Council of Ministers

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS ON IMPROVING ACCESS TO PUBLIC TRANSPORT

This document was examined at the Brussels session of the Council of Ministers.

These Conclusions and Recommendations and the proposed follow-up actions were approved by Ministers.
Ministers:

- approved the Conclusions and Recommendations of the joint ECMT-UITP report;
- agreed to disseminate them to local authorities and public transport operators;
- re-affirmed their commitment to improving the accessibility of public transport;
- agreed to examine existing laws and legislation to ensure that they provide a supportive national framework within which local authorities and transport operators can work together to improve accessibility of the transport system;
- agreed that ECMT should review progress on implementing the above recommendations in due time with UITP.
1. CONTEXT

Governments and public transport operators share a common goal to ensure that public transport is accessible to all, and that the pedestrian and traffic environments are designed and managed to enable people to reach and use public transport safely and with confidence. Public transport has a key role to play in improving accessibility for all individuals, thereby minimising social exclusion and enhancing social cohesion. In this pursuit, government and the public transport community must work together to reduce not only physical, but also psychological barriers (cognitive, information, fear, discrimination) to safe and seamless travel in cities.

The importance of improving accessibility to transport systems is clear: at any one time, an average of 25 per cent of the population may have a degree of reduced mobility due to a physical or mental disability, impaired sight or hearing, or through having to carry heavy bags or travel with small children. Further, physical and sensory disabilities are often related to age and, as is well known, the proportion of the elderly population in western countries is growing and will continue to do so well into the 21st century.

The present and future needs of people with reduced mobility cannot be ignored. To do so would be to exacerbate inequality of access to a wide range of facilities and, from the point of view of the transport service providers, to miss out on a substantial sector of the market for public transport. Indeed, benefits from improvements in transport accessibility are accrued not just to the disabled and ageing communities, but to all clients of the transport system. Providing access for disabled people to public transport is not an isolated endeavour: it is a crucial part of a quality approach to public transport services, which ensures that all passengers are provided with a high standard of public transport.

Much progress has been made toward meeting the goal of better accessibility in local areas. However, implementation of policies to improve accessibility for all clients of the transport system has proven difficult and slow in many urban regions.

2. ECMT-UITP TASK FORCE

To better ascertain the difficulties involved in improving accessibility to public transport, the ECMT and the International Public Transport Union (UITP) together established in 2001 a joint Task Force on Improving Access to Public Transport. The broad mandate for this Task Force, which was comprised of representatives of national and local Governments as well as transport operators, was to examine how urban public transport vehicles, systems and associated infrastructure can be further improved so that they provide better access to people with mobility difficulties.

Specifically, the three main objectives given to the Task Force were to:

- Define a framework for, and identify examples of partnerships between public authorities (at different levels) and transport operators which can improve access for all and deliver other advantages for local public transport services (increased patronage, reduced congestion);

- Draw up guidance on good practice for training transport personnel to understand and respond to the needs of passengers with mobility difficulties;

- Propose solutions to particular problems that occur in improving access, including liability in case of accident, specific technical solutions for boarding aids and the integration of accessible vehicles in the urban environment.
Drawing from *inter alia* the ECMT’s 1999 guide to good practice, “Improving Transport for People with Mobility Handicaps”, and the 2001 ECMT Consolidated Resolution (no.2001/3) on accessible transport, as well as UITP’s revised position on accessibility issues, adopted in 2000, the Task Force examined accessibility initiatives in the transport systems of four cities: Grenoble, Prague, Göteborg and Liverpool. Task force members met with local and transport authorities as well as the public transport operators in these cities to better understand how policies to improve accessibility are made and implemented.

3. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE ECMT-UITP TASK FORCE

Whilst the organisational structure of public transport and local authorities varied in the four cities examined, a number of key conclusions can be drawn from their experience in improving the accessibility of their transport systems.

**Role of national governments in improving accessibility of local public transport**

- National legislation requiring the provision of fully accessible public transport over a period of time provides a framework within which local authorities and transport operators can work together to achieve accessibility. The existence of such legislation is important in all circumstances and is essential when public transport services are provided solely or largely on a commercial basis.

