"Railway accessibility must be improved ahead of ending lockdown restrictions"

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With all legal Covid rules set to be scrapped on Monday, there is a call from those with accessibility needs for public transport providers to improve accessibility standards both in their physical spaces and online.

A 2019 study found that 40% of UK train stations cannot be effectively used by people with disabilities due to non-inclusive interior design and insufficient provision of assistance from staff members. National Rail's recent faux pas, in which the website was put in hard to read greyscale as a tribute following Prince Phillip's death, reveals the need for more robust accessibility processes and understanding within the industry as it becomes more digital.

Molly Watt, accessibility and usability consultant at Nexer Digital, was born deaf, lost her sight at the age of 14 and now has a guide dog to support her when out in public. Molly will no longer use train stations she has not previously been to due to accessibility concerns and is calling for rail providers to review accessibility standards both in physical spaces and online to make their services inclusive before the end of social distancing rules.

Molly Watt, accessibility and usability consultant at Nexer Digital said: "Despite some efforts to

address accessibility issues, the railway is still far from disabled-friendly. Accessibility issues are not simply limited to physically getting around the train or train station, but run deep in the sector. Staff are often not adequately trained to understand special needs and digital offerings lack fundamental inclusive features.

"As the world reopens, rail providers must make improvements so that people with disabilities are not excluded from enjoying life post-lockdown and travelling on trains to do so. Accessibility features both physically in train stations and online often feel like a bolted-on afterthought and are therefore not always fully functional.

"Rail organisations must scrutinise all aspects of the physical space, from the car park to the toilets to the train itself. Every step of the journey must be assessed asking if someone who was deaf, blind, in a wheelchair or cognitively impaired would be able to navigate it.

"Even in a well-designed physical space, those with additional needs may still need further support, so it is equally as important to provide staff with the right training to understand the various needs of a wide range of passengers and offer the correct assistance. In addition, employees should be clearly visible at all points of a person's trip to assist where needed.

"As more elements of rail travel become digital, providers must also ensure that these can be used by people with all kinds of access needs. Inclusive design needs to be embedded in websites with text of a sufficient, adjustable size that contrasts against the background, optimization for screen-readers and other tech used by those with additional needs and closed captions or sign language on videos. As society becomes more reliant on smartphones, organisations must ensure that implementing mobile features will not exclude those who do not use smartphones, as is often the case for older people.

"The UK is reliant on its railways and 19% of the country's adult population have disabilities. With the current state of accessibility in the train network, providers may find they are excluding or making life even harder for a huge number of people and alienate a significant portion of their potential customer base. As the country reopens following the pandemic, these shortfalls must be addressed so that everyone can enjoy reuniting with friends and family, no matter their needs."

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