# Built for purpose? Understanding people's experiences of infrastructure assets and services

*May 2026*

Infrastructure is at the centre of the way we live our lives. Transport gets us to where we need to be, digital infrastructure connects us to colleagues, friends and family across the globe, and the water out of our taps meets our basic needs.

It also supports improved social and community health – connecting us to each other, boosting social capital and in turn improving public trust in government, social cohesion and economic mobility.[1]

But not everyone has the same experience of and access to infrastructure assets and services.

This Institution of Civil Engineers (ICE) scoping paper examines people's experiences of Britain's infrastructure assets (and the services they support) from a diversity and inclusion perspective. The paper will act as a foundation for further work by the ICE in this area. As such, it is exploratory and stops short of making detailed recommendations for change.

A new YouGov poll of Great Britain, commissioned by the ICE, lays out the scale of the challenge.

- 55% of British adults don't think that the UK government cares about accessibility and inclusion when it comes to infrastructure planning and construction.
- 78% don't feel that people like them are listened to when infrastructure is planned, funded and delivered in the UK.
- And women, people with disabilities, those living in non-urban areas, older people and those with a lower household income were more likely to say they 'don't often' or 'never' feel safe, confident or included when using transport infrastructure.[2]

This paper seeks to understand more about infrastructure inclusivity in Britain, and what the key barriers are to embedding more accessible and inclusive planning, design and delivery.

This scoping paper explores the following key points:

[1] Local Trust (2023) Policy Spotlight 1: How Social Infrastructure Improves Outcomes

[2] All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 2,266 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 28 - 29 April 2026. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+).

- The gap between design and delivery intent and lived reality. The scoping paper discusses people's experiences of infrastructure and the barriers many face.

- The role of the infrastructure sector – including civil and infrastructure engineers – in embedding inclusivity and accessibility earlier in the project life cycle.

- The implementation gap between the available guidance and best practice for designing and constructing more inclusive infrastructure, and what is actually delivered in practice. There is an array of guidance available, but a lack of resourcing and prioritisation of its application.

- Non-design and construction levers for change. The full project life cycle offers opportunities to improve inclusivity and ensure that assets are informed by and benefit all who use them.

## People's experiences of infrastructure

People don't always feel safe, included and confident when using infrastructure services. This might be for a range of reasons, including their accessibility needs, cultural or ethnic backgrounds, and gender identities.

A historic narrative about infrastructure supporting growth in all forms, without considering who that growth does or does not benefit, has underemphasised the need to design for people of all backgrounds and needs.

The social model of disability proposes that 'people are disabled by barriers in society, not by their impairment or difference. Barriers can be physical, like buildings not having accessible toilets. Or they can be caused by people's attitudes to difference, like assuming people can't do certain things.'[3]

Diversity extends wider than disability. Barriers to people from all underrepresented or disadvantaged backgrounds benefiting equitably from infrastructure are (inadvertently) erected by those designing, building and maintaining that infrastructure. There is an important role for the infrastructure industry – including civil and infrastructure engineers – to play in removing these barriers or avoiding their creation in the first place.

In ICE-commissioned polling, British adults who said they 'don't often' or 'never' felt safe, confident or included when using a range of infrastructure asset types were asked why that was. The most common themes from the written responses included:

- Poor maintenance and failing infrastructure. Many were concerned about potholes, broken and uneven paths and unsafe cycle lanes.

- Personal safety, crime and antisocial behaviour. Brits expressed that they felt unsafe, and mentioned that their backgrounds as women, older people or as living with a disability made them feel particularly vulnerable.

- A sense that infrastructure isn't designed for or with them. Participants felt excluded, not consulted and that infrastructure is not built with them and their needs in mind.

[3] Sense (n.d.) The Social Model of Disability

The polling doesn't indicate there is much faith that this will improve through government leadership. Some 55% of those surveyed don't think that the UK government cares about accessibility and inclusion when it comes to infrastructure planning and construction.

