



## Flitwick Station: Step-free Access

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*Wednesday 24 July 2019 11:00  
(Morning)*

**(a) Ms Dorries, Nadine (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con)** I beg to move,

That this House has considered step-free access at Flitwick station.

Nineteenth-century engineers thought very little of laying a railway line in a cutting through the centre of an old market town; that was no obstacle. Sadly, they thought even less about how disabled people could access the platforms in that cutting. I thought that our modern attitudes had changed and moved on, and that we were more considerate of the less able in society, but I am afraid that there is no evidence of that at Flitwick station.

My constituent Darren, who is a severely disabled man and a wheelchair user, is one of the worst affected. He cannot hope to get on a train from a station that is only a few hundred yards away from his home. I will explain a bit about Darren, who I think might be watching. Darren was a very able professional man who used Flitwick station every day to commute to work. In an act of generosity, he once helped somebody to move house, and an obstacle fell off the back of the flatbed lorry they were using while Darren was tying his shoelaces. He broke his spine and has been a paraplegic ever since, but he would still like to use Flitwick station.

I felt incredibly humbled when Darren turned up one day here at Westminster. In his mobility wheelchair, with his suction and everything else, he had decided to bring himself to Parliament to see me. The effort it took him to get here is possibly the reason why I will never give up fighting for people such as Darren to have the disabled access that they need in order to live as normal and able a commuter life as possible, so that they can get to shops and do the things that they used to do before they were unable to access Flitwick station.

I am also talking about older people, young mums with prams and people with suitcases visiting the Centre Parcs in my constituency. The local campaign to get step-free access at Flitwick station has been determined in the face of seemingly endless delays and prevarication. Particular mention has to go to Arthur Taylor of the Bedfordshire Commuters Association, to the cross-party Bedfordshire Rail Access Network and to the efforts of Flitwick Town and unitary councillors, who are sitting in the Public Gallery. I also want to mention an honourable and good friend of mine, Fiona Chapman—her successor from the ward is in the Gallery.

The hopes of so many people in Flitwick and its surrounding towns and villages were focused on the Access for All funding, but they were dashed in April when the scheme announced its results. We all thought the case for step-free access at Flitwick was strong. Over 1.5 million people use the station each year, with 4.5% growth as the local area goes through a period of sustained house building. Much more is

still to come. We have seen investment in lengthening the platforms, which has happened during my time as an MP over the past 15 years, and the purchase of new trains. In fact, it is very rare for a train that does not have 12 carriages to pass through Flitwick station. However, nothing has been done to enable the disabled and elderly to use the station, despite the upgrading of platforms and train carriages.

In addition to the number of passengers, Flitwick's case for step-free access is strengthened by the lack of alternative means of travel. Disabled people who wish to travel from Flitwick must call 24 hours in advance, which is exactly what Darren did. A taxi will be booked to take them to the nearest step-free station—at least, that is how it should work. More often than not, there will be no taxi waiting when my disabled constituents arrive at Flitwick station, despite their having telephoned 24 hours in advance. There is occasionally a taxi waiting, but it is unable to take wheelchairs. There are unfortunately few buses from Flitwick, and most of them are not wheelchair-accessible either. For a large number of people, transport options are either strictly limited or absolutely non-existent.

For all those reasons and more, Flitwick station was the top priority for Govia Thameslink Railway, the relevant train operating company, in the last round of Access for All funding—or so it said. However, the funding was not enough. Govia Thameslink Railway said Flitwick was its priority station, but apparently it is not. By comparison with Flitwick, Cricklewood station has lower footfall, lower growth and better alternatives for less-able passengers, but it was awarded money from the Access for All funding. I do not know anybody who understands the rationale for that, other than it costs less money to adapt Cricklewood station. The train operating companies and the Department for Transport decided to go for the lower hanging fruit. For them, it is a numbers game: how many stations can we adapt for how little money?

We all know that Flitwick is a geographical challenge because of where it is situated—the elevations and the number of steps that one needs to go down to reach the platforms at the station. It is obviously an engineering challenge and would therefore be slightly more expensive. However, it would not be an obstacle to the Victorian engineers who built the station—they would think nothing of being asked to make the station accessible for wheelchair users or disabled people. It would not be a challenge to Victorian engineers, who would just get on and do it, but it is apparently too much for us to adapt a station that is slightly challenging in terms of its elevation, geography and current accessibility. We all know the reasons why.

