



Journey to Safety

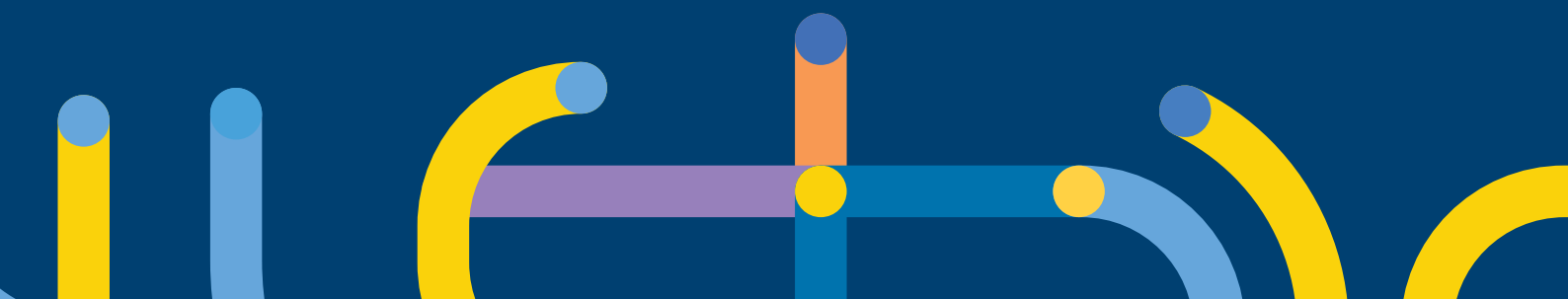
Combating Disability
Hate Crimes on
Public Transport

May 2025

Large print
Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

Context

Disabled people continue to face targeted abuse, harassment, and hostility while using public transport across England.

These experiences are not isolated – they are widespread, traumatic, and often met with silence. Despite over a decade of legislation aimed at promoting inclusion and accessibility, public transport remains one of the most common environments where disability hate crime (DHC) occurs and where it is least likely to be reported or addressed.

About the research

This report presents the findings of a co-produced, user-led research project funded by a User Research Grant from the Motability Foundation. Led by United Response, the research explored the lived experiences of disabled people who had encountered hate crime or hostility while using public transport.



Our research methods included:

- A national online survey completed by 164 victims of disability hate crime on public transport.
- Eight regional focus groups held across England.
- Ten in-depth case study interviews with victims.
- Stakeholder engagement with public transport authorities and law enforcement.

The project was designed and delivered with the active involvement of disabled researchers and participants, with co-production at its core.

Key messages

The evidence is clear: hate crime on public transport is often normalised, under-reported, and insufficiently acted upon. Many disabled people do not feel safe using trains, buses, or trams, and many alter or restrict their travel as a result. Survey and interview data revealed widespread dissatisfaction with responses from authorities, a lack of confidence in the criminal

justice system, and persistent barriers to reporting.

Transport providers and the public also have a crucial role to play. Public-facing campaigns and bystander interventions have shown promise in certain regions, but these remain inconsistent and underutilised. There is limited accountability when frontline staff act dismissively or contribute to a hostile travel environment.

What needs to change

This report outlines clear, evidence-based recommendations for government, police, and

transport providers. These include:

- Making disability hate crime an aggravated offence in law.
- Improving data sharing between police, Crown Prosecution Service, and transport authorities.
- Strengthening training and accountability frameworks for frontline staff.
- Co-producing accessible reporting routes and public awareness campaigns.

Above all, disabled people must be at the centre of decisions made about their



safety and access. Without meaningful action, hate crime will continue to be a barrier to independent living, mobility, and equal participation in society.





Key Findings

This research highlights how disablist hate on public transport is widespread, poorly addressed, and often internalised by disabled passengers as something to be tolerated or avoided. Drawing on 164 full survey responses, eight regional focus groups, and ten in-depth interviews, we identified five key themes:

1 Hate incidents are common and frequently go unchallenged

- More than three-quarters (76.3%) of survey respondents said they had experienced a disability-related incident while using public transport. The most common forms were verbal abuse (61.6%), discrimination (45.7%), and threatening behaviour (42.1%).
- 68.3% said others witnessed the incident. However, few participants described any kind of intervention. Instead, they reported silence, avoidance, or expressions of discomfort from bystanders.
- This reflects a broader culture of normalisation, where disabled people often feel expected to manage abuse quietly and alone.