Record infrastructure investment by the UK government in the form of the £725 billion 10 Year Infrastructure Strategy (10YIS) is a call to action to ensure that investment benefits everyone.[4]

## Starting with the end in mind

The barriers people may face can look very different depending on the types of assets they're using and the kinds of challenges they encounter in everyday life.

Understanding the experiences of those using the infrastructure assets being designed and built improves the infrastructure sector's ability to meet a wider set of needs.

This section summarises different groups' experiences of infrastructure assets to date but is far from exhaustive.

Most of the available data centres on disabled people's experience of transport infrastructure. Organisations including the National Centre for Accessible Transport (ncat), Transport for All and the Institution of Mechanical Engineers have developed a strong evidence base in this area, which the new ICE-commission polling builds upon.

It is clear that the more than one in five people across the UK who are disabled face a series of barriers when using infrastructure services. Ncat identifies common barriers as street obstacles, entering taxis, use of staff assistance and step-free access on/off vehicles and at stations.[5]

The new polling further highlights the depth of the issue. It found that 42% of those with a health condition or disability that limited them 'a lot' don't often, or never, feel safe, included or confident when using transport infrastructure. Similarly, 39% of that group felt the same about the urban environment.

[4] ICE (2025) What's in the UK Government's Long-Awaited 10 Year Infrastructure Strategy?
[5] National Centre for Accessible Transport (2024) Understanding and Identifying Barriers to Accessing Transport

**Using public transport in practice: barriers from door to door**

Using public transport with a physical or non-physical disability or other condition that affects mobility can be a challenging experience. Often, access to stations, or to trains and buses themselves, is the barrier that comes to mind. But the whole journey – from when someone leaves their house to when they reach their destination – can be littered with challenges.

Stations with step-free access have lifts or ramps – or a combination of both – so that customers don't have to use escalators or stairs to move between the street and the platform. In London, 94 Tube stations (over a third of those on the network), more than 60 London Overground stations and all 41 Elizabeth line stations have step-free access. All DLR stations and tram stops are step-free, and all buses and the majority of Transport for London (TfL) bus stops are wheelchair-accessible. Journey times for those who need accessible routes have improved by 40% since 2016.

This improvement is a positive step forward, but step-free access isn't the same as level boarding. Less than 2% of stations had level boarding in 2022, with a gap between the platform and train of over 250 mm at a third of stations, making it very difficult for those with accessibility requirements – or prams – to board confidently and without additional assistance.

Getting to and on public transport isn't the only barrier. Spatial challenges, including availability of designated priority seating, ability to move around carriages and overcrowding, also get in the way of disabled people's ability to safely and confidently use transport.

Transport for All has identified overcrowding on trains, stations and platforms as a barrier faced by almost half of disabled rail and light rail users. Ncat's survey results show that 34.7% of rail users with mobility challenges face space constraints.

A lack of toilet facilities, warm and dry waiting areas, signage that clearly marks where platforms and transport links are, and suitable seating are common barriers. For transport users with particular needs, existing infrastructure isn't meeting the mark. In 2023, Transport for All found that 40% of railway stations did not have tactile paving for blind or partially sighted people.

But the barriers people with disabilities face aren't just physical.

A lack of information can be a barrier in itself. Some 27.7% of disabled people using rail report difficulties with information availability in the vehicles and carriages they use. Not knowing where the door will be and what side it will open, unclear announcements with poor sound quality, coach numbers not being visible, and difficulty reading seat numbers and toilet signage are all challenges to those with disabilities.

In ICE-commissioned polling British adults were asked about the barriers they face to using different kinds of infrastructure, common challenges included:

- Potholes and uneven surfaces; many Brits highlighted underinvestment in maintenance.

