

Equal Access Advisory Group

Virtual Meeting - 18th November 25

Attendees – Dr Deborah Lawson (Chair), Cllr Kay Wesley, Cathy Dean, Tom Stephans, Alec Scaresbrook, Diane Ritherdon.

Apologies – Denis Murphy, Theresa Graystone.

1. Welcome from the chair – Deborah welcomed everyone to the meeting
2. Notes of the meeting of 11th September 2025 were accepted as a true record.
3. **Actions from previous minutes**

Actions

- **Action** - Kay and Theresa to check out routes from Able World to Readsmore Surgery – **Remove Action**
- **Action** – Dropped kerbs – Replace surveying dropped kerbs with councillor and staff training, aim for springtime to let councillors experience navigating around town in a wheelchair. Give certain tasks to complete. Invite the Cheshire East Highways Officer to the Equal Access meeting.
- **Action** – Contact CAB to see if they will come to Congleton so people can have face-to-face contact. – **Kay had a further discussion with David but no response from CAB.**
- **Action** - Cathy to follow up with Mark (Town Hall Manager) regarding the ramp, accessible toilet sign and mirror in the accessible toilet (button also temperamental) – Permanent Ramp not possible, investigate a removable ramp and bell at the back door:
Update - Temporary ramp also not possible because of the gradient. Due to the distance from the back door to the Information Centre you can't use a standard model. CIC isn't open at the same times as the building. The button on the disabled toilet is temperamental but costs around 7K to replace. – **Deborah suggested contacting 'The Ramp People', Cathy, to follow up.**
- **Action** – **Disability Welcome Scheme Update** - Add resources to the disability page on the website. Ask for a training budget for CTC in the budget setting. The Disability Welcome Scheme leaflet is to be reorganised into new sections: Legal Requirements, Silver, and Gold. This is in response to businesses asking what makes gold vs silver,

and businesses must meet legal requirements. redesign leaflet – **Cathy/Kay – Carry Forward.**

- **Action** – Arrange a meeting with the Cheshire East Officer - Sam Burnard - Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Officer. Sadly, Sam was unable to attend the meeting 11th November. **Cathy to send meeting dates for 2026** - Kay followed up with Sam to discuss coming over and having a general chat with the group.
- **Colouring Competition Entries** - Cathy to contact the winners and arrange a photo call. **(Completed)**
- **Community Toilet Scheme** - Cathy to contact other councils to see what other councils have done, contact businesses to access support for the scheme. - **Carry forward Cathy/Kay**

4. Review Action Plan

Agreed to postpone as it would take too long for this meeting – Cathy/Kay/Deborah to organise a meeting to review. If anyone else would like to view, please visit -

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1r5OPQbUOXatGj6lQn6BCtpcGtxNMZKFkAmLLQV7yrUY/edit?usp=sharing>

5. Transport Plan (Cheshire East) Consultation

Your Transport - Your Voice: Consultation until 7th December 2025

A Cheshire East consultation has launched on a draft Local Transport Plan (LTP) and Investment Framework. The current LTP was adopted in 2019 and needs updating to reflect the considerable change in transport movements and trends. It is a statutory requirement to maintain a LTP to provide a policy framework that is robust and relevant to the needs of Cheshire East.

The [consultation brochure](#) and further information can be found on our website (www.cheshireeast.gov.uk/LocalTransportPlan), along with a [questionnaire](#) and [short video](#).

Deborah sent feedback to the group before; read the full response in Appendix 1. In summary –

In summary

A. Ableism in the strategy

The plan assumes able-bodied urban mobility. Rural wheelchair users have effectively no modal choice. Exclusion at design stage results in unintentional but significant ableism.

B. Diesel WAV necessity

Most WAVs able to carry powered chairs are diesel vans. Restricting these removes mobility. Sustainable travel must not compromise independence. An equitable society recognises this and would not penalise them for it or impose limitations.