76%

Survey respondents who said they had experienced a disability-related incident while using public transport

62%

of these hate crimes involved verbal abuse

46%

involved discrimination

22%

of cases, the perpetrator was a member of transport staff.

Only

30%

of victims reported the hate crime to any authority

2. Staff responses are inconsistent and sometimes harmful

- In 22% of cases, the perpetrator was a member of transport staff. Several participants described feeling shocked or disoriented when abuse came from someone in a position of responsibility.



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- Where staff failed to intervene, this was often interpreted as complicity. Others described being dismissed, disbelieved, or blamed when they attempted to report what had happened.
 - Positive staff responses were rare but powerful — suggesting that clear responsibilities, training, and support structures can make a meaningful difference.
 - Among those who experienced an incident, only 29.9% went on to report it to any authority.
 - Among those who reported, 46.9% were unsatisfied or very unsatisfied with the response they received, compared to 40.8% who were satisfied or very satisfied.
 - Key barriers to reporting included a lack of disability awareness among authorities (55.1%), lack of support (30.6%), inaccessible reporting systems (28.6%), and delays in follow-up.

3. Most disabled people do not report what happened – and when they do, satisfaction is low

4. Many disabled people change or restrict their travel

- The most common long-term impact of experiencing hate was loss of confidence (75.6%). This often resulted in avoiding certain times, routes, or modes of transport altogether.
- Nearly half reported experiencing anxiety or panic attacks (47.6%), with others citing fear (43.3%), shock (42.1%), and depression (23.8%) as direct consequences.
- These effects were compounded for people

who already felt isolated, or who relied on public transport to maintain independence and connection.

5. Some promising practice exists but it is patchy and uncoordinated

- Participants praised select campaigns (e.g., Transport for Greater Manchester and Transport for London bystander initiatives) for raising awareness and modelling appropriate intervention. However, these were rarely recognised outside of the region in which they occurred.

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- Where disabled people were involved in designing staff training, policies, or public messaging, trust and confidence were stronger, but examples of this were limited.
 - There is no national framework to ensure good practice is shared or scaled, and current legislation does not provide parity for disability hate crime in terms of legal recognition or sentence uplift.

These findings are explored in detail across nine thematic sections of this report. They point not only to the personal cost of disablist abuse, but to systemic failures in how transport systems, authorities, and government structures respond to it.



48%

experienced anxiety
or panic-attacks after
experiencing hate





Actions and Recommendations

The evidence presented in this report shows that disability hate crime on public transport is widespread, often traumatic, and largely unchallenged. Tackling the problem requires coordinated change at every level – from national government to transport providers to frontline policing.

The following recommendations are directed at stakeholders across England, with responsibilities grouped under three key stakeholder categories. Each group holds distinct powers, resources, and opportunities to drive

progress. The proposals span foundational reforms (such as legislative and strategic change), operational improvements (including staff training and more accessible reporting systems), and longer-term cultural shifts that embed inclusion and challenge disablist attitudes.

This is not a menu of siloed options – all levels must act. While some recommendations require national leadership, many can and should be delivered now by those managing services, enforcing the law, or shaping public-facing environments. Lasting change will depend on

joined-up action and sustained commitment across sectors.

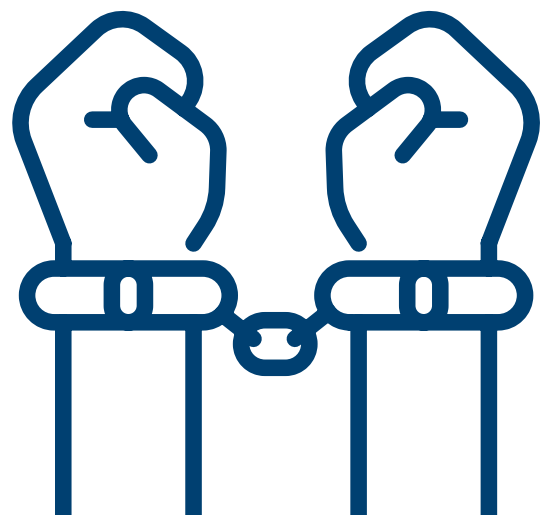
For Government

1. Introduce an aggravated offence for disability hate crimes

This would bring disability hate crime in line with hate crime related to race, religion, sexual orientation and transgender identity. It would create a standalone offence rather than relying on sentence uplifts under the Criminal Justice Act 2003. Introducing this provision would align with Labour's 2024 manifesto commitment and build on the framework set out in

the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 and the Criminal Justice Act 2003, making this a clear and deliverable reform.