- Feeling threatened or worried about antisocial behaviour, particularly for women and the LGBTQ+ community.
- Physical safety, particularly when cycling or otherwise interacting with cars or bikes as a non-driver.
- Cybersecurity concerns and broadband reliability.
- Health conditions or disabilities that make it more difficult to use infrastructure services.
- Not feeling included or heard in the design and delivery of infrastructure.

> *'I have a disability and the infrastructure was never built to take things like that into account.'*
>
> Response from a survey respondent when asked why they don't feel safe, included or confident when using infrastructure assets and services.

The argument is both moral and economic. The Motability Foundation has found that completely closing the transport accessibility gap for disabled people in the UK would deliver benefits in the region of £72.4 billion per annum.[6]

Of course, not all disabilities are physical or visible: those that aren't visible include deafness, severe anxiety disorders and neurodivergence.

The autism research and campaigning charity Autistica highlights that unpredictability, uncertainty and inconsistency on transport networks can prompt or increase anxiety and distress for some neurodivergent people.[7]

These factors can prevent some neurodivergent people from using public transport altogether and make it harder to navigate the built environment with confidence.

Similarly, safety concerns and the gendered distribution of caregiving responsibilities are factors that affect women's experiences of infrastructure assets and services.

> *'[Infrastructure is]... not always built with safety for women in mind, especially when walking in secluded, enclosed, dimly lit areas.'*
>
> Response from a survey respondent when asked why they don't feel safe, included or confident when using infrastructure assets and services.

An ICE and University College London paper in 2018 highlighted the gendered nature of infrastructure use.[8] Many urban environments are designed with men in mind – who on average take more train trips rather than bus journeys compared to women, and have different habits when moving around the built environment, including travelling more often from point A to B, instead of breaking up travel to see friends, pick up children or run

[6] Motability (2022) The Transport Accessibility Gap
[7] Autistica (2025) Neurodivergence and Public Transport
[8] ICE and UCL (2018) What is a City but the People?

errands. Alongside meeting disabled people's accessibility requirements, level boarding and step-free access also support caregivers with prams and other equipment.

An ageing population is likely to compound the effects of existing barriers.

At present, almost one in five people in England – or 11 million – are aged 65 and over, and almost two in five people – or 22 million – are aged 50 and over.[9] Median age is higher and increasing faster in rural and coastal areas – often driven by inward migration of older people seeking to retire and the outward migration of young people heading to towns and cities for education and work opportunities.[10] Many older people will experience the health effects of ageing and changes to the way they experience infrastructure services, as well as the connectivity challenges that accompany living in more rural areas.

> *'[I] don't use public transport, there are one [or] two buses a day in my village, and the roads are full of potholes.'*
>
> Response from a survey respondent when asked why they don't feel safe, included or confident when using infrastructure assets and services.

In the ICE-commissioned polling, a quarter of British adults over the age of 65 did not feel safe, confident or included when using transport infrastructure, compared to just 18% of 18- to 24-year-olds.

Transport infrastructure availability, as well as physical accessibility, poses a problem as people age, as does internet connectivity in rural communities – particularly as the government and other services continue to move to 'digital by default'.

Among people aged 75+ in the UK, three in ten (29%; or 1.9 million) do not use or rarely use the internet.[11] As people live longer lives, and the world rapidly digitalises around them, the health and activity challenges that come with ageing, including more disability, may be compounded by further ruralisation if trends continue.

Affordability pressures further compound other barriers. In the ICE-commissioned GB representative polling, 30% of those with a household income of under £20,000 don't often, or never, feel safe, included or confident when using transport infrastructure, compared to just 15% of those with a household income of more than £70,000. Where affordability concerns affect people's ability to get to work, or access services and their support systems, this can compound the effect of other challenges.

In London, where much of Transport for London's costs are recovered via fares that are some of the highest among comparable metros around the world, translating the social mobility opportunities that urban centres provide into actual impact for lower-income households can be a challenge.

