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Dear Keir Starmer MP

I am writing to you about an equality issue which affects every constituency in the country.

I realise that there are strict rules governing how Members of Parliament are allowed to respond to matters outside their own constituency, but the lack of equality of access to our publicly funded railway is, I would contend, an issue which not only crosses party-political lines, but is also no respecter of narrow constituency boundaries.

The issue is a very simple one. Everyone should be able to get to the platform and onto the train, but the stark reality faced by many rail users is that a lack of step-free access at hundreds of stations throughout the country makes it impossible for many people to even use the railway at all. It is moreover not just people with a visible or hidden disabilities who are affected, but families with toddlers in pushchairs, people with heavy luggage, commuters who use a folding bike, tourists with heavy touring bikes, and anyone who uses a mobility aid or a wheelchair. Disability can affect anybody at any time and involves all genders, religions, Race, LGBT+ and anybody who may find it impossible to access the railway.

A network is only as good as its weakest link. The individual traveller may board the train with ease at a modern, refurbished station where significant footfall has meant that establishing step-free access at that station has been a priority for the DfT's Access for All funds. If, however the rail user's destination is a smaller station with difficult access, or even with no step-free access to any part of the station, the end result for that traveller may well be that the journey is impossible to make.

Funds are of course always at a premium, but whereas the Government is now committed to spending over £100 billion on HS2, only approximately £300 million has been allocated in the current control period (2019/24) for access for all improvements. We may well be entering the age of 5G, but many smaller stations remain stuck in the Victorian era, with at least 40% of all stations not properly accessible according to recent research by Leonard Cheshire Disability.

Ian Cook (Founder of Step Free Access) says: "I would contend, a typical example of the difficulties suffered by many would-be rail users with a mobility issue. I walk with a crutch and use a stair lift at home because steps are very difficult for me, but I do get around on a scooter. At my local station Flitwick, which has now been given funding for Lifts, in the latest round of funding, however this mobility aid becomes a problem at Harlington, Leagrave, Brigg, Chinley and Buxworth and so many more stations in the UK, as no lift or ramp is available. Before lifts are installed at Flitwick, which should be by 2024, according to the DfT, if I need to travel, I can always drive the 16 miles to Luton Airport Parkway – but why should a lack of level access at my local station force yet another car onto the roads, with all the attendant issues of congestion and air pollution that car travel at present inevitably entails?"

The Passenger Assist scheme is of course another option, but this means that I have to state a time of travel in advance and involves getting a taxi - paid for by the railway company - to the nearest accessible station. These arrangements end up putting at least an hour both ways onto my journey time. Just because I happen to be a rail user with a mobility issue, I cannot travel as and when I want, and it feels to me like a very discriminatory arrangement as other rail users without mobility issues are bound by no such organisational constraints.

The Government has promised a revolution in transport for the UK, but as regards the future of rail travel for all, I hope that in your role as an MP you will not only be able to support this campaign (see website above) but will also be able to think of practical ways to address the funding of this pressing equality issue. May I suggest that a Comprehensive, Access for All programme for all stations could be a good way to provide an economic boost to the Covid-19-hit economy? It is impossible for many people to travel to hospitals by train because so many stations are inaccessible.

HS2, Crossrail, Northern Powerhouse Rail are all exciting future rail developments, but every rail journey starts and ends at a station, and everyone should be able to get onto and of the platform at a station of their choice.

Disability Does Not Discriminate, People Do, I urge you to look into this injustice and not to dismiss it, as all major political parties have done for many years, I thought the Labour Party was for the Many, disabled rail users also come into this category, so please don't ignore us.

Yours sincerely

Ian Cook (Founder of Step Free Access)

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