

## Travel Ambassadors: 'How to Guide'

### What is the Travel Ambassador programme?

The Travel Ambassador Programme at Optalis, in partnership with Community Rail Partnership, piloted in 2024 with the aim of supporting five adults with varying disabilities to be more confident in using trains to access heritage and outdoor spaces, making train travel a central part of the experience.



### What does it mean to be a Travel Ambassador?

The role of the Travel Ambassadors was to co-design the programme. The funding that Community Rail Partnership provided for the programme enabled five existing Optalis clients to undertake the paid position of Travel Ambassadors. The position involved attending meetings in the Optalis offices to plan three trips. The Travel Ambassadors would collate information regarding trains, outdoor spaces and activities with accessibility being the imperative factor. They would plan three trips to take part in over the course of the programme using the information that they gathered.

Travel Ambassadors play a key role in advocating for and improving accessible travel experiences for people with disabilities. Responsibilities include collaborating with a small team to plan and execute three trips along the Great Western Railway. During these trips, it is essential that they evaluate the accessibility of trains, stations, and areas of interest (tourist attractions, heritage sites etc), ensuring they meet the needs of people that travel with disabilities. Feedback and recommendations will be given by the Travel Ambassadors in the form of 'How to Guides' to enhance accessibility, contributing to a more inclusive travel environment. The goal of their work is to inspire and empower individuals with disabilities to explore new destinations confidently, knowing that their needs are being considered and addressed.

## The goals of Travel Ambassadors

When we started as Travel Ambassadors for Optalis, in partnership with Community Rail Partnership, our goal was to be the voice for those with disabilities when travelling and create guides to help people overcome barriers when travelling.

We were aware that travelling can be daunting to those who have not tried before and are aware of potential barriers people with disabilities might face along the way. Our goal was to identify these obstacles and attempt to break them down as well as provide advice as to how we achieved this.

## Where did we start?

The group consisted of five individuals that consider themselves to have disabilities, inclusive of a wheelchair user, learning disabilities and neurodivergence. With a range of disabilities, we also gained a range of perspectives that are important to those who are looking to travel. Starting the programme, we lacked confidence around trains and planning journeys as we all had little prior experience. We were able to learn from each other as each of us has varied strengths. Any areas we were unsure of we would be assisted by Optalis coaches. Over the course of the programme, we shared our skills and learned how to effectively plan journeys.

We are immensely proud of what we have achieved over the course of the programme as we have achieved our set goals and contributed to the community by providing feedback to increase overall confidence for people with disabilities.

## What have we achieved?

### Trip 1: Oxford – Hop on, hop off bus tour

#### Overview

The Oxford hop on, hop off bus is a tour around Oxford town centre that provides a guide that talks through the history of buildings and the importance of monuments. The train journey along the GWR from Wokingham to Oxford involves 1 change at Reading.

Our initial train from Wokingham was cancelled due to bad weather, but once we got the next available train our journey was smooth sailing overall. The ramp assistance at all stations (Wokingham, Reading and Oxford) was amazing with staff being proactive and making our journey smooth and enjoyable. The bus station is easily accessible from Oxford train station, being a 3-minute walk away with step free access. The toilets within the train stations were accessible and suitable signage was displayed.



#### Transport

The transport consisted of both trains and buses. Due to extreme weather conditions, our train had been cancelled. As Travel Ambassadors, we must be aware of unforeseen circumstances and know how to overcome them. We dealt with the setback efficiently, deciding to get the next available train to Reading. This did not affect our day as we had prepared for unforeseen circumstances by giving ourselves extra time when planning the trip.

At Wokingham station, getting the lift is necessary to getting to the other platform. Our wheelchair user struggled to reach the button for the lift as it was too high. Other stations were much more accessible. It is also important to remember that if you are taking the lift to get to a different platform, you need to give yourself extra time to do so.

After a quick change over at Reading, our travel into Oxford was smooth and enjoyable. We arrived in Oxford and made our way out of the train station, down to the bus station – a short 3-minute walk away (this route has stepless access). At the bus station, we located the Oxford bus tour company and checked in. The buses were frequent (arriving every 15 minutes), and we were on the bus within 10 minutes of waiting.

## Accessibility

As part of our train booking, we had booked travel assistance to ensure that a ramp would be in place for our wheelchair user. As our train had been cancelled, we did well to alert the members of staff at the train station to make them aware of our change of plans. The ramp assistance at all stations was commendable. The ramp was set up quickly and there was a member of staff waiting for us at the stations to help us off the train. The trains also had a large amount of room for people in wheelchairs meaning that there were no concerns around having enough space.