Intersectionality refers to the interconnected nature of social categories, such as race, class, gender and other protected characteristics. These connections can create overlapping systems of discrimination or disadvantage and can compound barriers when people attempt to use infrastructure services.

Similarly, infrastructure assets should not be seen in isolation, but rather as an interconnected network. Part of the complexity of eliminating barriers to accessibility and increasing people's confidence includes

[9] Centre for Ageing Better (2025) The State of Ageing 2025
[10] Centre for Ageing Better (2021) Ageing in a Rural Place
[11] Age UK (2025) Facts and Figures about Digital Inclusion and Older People

understanding how assets and networks are interrelated from a user perspective. Inclusive design and delivery must cater for each part of the community, taking into account a range of identities, barriers and changing lifestyles.

Catering to a wide range of needs should prompt civil and infrastructure engineers to consider whether designing as if everyone faces accessibility and other barriers wouldn't just make infrastructure services better for everyone.

### *Do we have all the information we need?*

There is a need for improved data collection and use to support a more effective case for embedding inclusive outcomes within individual projects. Improved data collection will capture the benefits of existing accessibility and inclusivity investments, and lead to improved understanding of the needs of those who will use the asset(s), to inform design and delivery.

More, higher-quality and better-coordinated data could be used to:

- Clarify who is providing resources for projects versus who benefits from their delivery and operation, to encourage better-informed collaboration between affected groups, departments and other clients, who currently act in siloes.[12]

- Address data collection fragmentation issues that result from the diffuse nature of transport and other infrastructure systems. The Rail Data Marketplace is a good example of work to bring together data collected from across the rail network.[13] The government has committed to extending this approach to other transport modes through the Transport Data Action Plan.[14] Extending this to other asset classes – including asset mapping and accessible data sharing on maintenance across streetscapes (road and pavement infrastructure, for example) – and prioritising coordination with local authorities could be a useful extension of this commitment.

- Promote accountability across modes. The House of Commons' Transport Committee highlights that airports are required to report failed assists – where a passenger misses a connection or flight as a result of assistance not turning up. This is not the case for other modes of transport or wider infrastructure asset classes.[15] A failed assist reporting system which requires more frequent data collection would be a useful addition.

- Improve mapping of existing accessible infrastructure services to inform future planning. The Transport Committee also recommends the government develop a register of key accessibility assets on the rail and bus network which can be drawn upon by journey-planning tools.[16]

[12] Mott Macdonald (2024) Making London's Infrastructure and Communities More Inclusive
[13] National Rail (n.d.) Rail Data Marketplace
[14] Department for Transport (2026) Better Connected: A Strategy for Integrated Transport
[15] Transport Committee (2025) Access Denied: Rights Versus Reality in Disabled People's Access to Transport
[16] Ibid.

- Expand understanding of people's experiences of infrastructure. As is clear from this paper, and the work of organisations like ncat and Transport for All, among others, much of the quantitative and qualitative data available on inclusivity in infrastructure centres around transport modes and their accessibility for disabled people. Alongside continued investment and government focus on expanding this evidence base, an improved understanding of the barriers those with disabilities face across other asset classes would be beneficial to making the case for further investment.

Part of the issue is that post-occupancy evaluations are not undertaken as consistently as they could be and so consistently available information about how inclusive an asset actually is in practice for those using it is a missing piece of the puzzle.

## What is the role of the infrastructure sector?

There is plenty of accessibility guidance available, and although not perfect or total in its coverage of asset classes, much of it is high quality. The UK's infrastructure sector also demonstrates pockets of good work to include a wider range of people both as end users of infrastructure and in the consultation process for projects.

But there is a consistency gap – available guidance isn't being applied and used as consistently as it could be. Often, financial or engineering trade-offs, and a lack of prioritisation of inclusivity as a policy or project goal, mean that inclusive elements, while designed in at the start of a project, fail to be properly delivered.