C. Inaccessible pavements

Walking or wheeling improvements cannot be achieved without safe, accessible pavements. Many do not exist or are unusable.

D. Inaccessible consultation

If disabled people cannot meaningfully participate, the resulting plan will be inequitable.

E. Exposure and health

Outdoor waiting for transport (or even being outside for too long) is unsafe for many disabled residents and not acknowledged within the plan.

F. Fairness

Sustainability must include all residents. A strategy that works for urban non-disabled people but excludes disabled rural residents is not equitable or sustainable.

After much discussion within the group, it was agreed to form a response via the CTC community committee on the 27th of November. The plan does not recognise the needs of disabled people within the community and the significant challenges they face. Recommend bringing in experts to comment on the plan with lived experience.

New bus route discussed 93a/c, challenges on bus stops and route landmarks on the new route are noted by Kay, who continues to work with CEC and D&G to improve bus services.

6. Events - Remembrance and Christmas

Rachel – Town Centre and Events Manager for CTC, joined the meeting to comment on the accessibility arrangements for the Christmas Lights Switch on 28th November. These are detailed in Appendix 2 and will be posted online and shared on social media/press release.

At the Remembrance parade, chairs are available for the public to use. Next year, accessibility information will be shared on the event page for the new CTC website.

Diane commented that the warning signs for the road closure were not placed far enough up Canel Street, which forced people to do a 3-point turn at the end of the road.

7. Meeting Dates for 2026

Tuesdays 11am – 27th Jan, 14th Apr, 9th June, 8th Sept and 10th November.

Meetings are likely to be a mix of Zoom meetings and in-person. I suggest we hold the January meeting online due to the potential for poor weather. I will reserve the grand hall for the remaining dates.

8. AOB

A - The group is sad to learn that Deborah has to move out of Congleton due to the lack of suitable housing for people with disability in Congleton. Deborah will continue to chair the Equal Access group.

B - Sustainable travel group continues to pursue access to BVW.

C – Email received thanking the group and Deborah for all their hard work, copied below:

“Good morning

I'm writing in to say thank you for this purple pound guide and the disability awareness guide <https://www.congleton-tc.gov.uk/equal-access-congleton/>

Talk about helpful!! They are really really good. I can really make changes using these that I understand and I've used the disability awareness guide to make my staff more aware (and its making a difference already).

Will you be providing more of these guides in future? I know scope and other websites have bits and bobs but nothing as helpful as these guides. I don't know how local councils work, but these need to be used across Cheshire if they aren't already. Like on a key local government site where councils can download resources. Maybe if you are commissioning more guides you could produce a set and look into it?

So impressed with Dr Deborah Lawson and the work she does with Congleton Council and in the UK. And with Cllr Wesley. And with Congleton Council.

I've cc'd in MP Sarah Russell just so she knows what a great council we have here in Congleton and how helpful these guides are.

*Best regards
Sharon”*

Appendix 1

Cheshire East Transport Consultation (Response by Deborah Lawson)

This feedback is predominantly written with wheelchair users in mind.

The plan does not prioritise disabled people

The strategy largely reflects a generic sustainable travel model primarily suited to urban,

non-disabled users. It places considerable emphasis on active travel, modal shift, public transport hierarchies, and reducing car dependency. While these principles are valuable, the framing does not adequately consider disabled or rural residents.

The plan gives little attention to:

- rural areas with no pavements, poor lighting, and unsafe wheelchair routes
- wheelchair or mobility aid users who cannot engage in active travel
- reliance on diesel WAVs for powered wheelchairs (due to vehicle engineering constraints)
- the lack of accessible bus stops or shelters
- the cold, heat, exposure and health risks involved in waiting outdoors for many disabled people (or consideration of the damage to their electrical mobility equipment in the rain)
- the widespread absence of accessible pavements and dropped kerbs across Cheshire East
- NHS-issued wheelchair battery limitations
- pavement obstructions such as cars, bins, potholes and overgrowth
- the chronic shortage of wheelchair spaces on buses
- the reality that wheelchair users have no modal choice

As such, the strategy appears centred on climate and modal shift, with disability considerations applied afterwards. This creates unintentional but significant structural barriers for disabled people.

