

# Technology and an ageing population



Author **Peter Rayner**

**Peter Rayner offers his thoughts on the legal and practical need for staff at railway stations, as transport planners head into an era of technological evolution that reduces the need for staff within the sector.**

Looked at without politics, without militant protesters and without trade unions, the question those of us with a serious professional accessibility responsibility have to ask ourselves is: 'If you run a train with no staff to an unstaffed station does that constitute a 'provision criterion or practice' that discriminates against disabled people, as defined by the Equality Act 2010?'

## The Hungerford example

I was in Hungerford on 19th August 1987, when a gunman killed 16 people and, as a result, the railway was closed.

Hungerford is a quiet little town: a tourist town, with a canal, antique shops, pubs and cafés, just the sort of place you would expect old people and maybe people of reduced mobility to come for the day. If they come by rail then they will find a conveniently placed ramp for wheelchair users and to help those who cannot easily step on to the train. They will be pleased to know there is a regular – at least hourly – train service to Reading and London. There is not only a footbridge, but also a controlled road crossing so it is possible to get from one side of the line to another on the flat.

However, what those people who might need help do not know is that neither the trains nor the station is staffed. The ramps have never been used on a regular basis.

Let us, then, debate the question: is the lack of any staff at Hungerford station, save the driver of the train, a 'provision, criterion or practice that discriminates' and so breaches our long-established equality laws?

## Introducing Colin, the unsung hero

Waiting for a train from my local West Country railway station recently, I overheard a conversation between Colin, who has been behind the ticket office counter for many years, and an elderly disabled gentleman buying a ticket. The transaction took more than five minutes and included a discussion about what help could be given, where best to sit, how to get a car park ticket, which trains arrived back while there were still staff at the station and so on.

Without Colin, that gentleman would not have travelled by train or very probably made the journey at all. Nor would many like him.

Yet there is a bank of ticket machines at the station available day and night, and Colin and his colleagues are reduced to fewer and fewer hours. There are also ample online sources of tickets, many at better prices than you can get over the counter, and of course, if you know how to search, there is plenty of online advice on how to book assistance.



^ Does running a train with no staff to an unstaffed station discriminate against disabled people?

Many older people are perfectly capable of using the internet and other modern technology but ask most people in their 80s what is the most important element of any journey for them and they will invariably answer the presence of staff. In other words, someone to ask, often just for reassurance.

Is this just a case of an older generation incapable of adapting to new technology? If that is the case, then it could be argued that our next generations will all be so tech savvy that this ceases to be a problem. However, in all probability, each ageing generation will be left behind by the pace of new technology and will reach a point where contact with another human being to help us plan and make a journey is the only option that we would consider.

As travel becomes increasingly technology dependent and the human element disappears, what will happen to older people with the need and desire to travel and the cash to do so? Do we just accept that they are a casualty of modern life?

Even if we put aside the enormous cost in terms of quality of life for those unable to travel independently, we ought to recognise that the problem will not simply disappear behind closed doors. There is plenty of research to point to the link between loss of independent mobility and a decline in physical and mental health and wellbeing among older people. That carries with it a significant price tag for the health service and for social services. ⊖

## Peter Rayner FCILT

Chair, Accessibility and Inclusion Forum, CILT.

✉ [petergrayner@aol.com](mailto:petergrayner@aol.com)

🌐 [www.ciltuk.org.uk/accessibility](http://www.ciltuk.org.uk/accessibility)