The industry has an opportunity to improve inclusivity at every step of the delivery process, and each core project role has a part to play. The Royal Institute of British Architects' Inclusive Design Overlay sets out many of the actions project teams can take.[17]

**What is inclusive design?**

The Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) describes inclusive design as seeking to 'create buildings and environments that welcome everyone, regardless of their characteristics or identity, such as age, disability, gender, neurodiversity, sex, health conditions, race, ethnicity, religion or belief, pregnancy, maternity or paternity status, carer status, and more'. (Inclusive Design Overlay for the RIBA Plan of Work)

Inclusive design aims to remove the barriers that inhibit equitable use of infrastructure, to enable everyone to participate equally, confidently and safely.

Core project roles include the client, project management, design, construction and asset management teams. Alongside the traditional project teams, RIBA's guidance also identifies the value of an inclusive design lead – most likely an independent inclusive design consultant – on larger projects in particular. On smaller projects, inclusive design champions should be identified to shepherd the application of inclusivity principles.

Client teams might, for example, define the inclusive design vision and allocate budget to achieving it. They might also undertake a user-impact assessment and appoint an inclusive design lead.

Project management teams should engage early with asset management teams and review contracts to ensure project inclusivity commitments are met throughout the project.

[17] RIBA (2023) Inclusive Design Overlay for the RIBA Plan of Work

Ahead of design, user-group engagement should be set up, and feedback facilitated.

**User engagement panels in practice**

The 2012 Olympic Games were the first to consider accessibility needs and inclusivity through the entire process, from design to delivery, operations and legacy.

The Built Environment Access Panel for the Olympic Park legacy development included stakeholders who were older, disabled or experts in diversity and accessibility. The Panel had the ability to veto development as part of the project, but this power wasn't used because panel involvement was considered sufficient to improve designs and ensure end users' needs were met.

Network Rail has built on this legacy by setting up a Built Environment Accessibility Panel, mostly made up of disabled people, to advise on access issues.

Asset management teams have a critical role to play as well: providing operations and maintenance data early informs better design. The team also supports the project management team's handover documentation, and ensures there is sufficient budget allocated to ensure longevity of the asset, including as user needs change. Teams should also plan post-occupancy evaluation with a specific focus on accessibility and inclusion.

Design is supplemented by British standards (including BS 8300-1 – Design of an accessible and inclusive built environment[18] and PAS 6463 – Building for neurodiversity[19]) and project-legacy-driven best practice standards (including those developed by the London Legacy Development Corporation following the 2012 Olympic Games[20]). However not all standards align. Conflicting expectations can inhibit the effectiveness of inclusive design.

## Improving inclusivity throughout the whole asset life cycle

A focus on delivery and operations can be supplemented by using non-construction levers like procurement and non-built solution design to embed inclusivity across the whole asset life cycle.

### *Championing improved social outcomes in procurement and delivery*

Infrastructure procurement is a large lever for governments to pull, ensuring that, alongside accessibility from the perspective of those using the asset(s), the project is contributing to the communities it is built in.

**What is social procurement?**

'Social procurement' relates to how procuring bodies – mainly public in this context – ensure tendering, contract award and management processes improve economic, social and environmental wellbeing: known as social value.

[18] BSI (2026) BS 8300-1 – Design of an accessible and inclusive built environment. External environment. Code of practice
[19] BSI (2022) PAS6463
[20] London Legacy Development Corporation (2025) Inclusive Design Standards

The Social Value Act (2012) (SVA) is the bedrock of social procurement in the UK, including for infrastructure projects. The Construction Playbook – the government's guidance for public works programmes and projects – gives further advice on the application of social value creation frameworks across infrastructure.

Research undertaken by the ICE and Useful Projects in 2020 highlights that social value is primarily considered during the procurement and construction phases of a project – largely because procurement is the focus of the SVA.[21] However, it can be created at all stages of a project's life cycle, from the earliest planning, through design, procurement, delivery and into operations and eventually decommissioning. The paper calls on the industry to be bolder in its ambition to improve the creation and distribution of social value via infrastructure procurement.