The train operating company directs all inquiries to the Department for Transport. The Access for All administrators have refused to answer any questions put to them by my constituents and other people—believe me, there have been a lot—who have inquired about why Flitwick was missed out of the programme. The fragmentation, lack of information and lack of communication between the Department of Transport, the train operating companies and the relevant interested bodies in my constituency, including Flitwick Town Council, have led to bad feelings. There was absolute frustration in my constituency, because the one station that everyone—not just in Bedfordshire, but in the entire eastern region—thought required funding and adaptation was Flitwick, due to the house building and established growth. That is not growth that we are predicting: 4.5% growth is happening right now.

Look at our local plan and the aspirations of Central Bedfordshire Council for inward investment already deciding to come to the area, close to Flitwick station. A great deal of house building will take place close to Flitwick station. A number of new commuters are about to come and live close to it. A number of businesses are about to relocate to areas such as Henlow and others, close to Flitwick station. It is not imaginary growth. Central Bedfordshire Council was able to confirm the level of growth that we will have going forward, but the one station in the entire region that requires funding was left off.

I have spoken to the Minister about this issue in the past, and there is some confusion. The Department for Transport blames the train operating companies, and the train operating companies blame the Department for Transport. The Department says, “We adapted the stations that the train operating companies told us to adapt,” and the train operating companies say, “You were top of our list, but the Department for Transport decided not to do it.” That is the problem facing us at the moment.

I would like a clear response that my councillors, who are sitting in the Public Gallery, can take back to Flitwick, saying, “This is the situation with regard to Flitwick station. This is why it didn’t happen. This is why it is going to happen in the future, and this is when it is going to happen.”

We all understand the logistical challenge of adapting Flitwick. We all understand that we would have to go through a period when the station might even have to close for a while, and I have been told that the civil engineering problem there might even mean that the centre of Flitwick would close for a while. I do not think that we regard that as a problem, because the eventual outcome would be worth it. It is something that we could explain easily to my constituents, our residents, because the equality of access has to be there for people such as Darren.

Everyone has a right to be able to travel, in particular in an area with poor transport links—bus links and the whole transport structure are poor. Flitwick station and that Bedford-to-St Pancras line—known as “the Bedpan line”—offer a life-giving artery for people to access work, pleasure and travel in all its aspects. It is such a well used line, but an entire group of my constituents is denied those ordinary daily rights of employment, pleasure and travel that people such as me and my councillors have access to and enjoy.

At the start, I said that I would always see access for disabled people through the eyes of Darren—the eyes of a man who worked and lived the commuter life, a professional life, that is now denied him because he is unable to travel. This is not a man who wants to sit at home; this is a man who wants to get out, to go to the train station, to travel to London and to enjoy things that every able-bodied person is able to enjoy. But that is all denied him because of lack of access at Flitwick station. That is the truth of the matter. I have also seen women struggling up and down the steps with babies in prams. Despite the bus, sometimes I see people struggling up with suitcases to get taxis or on to the main street. This cannot go on for much longer.

Flitwick station is 50 miles outside London, most of my constituents are commuters and most of my disabled constituents want to work, so I now ask the Minister for some specific answers. When will it happen? Why did it not happen before? That is the question everyone is asking—why did it not happen? We need to have communicated to us today a clear trajectory towards a situation in which those people can access the travel rights that the rest of us have. At the moment, all we have is a lack of communication, as well as confusion, frustration—and, from some people, a certain amount of anger.

**(a) Ms Ghani, Nusrat (The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport)** It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries) on securing this important debate, which gives us the opportunity for us to discuss accessibility. I want to acknowledge on the record her passionate and ongoing campaigning not only on behalf of her constituency but for accessibility across our rail network. I was moved to hear her talk about her constituent Darren, and I hope that my hon. Friend will never give up campaigning on behalf of her disabled passengers. As I continue, I hope that she will believe the evidence that we are committed to assuring accessibility across our transport system. I am committed as she is, and I will try to explain what happened in her particular case and what we are doing throughout the country.

