



campaigning
by the
Railway Development
Society Limited

Passenger Committee

Disability Advice (re DPTAC)
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Sustainable Travel and Equalities
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Dear Sirs,

Railfuture's response to the Consultation on the Proposed Abolition of the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee (DPTAC)

Introduction

Railfuture is long established and increasingly recognised as the UK's leading independent railway development organisation campaigning for better rail services for both passengers and freight. Our local branches and volunteers campaign to get stations and lines opened for the benefit of the community, economy and environment. We have had a major part in getting over 370 new and reopened stations and over 500 miles of route to join the network over the past half century.

As part of its remit, Railfuture's Passenger Committee takes a keen interest in the quality of service provided by the railways to their passengers. This includes access to railway stations, station facilities, on train facilities, and the design of passenger rolling stock.

Railfuture's interest in passenger welfare includes that of the disabled person. We consider it axiomatic that the best quality provision in all these respects can only be achieved through effective consultation with passenger groups, including the disabled.

There has been growing awareness of the needs of the disabled passenger over the past 25 years or so, with evidence of improvements in access to stations being most noticeable. However, disabled people still face many and considerable difficulties in using and accessing transport. The UK's railway system was built before we became as aware as we are today of the needs of the disabled passenger. Improvements are only gradual, and we still have a long way to go. The recent successful Paralympic Games have helped to highlight this.

The Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee (DPTAC) has been instrumental in the progress that has been made in the transport environment for the disabled passenger. It has had the advantage that it is sufficiently independent to be able to regulate its own affairs and give advice if and when asked to do so by Parliament, ministers and officials. Above all, it has cooperated and coexisted with the Department for Transport (DfT) who in turn has come to DPTAC for advice from time to time.

Railfuture proposes to respond to the Consultation by briefly considering each of the five options proposed for successor arrangements following possible abolition of DPTAC in turn.

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www.railwatch.org.uk

Option 1: Rely on policy divisions within the Department to go out directly to stakeholder groups, the transport industry and experts.

Option 1 would require that the DfT has, or proposes to build, a team of people with disability expertise. The team would need to be given sufficient independence within the Department to maintain regular contact and communication with, and actually go out to, stakeholder groups, the transport industry and disability experts. The team should have freedom to act, and should not be dependent on experts from outside the DfT. This depends on the DfT having and maintaining adequate expertise in disability. Railfuture believes there is no guarantee that this would always be the case.

Option 2: A wide ranging panel of experts from which members could be drawn, on an ad hoc basis, when specific advice is needed.

Railfuture considers that Option 2 would be a group of people on standby to respond as and when called upon to do so. Unfortunately, the needs of disabled people are on-going, and Railfuture considers that this arrangement would not be adequate to meet this. Whilst there may be occasions when specific advice is needed on an ad hoc basis, disabled people still face considerable difficulties with transport and accessibility on a daily basis. The question also arises as to who has the authority to determine, and with what consultation, when specific advice is needed. Option 2 could exclude the expert in disability from the decision making process.

Option 3: Establish a stakeholder forum, which could be convened and provide advice as and when issues arose.

In effect, DPTAC is a stakeholder already. As such, it can and does give advice if and when asked to do so. As a stakeholder group, it can regulate its own affairs. However, Railfuture believes that convening a stakeholders' forum to consult on a specific issue might be done on the convener's terms, and would not necessarily allow the stakeholder group to initiate matters.

Option 4: Rely on a cross-government body.

Railfuture considers that transport is a specialist departmental matter, and that successor arrangements should reflect this. Under a cross-government body, there would be no guarantee that transport matters, and therefore the difficulties that disabled people have with transport and accessibility on a regular basis will be given due prominence.

Option 5: Implement a combination of a cross-government body and a panel of experts.

Option 4 has some of the characteristics of both Option 1 and Option 2 – the availability of experts and the attendant advantages. There is no reference about how the panel of experts will be used, but it would seem that it would be consulted if and when advice on an issue is needed. As such, there is no recognition of the on-going difficulties that disabled people face in using transport. As with Option 4, Railfuture believes there would be no guarantee that transport issues, and the daily problems faced by disabled people, would be given due prominence under this arrangement.

Summary and conclusions

The five options proposed for successor arrangements should DPTAC be abolished would all seem to reduce the quality of consultation at a time when it is becoming more important than ever to help disabled people to overcome the disadvantage that they frequently encounter as a result of the obstacles to their mobility. Railfuture believes that the issues affecting disabled people have to be seen as a continuum, and that the resolution of these issues has to be treated in the same light. If one uses the London Underground as an example, some progress has been made in recent years on improving access from street level to platform level at some stations. During the Paralympic Games, a selection of central London underground stations was provided with ramps to help disabled people board and alight trains. There was no commitment to keep the ramps at these stations. The Docklands Light Railway was built with access for the disabled in mind, with the result that the whole system gives disabled people access from street level onto the train itself.

Railfuture considers that none of the five options for successor arrangements is capable of providing the quality support that is needed to reassure the disabled passenger that, even in the long term, his/her needs are being catered for. Of the five, Option 1 comes closest to achieving this level of support, but is dependent on the DfT ensuring and maintaining a team of disability experts in house, and giving a fair amount of operational flexibility and freedom to the team. This cannot be guaranteed. Options 2 and 3 would involve outside experts, but Railfuture fears that these might be kept at arm's length. Options 4 and 5 give no reassurance that transport issues, and therefore issues affecting the disabled, would be given due prominence.

Railfuture would, therefore, recommend Option 6, with DPTAC continuing as a statutory body. This would enable it, perhaps with some restructuring, to continue to advise Parliament, ministers and officials on an on-going basis on the transport needs of disabled people and what should be done to overcome the disadvantages and discrimination that they frequently face.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "H Thomas".

Howard Thomas
Railfuture
Chairman, Passenger Committee