Many infrastructure clients and organisations across the supply chain have social value creation policies and objectives. But there is still a significant implementation gap between policy settings, including in private sector organisations, and the reality of meaningful social value being delivered in practice.

### *Inclusion in non-built solutions*

Cultural diversity and practices also affect the way people use and experience infrastructure. Communication about the use of infrastructure after it is in operation, and especially when behavioural change is required from those using it, provides an opportunity to think differently about *who* is using the service, as well as *how*.

The water sector has tested an approach, to understand how water is used and valued in different faiths and cultures, with the aim of reducing water consumption to support a better-functioning water provision system.

Funded by OfWat, campaigns in Cambridge and the West Midlands, *Reviving the Sunnah – performing wudu the prophetic way* and *Saving water in South Asian communities,* centred around religious rituals and cooking practices to address water use in a sensitive and well-targeted way.[22]

### *Improved inclusivity will require co-creation and appropriate consultation*

In the same way that procurement is a lever for improved social outcomes, consultation and user engagement throughout the project life cycle provide substantial opportunities for more inclusive practices.

But people don't feel included or listened to.

The ICE-commissioned polling demonstrates the breadth of the issue. Some 78% of British adults didn't feel that people like them were listened to when infrastructure is planned, funded and delivered.

> *'I don't feel included in the design of infrastructure. No outreach from local organisations, things just seem to happen.'*
>
> Response from a survey respondent when asked why they don't feel safe, included or confident when using infrastructure assets and services.

[21] ICE and Useful Projects (2020) Maximising Social Value from Infrastructure Projects
[22] Cambridge Water (2025) Findings Revealed from Diversity-Led Water-Saving Project

Broken down by age group, older people feel the least listened to, with 89% of those over 65 responding negatively to this question. By contrast, the group that felt the most listened to was 18- to 24-years-olds, at 25% of those surveyed.

Similarly, 84% of those with any level of health condition or disability don't feel that people like them were listened to when infrastructure was planned, funded and delivered.

On a location basis, 86% of those who live in towns or on the fringes of urban centres, and 83% of those who live rurally, don't feel that people like them were listened to, compared to 76% in urban centres.

Engaging more meaningfully and understanding in more detail how assets are being used in practice once operational could support improved planning and design from the outset.

> *'Listen to what people want.'*
>
> Response from a survey respondent when asked what is the single most important change, if any, you think policymakers should make to make infrastructure safer and more accessible?

Best practice guidance often includes an acknowledgement of the need for staff to undertake appropriate training, engage accessibility consultants to supplement their capability, and engage directly with users to understand their needs.

Co-production, rather than traditional consultation, acknowledges the value of those using infrastructure services as equal partners in design and delivery. Instead of a traditionally one-way consultation process, where already-developed solutions are 'tested' with users, co-production techniques involve users much earlier, and at problem-definition stage.

Co-production is highlighted as good practice in many transport-sector guidance documents but can easily be ignored if organisations aren't incentivised to follow it.

Accessibility panels and engagement with 'experts by experience' are valuable approaches to user engagement. Panels bring together people who use infrastructure differently than mainstream engineering approaches may assume, to give targeted feedback and shape asset design.

Engaging these panels and user groups earlier in the process of design and delivery could support an improved understanding of current experiences of infrastructure, as well as what is required for different groups via the construction and operation of new assets.

These themes will be further explored in upcoming ICE work scheduled for later in 2026, which will focus on public engagement in infrastructure development and delivery.

### What does the policy environment look like?

Broad legislation, including the UK's Equality Act (2010), creates the framework of rights and duties to protect people across the UK from discrimination based on their personal characteristics and backgrounds.[23] The Human Rights Act supplements this framework with additional requirements.