Using the ramp access on the bus could not have been easier, with friendly staff to help and a quick set up for the ramp, it was an easy onboarding process. Although the access to the bus was efficient, there were only two spots for a wheelchair. This should be noted as if there was another wheelchair user/buggy/pram on the bus, it would have been cramped; potentially we would have had to wait for the next available bus.



## Toilets

Toilets throughout the stations were easily accessible. They were clearly marked and placed in easy to access places. It is important to note that Radar Keys are required for station toilets. If you do not own a key, they are available from members of staff from the help desks.

If you would like to get your own Radar Key, you can purchase an official Radar key for about £5 from participating local authorities or the Disability Rights UK shop or:

- Check with your local council, as they may have keys available to give out to disabled people in the local area.
- Purchase from some chemists or online; they can be purchased from online retailers such as Amazon (prices from £3.10 as of December 2024).

## Staff

The staff that assisted us along the journey (Wokingham, Reading and Oxford) were incredible. There was an excellent level of customer service with boarding and exiting the train whilst using ramp assistance. Staff on the stations were proactively approaching our wheelchair user to prepare the rail assistance for him to make it as smooth as possible. Staff are helpful and able to connect with us.

The staff at the Oxford bus tour were equally as supportive and helpful for us. They were proactive and set up the ramp when getting on and off the bus and ensured that we could hear the live tour guide on the bus.

## Anything else to add

Booking rail assistance: The first time you phone to book rail assistance, you will need to answer a few questions to create a profile. The First time we called to arrange rail assistance took 25 minutes. Our advice would be to give yourself time to complete this call. Once you have done the initial call, we found that it takes 7 minutes normally to complete the rail assistance process.

To book rail assistance simply find the number of the train station you are departing from, and request rail assistance and they will direct you to the relevant department. Alternatively, you can book rail assistance online.

For more information about rail assistance please visit the following links:

- [Passenger Assist and accessibility | Great Western Railway](#)
- [Passenger Assist | National Rail](#)



## Trip 2: Swindon – STEAM (GWR) Museum

### Overview

The STEAM GWR Museum in Swindon is an interactive museum that explores the history of trains on the Great Western Railway network. The train journey along the GWR, from Wokingham to Swindon, involves 1 change at Reading. The train was delayed from Wokingham but was smooth sailing once on the journey. The ramp assistance at all stations (Wokingham, Reading and Swindon) was amazing with staff being proactive and making our journey smooth and enjoyable. The journey from Swindon train station to the museum was a 15-minute walk with step less access. The toilets at the train stations and in the museum were accessible with good signage and help from staff.

### Transport

The transport throughout this journey consisted purely of trains. Our train was delayed from Wokingham to Reading. Likewise, to the Oxford trip we had given extra time in our journey for unforeseen circumstances. We again, decided to get the next available train to Reading. After a quick change at Reading, our travel to Swindon was quick and spacious.

From Swindon train station, it was a 15-minute walk to the museum. This route was step free and accessible for wheelchair users. It should be noted that electric wheelchairs will need to be fully charged for days out to ensure that you can safely manoeuvre throughout the day. When planning journeys in advance be sure to check the route as we encountered cobbled paths and road intersections.

## Accessibility

The accessibility at Swindon train station was pleasant. The lifts at Swindon station were easy to access with the button being in an easy to reach position. The lifts had a large amount of room making entering and exiting the lift easy.

Overall, the STEAM Museum had good access throughout, making the day enjoyable for us all. However, as a part of the museum, there was a train conductor simulator station. This was not designed with wheelchair access in mind as the platform the simulator was on had an unsuitable ramp causing an inability to reach.



## Toilets

Throughout the train stations, the toilets were accessible. It is important to note that at Swindon train station, although accessible, is not as spacious as other stations. To get to the toilets, you also have to travel through the platforms via lift which has room for 1 wheelchair user at a time.

Toilets were clearly signed and are pointed out to you by members of staff when you enter the museum. They are easy to access from the lobby and are spacious. They do have an accessible toilet. If you do not own a Radar Key, you can ask a member of staff, and they will be able to assist you.

## Staff

Staff throughout the stations (Wokingham, Reading and Swindon) were helpful. They were proactively approaching us to ensure that we had the correct assistance to board the train. The staff that prepared the ramp assistance for our wheelchair user were friendly and provided high quality customer service when helping us board and exit the train. The staff would ensure that all staff were aware of when we were exiting the train to give us extra time.

The staff at the STEAM Museum were equally as helpful. They were able to provide assistance to our wheelchair user, pointing out the toilets from entry and giving us information around the accessibility of the museum.