- Although implementation of measures to improve the accessibility of public transport is mainly a matter for local authorities and operators, national government has an important role in setting the legal framework, providing incentives and producing guidance on standards of good practice.

**Co-operation between local authorities and public transport operators**

- Close, continuing and frequent co-operation between local authorities, local transport authorities and transport operators is essential. Where these are all public authorities, or where there is control over private operators, there is no evidence to suggest that formal, contractual agreements are essential.

- Where operators are independent, authorities should stipulate clearly the accessibility level required in agreements that are contractually enforceable between the public transport authority and the operators.

**Planning for accessibility**

- Forward planning, with a time horizon of approximately ten years, is necessary. More detailed plans should cover a period of five years, and should be updated on an annual basis.

- There should be regular monitoring of progress towards achieving forward plan objectives. Monitoring should cover improvements to public transport infrastructure, introduction of fully accessible vehicles (buses, trams, trains) and use made of accessible services by disabled people and others with reduced mobility.
Co-operation with disabled people in defining and developing better accessibility to transport

- Collaboration and consultation with disability associations on all aspects of accessible transport is essential. This should cover vehicles, infrastructure and information. The public transport authority should have a focal point specifically charged with dealing with all disability issues. Care should be taken to ensure that consultation covers the whole range of disabilities: physical, sensory and cognitive.

Ensuring full accessibility: vehicles, infrastructure, and stops

- In urban areas, gapless and stepless boarding should become the norm. This requires action by both local authorities and operators. Infrastructure modifications should be undertaken to allow such boarding, either by making existing high platforms accessible or by arranging street-level infrastructure to maximise the benefit of low-floor vehicles. The authorities responsible for the transport infrastructure should conduct accessibility audits of bus and tram stops as well as related infrastructure using consistent standards. The objective should be to match the introduction of accessible vehicles with appropriate infrastructure. If this is not done, much of the value of accessible vehicles will be lost.

- While the development of accessible bus and tram stops is essential, it is also important to ensure that the surrounding pedestrian environment is also accessible. This responsibility rests primarily with the local authority.

- The effective enforcement of parking restrictions at and around bus stops is absolutely necessary, otherwise the benefit of low-floor, step-free access is lost. This requires stringent, consistent and enforced policy at the local authority level.

- In order to make construction provisions more effective, affordable and easier to design, it is desirable for local authorities, operators and vehicle manufacturers to rely on some degree of standardisation in wheelchair dimensions and restraint devices for transport purposes. Wheelchair manufacturers should adopt existing ISO standards, and associations of wheelchair users should make their constituencies aware of the standards on which public transport vehicle manufacturers are basing their designs for wheelchair accessibility.

Specialised Services

- Specialised services will continue to be needed by some of the most severely disabled people, as well as to provide connecting services for those people otherwise unable to reach public transport. It should not, however, be regarded as an acceptable substitute for accessible public transport, but rather as a complement to it.

Training

- Ensuring that drivers and other public transport staff have disability awareness training is essential to the effective delivery of accessible services.
Information

- As services become fully accessible, operators should ensure that accurate up-to-date information and publicity are made available in appropriate (audio/visual) formats for disabled people. Good, comprehensive information is essential if disabled people are to be encouraged to use accessible services. Information should cover the whole transport chain: pre-journey and during the trip.

- Some operators believe there are problems associated with particular features of accessible vehicles, notably buses. Use of a ramp and securing of wheelchair passengers are examples. Continued exchange of information and good practice on these aspects of operation between authorities and operators would be helpful.

Costs and Benefits

- Clearly there are costs associated with creating a fully accessible public transport system, but it should be remembered that there are financial benefits to be had from increased use of the public transport services.

- Additional investment and financing costs should be incorporated into long-term transport development plans to the extent possible, and discussed and shared based on responsibility and jurisdiction.

- Opportunities should be sought for cost-effective improvements to accessibility based on better enforcement of existing traffic laws (e.g., fines for illegal parking in and around bus stops).