Why lived experience directly contradicts the strategy

1. Wheelchair users in rural areas must rely on vehicles

For powered wheelchair users, WAVs (often diesel vans) are the only safe and viable mode of transport. Electric vans typically cannot accommodate tail lifts, dropped floors or the necessary internal height for large powered chairs. These are engineering limitations, not preferences. Any policy that restricts diesel WAVs disproportionately affects disabled residents.

2. Rural pavements are non-existent or unusable

Many pavements fail basic accessibility standards due to:

- missing dropped kerbs
- uneven or broken surfaces
- narrow widths

- cambers
- lack of street lights
- overgrowth
- pavement parking

This makes active travel impossible for many residents. Safety is compromised even in semi-urban areas. And a wheelchair user should not lose independence, having to always have a companion with them to keep them safe.

3. Public transport is unreliable and often excludes wheelchair users

Key concerns include:

- only one wheelchair space on most buses
- lift failures
- inaccessible stops
- passengers being left behind in bad weather when the space is occupied
- minimal shelter or heating at stops
- high risk of illness from prolonged weather/temperature exposure
- very limited battery range for powered wheelchairs
- train assistance that must be pre-booked and is not always provided reliably

The plan's reference to improving bus connectivity does not adequately address the systemic barriers preventing safe, independent public transport use by disabled people.

4. Disability access concerns extend far beyond ramps

Important realities include:

- wheelchair users are significantly colder and more exposed to the elements than walking passengers
- rural distances intensify health risks
- waiting for transport is not an inconvenience but a safety issue
- "walkability" metrics do not apply where pavements do not exist or where mobility is severely limited

5. The consultation documents themselves are inaccessible

Issues include:

- long, complex PDFs
- no easy-read versions

- no audio formats
- limited screen-reader optimisation
- no simplified versions for cognitive impairments
- no large-print versions
- no targeted outreach to older or disabled people

This means those most affected are least able to contribute, creating structural bias in the consultation process.

Universal transport strategies assume conditions that do not apply to disabled or rural residents

The plan assumes:

- everyone can walk 10 minutes to a bus stop
- everyone can cycle
- everyone can wait in bad weather, or the heat/rain/wind
- everyone has equal resilience
- reducing car use is universally positive

For wheelchair users, none of these assumptions holds true. We cannot shift modes. We cannot just walk, just cycle or just take the bus. Most towns do not even have wheelchair-accessible taxis. Many disabled people also require their vehicle for medical needs or to return home in an emergency.

Lack of modal choice

Most residents can choose between multiple modes of travel. Wheelchair users often have one, dependent on:

- pavement existence and quality
- dropped kerbs
- obstructions
- weather
- battery range
- available WAV transportation

Removing or restricting this single mode removes independence completely.

Public transport alternatives also fail to provide a reliable or safe choice, particularly with unpredictable assistance, inaccessible stops, and exposure to severe weather.

Many travel modes such as cycling, scooters, most EVs, narrow paths, stairs, shortcuts are simply impossible for wheelchair users.

Therefore, policies based on modal shift do not reflect disabled people's lived realities.

In summary

A. Ableism in the strategy

By assuming mobility based on higher levels of physical ability, the plan fails to account for residents with limited mobility, particularly rural wheelchair users who have no modal choice. Designing without these realities in mind creates structural ableism, even if unintentionally.

B. Diesel WAV necessity

Most WAVs able to carry NHS-prescribed powered chairs are diesel vans. Restricting these removes mobility. Sustainable travel must not compromise independence. An equitable society recognises this and would not penalise them for it or impose limitations.