## Anything else to add

When preparing the trip, ensure that the journey from the train station to the destination is planned. Make sure that the route that you have selected is the easiest to navigate and, if applicable, have step less access. It is also important to remember when planning the journey and timings, to account for travel between the train station and the destination. Give yourself extra time for unforeseen circumstances, such as train delays, road works etc. Make sure that you have the right amount of money to able to comfortably carry out your journey.

## Trip 3: Reading – Cole Museum of Zoology

### Overview

The Cole Museum of Zoology is an exploratory museum of the biology of many extinct and living animals/organisms located on the University of Reading campus. The journey consisted of a train from Wokingham to Reading followed by a bus from Reading Station to the University of Reading. From the bus stop it was a 10-minute walk, with step less access, to the museum. The staff throughout the day overall, were nice and helpful. The museum had accessible toilets with an excellent level of signage.



## Transport

The trip to Cole Museum consisted of both trains and buses. We got the train from Wokingham station directly to Reading. The trains during this journey were delayed and cancelled due to weather. Once we were on our train, we had a calm journey to Reading with no disruption. The bus station is located immediately outside of Reading station. This also has step less access.

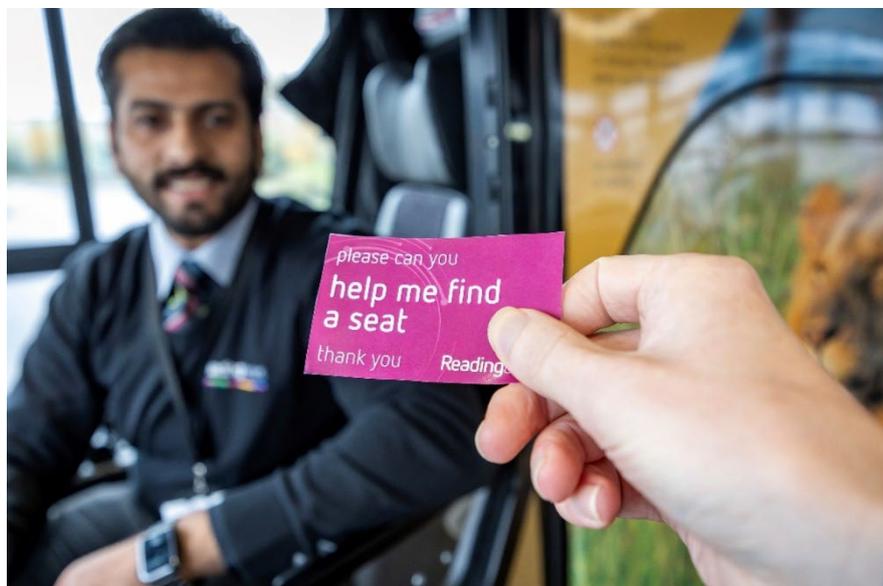
The buses from Reading station are very consistent, leaving every 15 minutes, you can effectively get around the entirety of Reading and the outskirts. We had to wait a short 5-minutes for our bus before we were heading off to the University of Reading.

It is important to note, that when you are planning your journey, check for any discounts you may be eligible for prior to the day. For example, if you travel in a group via bus; you can purchase a group ticket which reduces the price of travel per person. For more information please visit: [save with our group ticket - Reading Buses](#) / [GroupSave | Great Western Railway](#). Alternatively visit your local bus companies' website to see what offers/discounts they offer.

## Accessibility

Likewise, to the other journeys, the accessibility on the train was to a good standard. The ramp assistance itself was to a good standard.

The assistance on the buses were quick and efficient. The staff were proactive at getting the ramp set up for our wheelchair user as soon as the bus pulled up. The buses also adjusted the tyre pressure to get the bus to correct height to make the boarding and exiting as easy as possible. The Reading bus staff are also aware of travel assistance cards in which can be displayed when you enter the bus to get extra assistance. If you would like to access these travel cards, you can download these from your local bus site: [Safe Journey Cards - Reading Buses](#).



## Toilets

Throughout the train stations, the toilets were accessible. At Wokingham and Reading station, the toilets have good signage to help you find where they are. Staff are also happy to assist you if you need further help to find them. It is important to note that at some stations you will have to travel between platforms to get to the toilets. Give yourself extra time to do this if you require the lifts to travel.

Although signage was present in the Cole Museum, the toilets were not as easy to locate. Staff are more than welcoming to assist you find them if you need assistance.

## Staff

Generally, we were welcomed by SWR staff at the station; however, when waiting for our GWR train a SWR employee behaved inappropriately towards us. The issue was reducing our choice and control of which train we could board. The issue has been escalated to SWR to find a resolution. We raised this by visiting SWR website: [Make a Complaint | Online Complaint Form | South Western Railway](#).