Unlike existing sentence uplift provisions, aggravated offences are charged and recorded as hate crimes from the outset. Introducing an aggravated offence for disability hate crime would enable better data collection, clearer charging decisions, and more transparent justice processes.





2. Renew the National Hate Crime Strategy

The previous Action Against Hate strategy expired in 2020 and has not been replaced and represents a significant policy vacuum. A new strategy should be co-produced with disabled people's organisations and include:

- A requirement for disaggregated hate crime data by setting, including public transport.
- Updated guidance for public transport providers and police forces.
- Annual progress reviews against clear milestones and accountability structures.



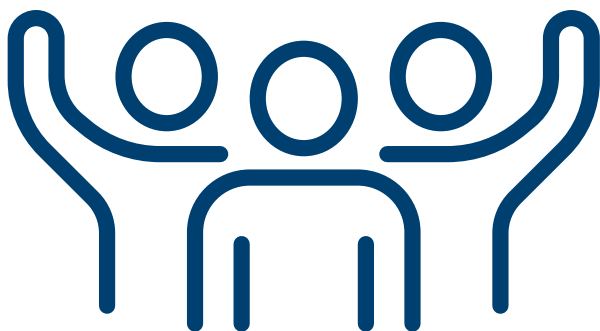
3. Expand the role of the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee (DPTAC)

We recommend that DPTAC convene a crime and safety working group with representation from the Home Office, Department for Transport, British Transport Police, Police and Crime Commissioners, transport regulators, and disabled people's organisations. This group should advise government on:

- Preventing disability hate crime in transport settings.
- Developing national standards for staff training.
- Publishing model guidance for operators and local authorities.

4. Establish a national transport hate crime reporting mechanism

Current pathways are fragmented, inconsistent, under publicised and inaccessible leading to significant under-reporting. We recommend the Department for Transport



and Home Office co-develop a unified reporting framework, embedded in the True Vision portal and reflected in police data returns.



5. Develop a disability awareness and allyship campaign for schools

This campaign would teach young people about the experiences of disabled people, challenge disablist



attitudes, and encourage inclusive behaviours. It should be co-designed with disabled people and implemented across the Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) and citizenship curriculum, in collaboration with the Department for Education.

For Public Transport Providers and Local Authorities

6. Embed disability hate crime into accessibility action plans

Hate crime prevention and response should be considered a core accessibility issue. We recommend that all English local authorities and operators adopt accessibility and inclusion action plans that:

- Acknowledge hate crime as a barrier to travel.
- Outline staff responsibilities when incidents occur.
- Ensure accessible and anonymous reporting pathways.

Compliance with these commitments should be independently monitored, with outcomes reported publicly on an annual basis.

7. Introduce/strengthen staff training on disability hate crime

Staff training should not only cover hidden



disabilities and customer service, but also include:

- How to identify and intervene in hate incidents.
- Legal obligations under the Equality Act 2010.
- De-escalation and trauma-informed approaches.



This training should be co-delivered with disabled trainers, evaluated regularly, and aligned with best practice guidance from the College of Policing, National Police Chief's Council, and the Office of Rail and Road.



8. Launch a cross-industry charter on preventing disability hate crime

This charter should draw clear inspiration from the Scottish Hate Crime Charter in its scope and ambition. It should set minimum expectations for:

- Zero-tolerance messaging.
- Staff training.
- Victim support.
- Annual data collection and publication.

A national charter would help standardise expectations, drive sector-wide accountability, and demonstrate a visible public commitment to safety. The charter should be supported by the Department for Transport and coordinated through industry bodies such as the Urban Transport Group, Confederation of Passenger Transport, and the Rail Delivery Group.

For Police and the Criminal Justice System

9. Introduce dedicated Disability Liaison Officers (DLOs)

Every police force and transport policing unit should have a designated DLO to:

- Provide support to victims.
- Coordinate responses to disability hate crime.
- Train colleagues on identifying and recording incidents.

These roles should be embedded within local

hate crime units and guided by College of Policing standards. DLOs should publish regular summaries of activity, outcomes, and local trends in public reports.

10. Improve transparency and accountability

All police forces should publish annual statistics on disability hate crime investigations, prosecutions, and victim satisfaction. These reports should be disaggregated by setting – including public transport – and made publicly available.

If you would like to talk to United Response about this report, or request a version in easy-read or standard-sized print, please email policy@unitedresponse.org.uk

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