My hon. Friend is aware of the Department for Transport’s inclusive transport strategy, and she has campaigned incredibly hard to ensure that her constituency gets as many resources as possible. The strategy is incredibly ambitious, and I believe it to be the first national strategy determined to deliver accessibility by 2030, which is the United Nations goal. She is right that we are dealing with very old infrastructure, which remains a barrier to disabled people accessing our rail network. We need to work with them, Network Rail and the train operating companies to ensure that accessibility is a priority.

We are discussing Flitwick station, which was nominated for the Access for All programme, but was not successful. My hon. Friend found that decision difficult to accept because she had worked incredibly hard on the best bid possible, but the funding was heavily oversubscribed. We had well over 300 nominations for the programme, and significantly more stations required our support—I will go through the reasons.

The Flitwick nomination was good, and I hope for another round of funding in which she can secure a new bid, but it was not successful in the previous round.

We could compare Flitwick with lots of other stations, but I do not want to confuse my hon. Friend or her councillors, who are listening to the debate. They must put the best bid together in future. It is a competitive process, with criteria. Train operating companies also have the opportunity to nominate their top priorities—for example, Biggleswade was a top priority for Great Northern—although that is not the only criterion.

We also have to look at the broad spectrum of accessibility in a region. Twenty-one stations were nominated by Thameslink with a priority rating. The train operating company's second priority was Mill Hill Broadway, with two other stations nominated, Catford and Cricklewood, which were more successful in the bidding despite being lower ranked than Flitwick by the company. There were, however, other factors, which I will explain. My hon. Friend will want to work as closely as she can with the train operating company and the local authority to ensure that the next bid is successful.

At present, I am told that six of the eight stations in my hon. Friend's constituency are step-free, which is no doubt a great deal down to her campaigning. As we have discussed, a lot of that infrastructure is Victorian, but 75% of journeys are already step-free. We want to increase that figure, which is why the inclusive transport strategy had funding of £300 million available to help stations improve. A lot of those stations were deferred from the 2016 Hendy review to the Network Rail delivery programme, and new stations were accepted as well. In total, therefore, 73 stations will receive funding to ensure that they are step-free.

Nominated stations were selected on the basis of annual footfall, weighted by the incidence of disability in the area. We considered other local factors such as proximity to a hospital and, fundamentally, the availability of third-party funding for the project. It was also important to ensure a fair geographical spread of projects across the country. All those points are noted when a grid is put together.

Third-party funding is especially important in weighting a business case. Many of the selected stations had bids that included significant match-funding contributions, which often came from the local authority but also from the train operating company. I hope that my hon. Friend will take on board the fact that we have released a new tier of funding—£20 million now available for the Access for All mid-tier programme—which was launched on 8 July and is open to nominations right now. I urge her to put in another bid, ensuring that she works with the train operating company and the local authority. I cannot emphasise this enough: significant third-party funding for the project would help.

A few weeks ago, I wrote to all right hon. and hon. Members, encouraging them to contact their train operating companies if they wanted their stations to be included in that programme of work. I can only apologise if my hon. Friend is getting mixed messages from my Department, and I am disappointed that the train operating company has not made it clear how the whole package has to be presented, not just nominations. However, we—not only I—look forward to the train operating company nominating Flitwick station, and I hope that she can go back to her constituency and put together a package of support from the local authority, to ensure that the station gets a higher rating than it did previously.

I will now reflect on some of the points made by my hon. Friend on behalf of her constituent Darren. Within the inclusive transport strategy, we have ambitious plans to ensure that disabled passengers are dealt with with the care and dignity that they deserve. My hon. Friend mentioned taxis being called, which is part of the disabled person's protection policy. It is absolutely right that a person should be able to carry on their journey. It is illegal for taxis not to take disabled passengers onboard, to take umbrage at taking wheelchairs or to charge any extra for taking on disabled passengers. I urge my hon. Friend or her constituent Darren to write to me—immediately, considering where we are right now—so I can keep an eye on the taxi firm and how that could have occurred. She closely follows the issues of her disabled constituents.

**(a) Ms Dorries** May I add some nuance? Some constituents such as Darren are not just in wheelchairs but in huge, motorised, supportive wheelchairs that enable people to sit up and move. It is not a case of just a wheelchair but much more, making it more difficult.