C. Inaccessible pavements

Walking or wheeling improvements cannot be achieved without safe, accessible pavements. Many do not exist or are unusable.

D. Inaccessible consultation

If disabled people cannot meaningfully participate, the resulting plan will be inequitable.

E. Exposure and health

Outdoor waiting for transport (or even being outside for too long) is unsafe for many disabled residents and not acknowledged within the plan.

F. Fairness

Sustainability must include all residents. A strategy that works for urban non-disabled people but excludes disabled rural residents is not equitable or sustainable.

Appendix 2

Welcome to Congleton's Christmas Lights Switch-On!

The town council, in collaboration with its Equal Access Support Group, has launched a series of accessibility improvements to ensure everyone can join in the festive cheer. From quieter viewing areas and inclusive spaces to accessible toilets, these enhancements are designed to make the celebrations enjoyable for all visitors.

Whether you're coming to see the big Lights Switch-On, take part in the Lantern Parade, visit Santa's Grotto, or explore the festive stalls, we're committed to ensuring all visitors can enjoy the celebrations comfortably.

The event opens at 4pm, with the big switch-on at 6pm. Festivities in the High Street and Pedestrian area will be at its quietest when the event opens. Anyone who wants to avoid crowds and/or noise is advised to attend early and avoid the congested areas between 5.30pm-6.30pm.

Where are the Accessible & Quiet Spaces?

Congleton Town Hall, (No 10 on the map)

There will be an accessible live-stream of the main stage inside the Town Hall, providing a quieter, more comfortable viewing space. Accessible toilets are also available within the building.

The Space, (No 6 on the map)

An Inclusivity Area in 'The Space' will be open from 5pm–7pm, offering a calmer, supportive environment for anyone who may need a break from the busy crowds while still enjoying the festive atmosphere. Please be aware that the route to The Space is expected to be very busy, especially around 6pm during the Lights Switch-On, so allow extra time to move through the area.

Is Blue Badge Parking available?

Blue Badge parking spaces are available at the following locations, provided by Cheshire East Council. Please note there is no designated event parking:

- Antrobus Street, CW12 1HB: x2 spaces
- Back Park Street, CW12 1EP: x3 spaces
- Fairground, CW12 1BP: x6 spaces
- Princess Street, CW12 1DF: x2 spaces

Will there be accessible toilets?

Toilets are available at several points across the town centre:

- Accessible toilet inside the Town Hall, High Street (No. 10 on the map)
- Portable toilets on Market Street by the bus station, including one accessible unit and three standard units
- Toilets inside Rumba, Swan Bank (No. 3 on the map)

Stall Layout & Accessibility

To improve safety and accessibility, all stalls will be arranged single-sided along Swan Bank, Mill Street, the pedestrian area, and High Street. This ensures clear pathways for visitors, including those using wheelchairs, pushchairs, or mobility aids, while still enjoying the festive stalls.

Please note: These areas are expected to be very busy, especially around the 6pm Lights Switch-On, so allow extra time to navigate through the crowds.

How do I get to Congleton Market Quarter?

You can access the Market Quarter in two ways:

- Down the ramp from Morrisons
- From Princess Street Car Park

Both routes provide convenient access to the stalls, entertainment, and festive activities.

Information Point

Visit Congleton Information Centre for all event details, help, and signposting. This is also the designated Lost Children Point. Located inside the Town Hall (No 10 on map).

Event Marshalls

Stewards will be wearing yellow Hi-Viz jackets. If you require assistance, please speak to a steward. Please note, the majority of stewards are volunteers, and they may need to radio the organisers to assist you with your request.

Road Closures

Road closures will be in place on High Street (12 noon-10pm), and Mill Street and Swan Bank. Motorists will still be able to use Market Street to access Morrisons and the Fairground Car Park. Vehicles on Canal Street will only be able to turn right onto Lawton Street. No access from Moody Steet to High Street. The bus and taxi rank will operate as normal but with all routes exiting via Mountbatten Way.