Like SWR who dealt with our issue, GWR have a receptive and helpful team that will help you with any issues you may have. If you would like further information on how GWR deal with their complaints you can find the information on the following link: [Making a complaint | Great Western Railway](#).

The staff throughout the Cole Museum of Zoology were welcoming and helpful. They were attentive to us as we walked around and were welcoming of any questions.

## Anything else to add

If you are travelling and encounter a challenging situation, it is important to remain calm as this helps you regulate your thought process and make the right decisions. If you feel comfortable, try to resolve the situation as much as possible. If this is not working and the situation is escalating or you feel threatened, remove yourself from the situation and find assistance from a member of staff.

If your challenging situation is with a member of staff, try to find another member of staff to help or phone the customer support team as soon as possible to ensure the issue is resolved.

If you are travelling as a part of a group, remember to stay with your group as this will make you feel safer.

## Overall things to consider

As highlighted throughout the 'How to Guide'; it's essential to consider several key factors when planning a journey to visit heritage sites or other places of interest. First, check the

opening times of the sites to ensure they are open on the dates you plan to visit. This can vary by season, so it's important to verify this in advance. Next, research the costs associated with your visit, including entrance fees, transport, emergency funds, and any additional charges for tours or special events. Finally, plan your travel logistics, such as train or bus routes, and the walk from the station to the site. This helps you manage your time effectively and ensures a smooth journey.

Another key factor to consider is weather. Weather plays a key role in how a journey might plan out. Always check your travel before departing as weather could have impacted the timings of trains (e.g., heavy rain or wind). You should also be prepared to dress appropriately, for example, if it is forecasted to rain on the day of your journey, wear the correct attire such as a waterproof coat.

Finally, if your travel consists of 1 or more changes, ensure that you are giving yourself enough time to change at the station. If your change is at a large station, you will need to factor time for going to the toilet or taking the lift to manoeuvre around the platforms. The staff at the station will help you if you are unsure where to go or in need of assistance.

## Contacting places of interest

When planning to visit places of interest, it's important to use both online services and phone calls as methods of contact. Not everyone has access to Wi-Fi, so free computers in public libraries can be a valuable resource for researching or booking in advance. As Travel Ambassadors we had to contact places of interest to enquire about accessibility and opening times. This helped to build our confidence in both phone skills and understanding of information we required before planning the journey.

Additionally, calling ahead can help you gather specific information, such as hours of operation or any special events. It's also a great way to inquire about potential group discounts or other offers that may not be advertised online, ensuring you get the best deal for your visit. Deals and group discounts are not always guaranteed; however, enquiring is the best way of checking.

## What would we do in the future?

Overall, the programme ran exceptionally. We were able to collect a lot of useful feedback about train travel and the planning process for visiting exhibitions and places of interest. The Travel Ambassadors got a chance to explore how accessible these locations were, especially in terms of transport, facilities, and available support. The feedback we gathered gave us great insights into areas where train services and exhibition spaces could improve to better serve people with disabilities.

Looking ahead, we think running the programme in the summer would help us gather even more valuable insights. Summer travel tends to offer longer days and better weather, which means we could plan trips to more outdoor locations, especially heritage sites and historic landmarks. Many of these places are more accessible during the summer or have special events that could make for a richer experience. By focusing on these types of sites, we can get a clearer picture of how cultural and historical venues accommodate people with different disabilities. Running the programme into the summer would give us more time to explore a variety of locations and conditions, helping us provide even more detailed feedback to improve accessibility for everyone.

## Final tips

Here are a few final tips that we gathered throughout our experiences and through extra research. These tips will help you feel more confident around travel as you will know what to do in scenarios where you might feel uncomfortable.

- It is best to sit in a carriage with other people (unless they are drunk and noisy!). Ensure that you stay with your group / companions. This will help you feel relaxed and in control of your journey. You will also have people to ask questions to if you are unsure on something.
- If you feel uneasy, move to another seat or carriage. Move to somewhere you feel more relaxed, do not stay where you are. Remove yourself from the situation.
- If you feel threatened, shout or use the alarm to attract the attention of the guard or driver. Make as much noise as possible.
- Have your train ticket in your hand before you get off the train. Then you will not have to be rummaging around in your bag at the ticket barriers. This will help reduce any stress you might be experiencing.
- If you are travelling at night or in an unfamiliar area, arrange for someone to meet you at the train station. Make sure you have a route planned – stick to main roads. Do not take shortcuts through dark areas. If you are with a group, ensure that you remain with them.