**(a) Ms Ghani** My hon. Friend makes an important point, but the facts remain the same: all operators have a disabled people's protection policy, and it is their duty to ensure that disabled passengers can continue their journey and to provide the right sort of taxi for them to continue that journey. But who wants to complain religiously when they are being let down by a service? That is why we are working with the Rail Delivery Group to ensure that Passenger Assist becomes a far more interactive, real-time application and to make it easier to make complaints, so that we can hold train operating companies to account.

Passenger Assist is a service that does good work, but it is not as real-time as my hon. Friend and I would like it to be. Hopefully, that will be delivered by the end of the year. We are working to make sure that the rail network is more accessible, and I have supported the industry's establishment of an independent rail ombudsman with powers to deal with unresolved passenger complaints. I have made it clear to the Office of Rail and Road that it needs to ensure that disabled passengers' complaints are heard and their expectation of services is met. Through the inclusive transport strategy, we will have a grading system to look at the train operating companies that do well and those that fail to deliver a standard that the rest of us enjoy.

I hope that my hon. Friend can take on board all the advice that I have given and will take it back to her councillors, to ensure an even stronger bid. She has worked incredibly hard, even before I was the Minister for rail accessibility; her reputation is very strong in the Department for Transport, thanks to her campaigning on behalf of her constituents. We will look forward to the bid coming in, but my hon. Friend must not forget to ensure that it is nominated strongly by the train operating company and the bid has some matched funding.

I hope that my hon. Friend will agree with me that even though the infrastructure is not perfect, and even though we have a long way to go, with the inclusive transport strategy and the £300 million that we have made available recently, we are doing everything we can to ensure that accessibility is not a barrier to people with disability accessing our rail network. I could talk about many other commitments that we have made through the inclusive transport strategy, but they will not necessarily affect the rail network.

**(a) Ms Dorries** Can the Minister give some further clarification? Obviously, we will reapply for the fund—I think that is already underway. We are having discussions with Central Bedfordshire Council about third-party matched funding. I am aware that we need increased matched funding in place, and I am sure that Flitwick Town Council will make that case, too.

I hope that the Minister will still be in post at the end of this week, if not in a more elevated post, but I am sure there will be continuity of her work. She mentioned matched funding and the other elements, but I do not take the case of comparability with other stations, because ours tops all the lists. If she is in post, can she ensure that the considerable engineering challenge of adapting Flitwick station and the cost of that does not preclude us? The Department could probably adapt five stations for what it will take to adapt Flitwick, but I do not want that to be a barrier to the rights of our disabled passengers.

**(a) Ms Ghani** My hon. Friend makes a good point. Let me be clear: when we put together the grid to see which stations to support, we do not look at the complexity of transforming those stations to make them accessible. At that point, we do not know the cost. That is why we do not say at the beginning that the £300 million will support 50 stations. We try to make sure that it supports as many stations that get the most points according to the criteria: high footfall, levels of disability in the area, accessibility issues, other concerns such as local schools and hospitals, whether there is a disability centre or an old persons' home nearby, or whether there are events throughout the year where the footfall increases incredibly. All those factors are taken into account.

In my experience as Accessibility Minister, I have not been in a meeting in which we have thought that something was too difficult to do. That is not the point. We are trying to do as many stations as we can that are accessed by a high number of people with disabilities, as well as all the other added elements. My

hon. Friend can take that back to her constituency and tell them that the complexity of the station is not the key. In the next round of funding, the key is to be nominated top by the train operating company, to put forward a proposal that is supported by both the town and council and any other local authority that will be involved in planning, and to have some matched funding. It is about putting the best, most robust case forward, with all the added elements of people trying to access that station—with or without a wheelchair—and any other accessibility issues, whether parents with a buggy or persons with sight loss. In the last round of funding, there was a remarkable number of stations that had substantial amounts of matched funding. I would like her to take that away.

I hope that my hon. Friend will continue to campaign for accessibility in her constituency and will hold my Department to account, regardless of who the Minister for accessibility is, to ensure that the inclusive transport strategy continues to roll forward. Even though 75% of journeys are step-free, we will not be satisfied until 100% are. I look forward to working with my hon. Friend in her next bid for a round of funding.

Question put and agreed to.

Sitting suspended.

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