[23] HM Government (2010) Equality Act 2010

Approved document M of the UK Building Regulations and its supplementary approved documents describe accessibility requirements and best practice in designing and delivering accessible buildings – including as part of wider infrastructure projects (e.g. stations).[24]

The community infrastructure levy allows (outside of London) for funds to be raised from development to then be invested in, among other assets, social infrastructure to benefit the communities the development is being built in.

For transport infrastructure, mode-specific regulations or standards for accessibility are set by the mode's regulator (e.g. the Office of Rail and Road).[25] Best practice guidance also exists for pedestrian infrastructure.[26]

Better Connected – the government's transport strategy – outlines a commitment to making transport increasingly accessible and affordable.[27] It recognises that persistent physical, economic and systemic barriers continue to limit equal access to, and confidence in, the transport network. It commits the government to embedding accessibility from the outset as a core principle of designing transport and makes the case for action to make transport more affordable, recognising that transport is the second-highest household cost after housing.

Prompted by the Transport Committee's diagnosis of the complexity and fragmentation of the legal and regulatory environment for transport accessibility, the strategy includes a series of actions for the government to take forward.[28]

These include:

- launching an Accessible Travel Charter
- working with the Law Commission to review the current legal framework for transport accessibility
- increasing the data available to help those with accessibility needs plan their journeys.

Individual public bodies, like Network Rail, have their own inclusive design manuals that lay out how they standardise inclusivity in asset design and delivery.[29]

Alongside Better Connected, and asset-specific guidelines, the Railways Bill, which sets up Great British Railways (GBR), provides an opportunity for further direction on inclusivity.

But the Transport Committee's report on accessibility, published last year, outlines the yawning gap between ambition and implementation. It states, 'A positive direction of travel is not enough... There needs to be more emphasis on a concrete delivery plan to achieve the overall outcome of closing the accessibility gap, rather than

[24] HM Government (2016) Access to and use of buildings – Approved Document M
[25] Institution of Mechanical Engineers (2025) En Route to Accessible Public Transport
[26] Department for Transport (2021) Inclusive Mobility: A Guide to Best Practice on Access to Pedestrian and Transport Infrastructure
[27] Department for Transport (2026) Better Connected: A Strategy for Integrated Transport
[28] Transport Committee (2025) Access Denied: Rights Versus Reality in Disabled People's Access to Transport
[29] Network Rail (2021) Inclusive Design

administrative actions which, while positive in themselves, risk adding up to no more than the sum of their parts.'[30]

Industry-led frameworks, including RIBA's Inclusive Design Overlay, champion best practice and supplement government requirements.

Much of this guidance pertains specifically to transport infrastructure and the non-dwelling buildings that support its use. Given the safety implications, and the data availability for transport modes compared to other asset classes, this is expected. However, improving the coverage of guidance documentation to consider a wider set of assets, and the services they provide, including providing guidance for non-built solutions such as demand management, as in the water sector example, may be a useful step forward.

## What are the barriers to better implementation?

Alongside data availability challenges, as outlined earlier, there is a range of other challenges that present ongoing barriers to better inclusive infrastructure outcomes for users.

### *Prioritisation against other policy, budget and engineering considerations*

In an increasingly constrained fiscal environment, there is a risk that inclusive design and investment to support accessibility is seen as a 'nice to have' rather than essential to the wide enjoyment and use of an asset.

Evidence to the Transport Committee ahead of its 2025 report highlighted that accessibility considerations were often deprioritised when they conflicted with other policy goals, financial considerations or traditional engineering solutions.[31]

Similarly, industry reflects that while inclusive design elements are often designed in from the start, budgetary pressures erode their deliverability in some projects. A lack of consistent evaluation and review practices contributes to a focus on time and cost, rather than benefits realisation.

Rebuilding the public's trust in the sector, and the government's ability to deliver, will require improved schedule and cost performance. But this must come alongside a recognition that the infrastructure sector will have to be smarter and more inclusive in designing for a wider range of users. Otherwise, rebuilding trust will be hamstrung by the narrowness of the communities that infrastructure services benefit.

