services<sup>5</sup>. DRT services have huge potential to meet the mobility needs for many people in society that currently experience inequality, discrimination, and exclusion due to a lack of access to suitable transport. It is essential that vehicles used to deliver these services meet high standards of accessibility and the Committee recommends these services be brought under the scope of PSVAR.

The exclusion of tour and charter services from the scope of PSVAR is an issue for many disabled people and older people. Since the introduction of the regulations very few operators of these services have voluntarily introduced more accessible services, despite older people being a key customer base for some of the services offered. Consequently, some disabled people and older people remain excluded from accessing these services.

In line with other services (and Article 9 of CRPD) disabled people should have the right to access tour and charter services on an equal basis to others in society. Operators of these services have shown little commitment to improve access to these services, Imtac therefore recommends these services be brought within scope of PSVAR.

As in other parts of the United Kingdom, there have been issues in Northern Ireland with the accessibility of vehicles used to deliver rail replacement services and some home to school transport services, despite these services falling under the current scope of PSVAR.

Given that the accessibility regulations have been in place for over two decades and there are numerous manufacturers of compliant vehicles and a strong second-hand market, Imtac believes it is impossible to justify on-going non-compliance with PSVAR in these two areas. The Committee believes there is no justification for any reduction of the scope of PSVAR in relation to these services and recommends that current temporary exemptions from PSVAR be removed as soon as possible.

---

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.imtac.org.uk/imtac-position-paper-demand-responsive-transport-services-drt>

## *Accessibility features*

The Committee notes issues raised by DfT in relation to international agreements and the potential barriers these create for wholesale changes to the accessibility features covered by PSVAR. Imtac does not believe this should be a justification for not considering significant improvements to PSVAR. We believe there are some simple, practical changes that could be made to PSVAR that would radically improve the accessibility and usability of buses in particular.

Although the call for evidence suggests that the original development of PSVAR was too focused on the requirements of wheelchair users, in reality the current minimum requirements for access for wheelchair users are often very restrictive and make access difficult even for people whose chair meets the reference dimensions. These issues were covered in depth in the research<sup>6</sup> commissioned by DfT in advance of the current call for evidence.

Imtac acknowledges the difficulties involved in the overall design of buses as a result of increasing the dimensions of the current reference wheelchair, including the potential impact on increasing door and aisle widths. However, as a minimum a practical change that should be considered is increasing the requirements for the size of the wheelchair space on board buses and coaches to make it easier for users to access the space.

One of the consistent issues with vehicles since the introduction of PSVAR has been competition for the wheelchair user's space with other passengers including people with prams and buggies and other disabled people using mobility equipment. One of the key principles Imtac promotes for good vehicle design is to provide alternative flexible space on buses that reduces potential conflict over the wheelchair user's space. Examples of best practice combine flexible space with a second wheelchair user's space.

A practical extension to PSVAR should be to require that all buses have flexible alternative space to the wheelchair users' space and that this be space be designed to ensure it can be used by a second wheelchair user.

---

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/reference-wheelchair-standard-and-transport-design>

When PSVAR was introduced, technology could not support a requirement to have next stop audio visual announcements on buses and coaches, in contrast to the then Rail Vehicle Accessibility Regulation (RVAR). Advances in technology and regulation mean that such systems are much more commonplace across the UK on bus and coach services.

Given the significant advances in technology and regulation since the introduction of PSVAR, the regulations should be extended to require the provision of equipment to enable the provision audio visual next stop announcements with an associated induction loop system on all new buses and coaches.

Through our work related to coach design<sup>7</sup>, we have found it extremely difficult to make recommendations that would improve the accessibility of high floor coaches. Not only do steps create an unresolvable barrier for many older people and disabled people, but alternative access via passenger lifts is also challenging and lacks dignity with bus stop infrastructure often incompatible with vehicle design. The operation of passenger lifts can also be time consuming, with passengers left waiting in all weathers. In addition, other restrictions such as gangway width, lack of handholds, a lack of priority seating and colour contrasting makes use of coaches difficult for many disabled people.

There are limited opportunities to improve the design of stepped access high-floor coaches. One change Imtac has secured in Northern Ireland is the removal of seating from the wheelchair user's space onboard Translink coaches, meaning this space is always available. Coaches operated by Translink also provide dedicated priority seating on board coaches.

For Imtac the only long-term solution for accessible coach travel is to move to a low floor design. PSVAR already requires this for double deck coaches but a suitable solution for single deck vehicles would appear to remain a challenge. Imtac has looked at various low-floor concept vehicles and is currently supporting a trial of low-floor coaches, first used by the National Transport Authority in Ireland, on two Translink inter-urban routes in Northern Ireland.

---

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.imtac.org.uk/imtac-comments-proposals-2020-translink-goldline-vehicle-procurement>

### *Regulatory approach*

Imtac believes that current regulatory approach ensures a degree of consistency and certainty for disabled people in relation to the design of vehicles. We are concerned that an outcome-based approach may lead to an unacceptable variation in vehicle design and a potential regression in current standards. The Committee, therefore, does not support any move away from the current regulatory approach.

### *Decarbonisation*

Imtac supports the alignment of accessibility requirements with the move to decarbonised public transport vehicles if current or future accessibility standards are not reduced in this process. Our own engagement around the design of hydrogen powered vehicles has shown fuel storage requirements can significantly compromise low floor space on vehicles. Further work is needed to improve fuel storage on these vehicles to ensure that there is no reduction in the accessibility.

### *Enforcement of PSVAR*

Previous comments made by the Committee in this response around non-compliance are relevant. The regulations have been in place for over 2 decades with ample lead in periods for operators to be compliant. Numerous manufacturers and a strong second-hand market for compliant vehicles exists. There is, from the Committee's perspective, no excuse for continued non-compliance by operators.

Imtac is supportive of developing better mechanisms for disabled people to report and make complaints about non-compliance.

### *Roadside infrastructure, conduct and other issues*

We would make the following points in relation to issues raised in this section:

- Some of the issues highlighted in this section as outside the scope of PSVAR, are addressed by other legal obligations<sup>8</sup> on service providers that have been in place since 2004.

---

<sup>8</sup> In Northern Ireland this would relate to duties to make physical alterations to make infrastructure accessible under Part 3 (Access to Goods, Facilities and Services) of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.



- One solution to competition for the wheelchair users' space is to change accessibility requirements to mandate other flexible space on vehicles (preferably a requirement for a 2<sup>nd</sup> wheelchair user space).
- Comprehensive guidance already exists around making stations accessible including Inclusive Mobility.
- There is more limited guidance around what makes a bus stop accessible, but this doesn't cover coaches – there is the need for more comprehensive national standards for the design of bus and coach stops and interchanges.

## **Conclusion**

As a committee established by Government in Northern Ireland to advise on accessible transport and mobility, Imtac has had unique opportunity to engage with operators and manufacturers of buses, coaches and the supporting infrastructure. As such there have been significant improvements to the accessibility of transport services in Northern Ireland. However, the limitations of the current PSVAR regulations have been a barrier to progress towards full compliance with the obligations placed on the UK Government by Article 9 of the UN Convention on the Rights of People with a Disability (UNCRPD).

Imtac's recommendations to this call for evidence have been based on this experience and we believe a meaningful review of PSVAR can provide the next stepping stone to a public transport system which disabled people can access on an equal basis to everyone else. We are happy to engage in further discussion around these issues as new draft proposals for the Regulations evolve.