### *Valuing wider benefits*

Valuing the non-monetary benefits associated with investment in accessibility design elements, and the wider benefits associated with social value procurement, also presents a challenge. Approaches to social value measurement in the infrastructure sector lack consistency, leading to difficulties in communicating and delivering social value.

The latest update to the Green Book – the government's guidance for appraising policies, programmes and projects – addresses some of the challenges associated with considering wider social benefit as part of government business cases.[32]

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[30] Transport Committee (2025) Access Denied: Rights Versus Reality in Disabled People's Access to Transport
[31] Ibid.
[32] ICE (2026) Rewriting the Rules: What Does the New Green Book Mean for Infrastructure?

It explicitly rejects arbitrary benefit-cost ratio (BCR) thresholds and clarifies that a BCR below 1 (i.e. that £1 of investment delivers less than £1 in economic return) does not automatically mean poor value for money. It now gives equal weight to 'unmonetisable' benefits for local areas and communities – including social and environmental benefits.

This is positive progress, but making the continued case for investment in inclusive infrastructure elements requires evaluation and leadership that highlights the 'unmonetisable' benefits delivered.

### *A representative workforce*

Ensuring that lived experience is captured through consultation processes and that designs are tested with those who will use the end product is one avenue to creating more inclusive design. But having that lived experience reflected in everyday infrastructure industry decision-making requires a workforce that is representative of the people it is designing and delivering for – alongside co-production practices.

Women occupy 22% of junior infrastructure sector roles, 13% of mid-level positions and 9% of senior roles.[33] In 2018, only 5.4% of construction workers in the UK were from Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic backgrounds (compared to 16% of the UK population).[34]

There are examples of good practice in the industry. Costain, for example, implements behavioural science principles to encourage inclusive behaviours and embed consequences for exclusionary practices as part of its culture. Similarly, Thames Tideway's investment in women's personal protective equipment and welfare facilities provided a more comfortable on-site environment.[35]

But there is still a long way to go.

## Where to from here?

This scoping paper provides an initial foundation for the ICE's work in this space. It is a paper that the Institution intends to continue building on.

There is plenty of good thinking, policy and guidance across Britain that has the potential to widen the group of people who benefit from the infrastructure services the industry builds and operates.

But the issue is implementation.

Each actor in the infrastructure delivery landscape will have a role to play in improving the current state of play.

The government will take forward a series of next steps, particularly focused on transport infrastructure, but will need to continue to facilitate investment and improved design across other asset classes.

There is also a clear need for improved data coverage and coordination to support a better understanding of where the gaps lie for different communities, promote accountability and improve the coordination of inclusivity investments. Leading much of this coordination will be necessarily the role of central government.

[33] Infrastructure Matters (2025) Women in Infrastructure
[34] Diversity and Inclusion in Construction (n.d.) Routes into the Built Environment
[35] Infrastructure Matters (2025) Women in Infrastructure

And the wider infrastructure sector will need to come in behind the goal of more inclusive infrastructure, including individual engineers. Inclusivity must be prioritised, despite budget and engineering pressures: both from a representation perspective – with the core question being who makes up the workforce and how representative is this of the wider lived experiences of those using infrastructure services – and on projects themselves.

Improving project practices will require more focus on early engagement, meaningful consultation and co-creation, as well as post-construction evaluations to improve project best practice, and wider benefits valuation going forward.

The challenge is shared, but so are the solutions. The ICE is committed to continuing to explore where those solutions can be developed, better platformed and shared, and implemented more effectively.

## About the ICE

The Institution of Civil Engineers (ICE) is a 95,000-strong global membership organisation with over 200 years of history.

It is a centre of engineering excellence, qualifying engineers and helping them maintain lifelong competence, assuring society that the infrastructure they create is safe, dependable and well designed.

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