

'Way to Go'

by Marion Shoard

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Cheap air travel and soaring car ownership seem to offer all of us unprecedented mobility. As we get older, however, we can still find ourselves stranded. Advertisements may show greying people happily taking to the open road in plush motors, but three-quarters of single people over 65 do not have a car. Though people are living longer, this gives them more time to develop conditions which make it difficult to move around. Osteoarthritis, Parkinson's disease, chronic heart and lung diseases, foot problems and osteoporosis can all too easily make it an ordeal to walk, stand or tackle stairs. Indeed, mobility problems are the most common of all the disabilities of later life.

Even among younger people, there are those with permanent mobility problems arising from accidents or long-term conditions like MS. Not all of these enjoy the impressive upper body strength which enables parOlympians to make a wheelchair seem nippy. And of course anyone of us can be temporarily stopped in our tracks by an accident.

Last year I joined this throng when a split-second accident left me with two broken bones in my right leg. For the six weeks afterwards, when my leg was encased in plaster, I could not mount or descend a flight of stairs except on my backside, or cover more than 50 yards on the flat on my own. Walking on crutches imposes painful strain on arms and stomach muscles in a body weakened by trauma. For any outing I relied on a friend to push me in a wheelchair hired from the Red Cross.

Yet I was lucky. Falls are a much worse problem for older people. They are more prone to take a tumble in the first place, more likely to break a bone when they do and they take longer to recover from injury. Indeed, a fall may result in a permanent move to a care home.

During my own relatively brief incapacity, I had plenty of time to think how we could all help those who find their mobility threatened, for whatever reason. What could we do to make our environment more accessible to those who are not so hale and hearty? Is there much we could do to make moving around a pleasure for these people rather than a challenge? There turned out to be quite a lot.

Seating

Seats do more than anything else to help people get around. Many people stay housebound simply because outside they cannot get the occasional rest they need. Concentration on the car by planners has made the provision of adequate seating an afterthought at best. Where seats are provided, they tend to be in a few isolated places such as parks, rather than scattered along routes at strategic locations which would enable people to take a rest as they move around.

No law enables us to force local councils to provide seating anywhere. However, the Department of Transport's Mobility Unit publishes guidance which you could use to help you persuade your council to put in more seating. It suggests that "in commonly used pedestrian areas and at transport interchanges and stations seats should be provided at intervals of no more than 50 metres" (Inclusive Mobility: a Guide to Best Practice on Access to Pedestrian and Transport Infrastructure, 2004). If you cannot get your council to match this standard, it may still respond to some degree. Even a single extra seat might be a vital help for someone.

Dropped kerbs

People using wheelchairs, pushchairs, frames on wheels or electric buggies all depend on dropped kerbs. So do those depending on another less familiar but also useful mobility aid - a shopping trolley with a hardened seat on top that provides the chance of a rest whenever it is needed. When I used to push my mother in a wheelchair in Ramsgate in Kent, I had to make a long detour to find a lowered pavement to get her on to the promenade. I wrote to the Highways Department of the local council, explained my problem, and it agreed to put in the necessary dropped kerbs.

If it had refused, I could have referred it to the Disability Discrimination Act of 1995 which says that people and organisations providing services must make "reasonable adjustments" to ensure that people with disabilities are not discriminated against. Disability is defined as a substantial, adverse and long-term physical or mental impairment which affects a person's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities. This impairment could be an arthritic knee or hip, continence problems, lung disease causing breathlessness on exertion, and many other such things. Another Disability Discrimination Act in 2005 made it clear that the "reasonable adjustments" stricture applies to highway and planning authorities. The only question is: what adjustments should be deemed reasonable? The Disability Rights Commission (which provides advice and offers a conciliation service) will probably publish guidance in this area, but in the meantime you could refer to the Department of Transport's very valuable Inclusive Mobility document, which says that dropped kerbs should be provided on all residential roads and side streets at 100-metre intervals where possible, as well as at all junctions.

Raised pavements

Even better than a dropped kerb is a “raised pavement” - actually a road built up to pavement level so a pedestrian goes straight across without having to descend while road traffic goes up. Tactile paving alerts blind and partially-sighted people to the presence of the carriageway. Making vehicles go over the rise slows them down, so making the road safer for pedestrians. Because of this, raised pavements are often installed as part of traffic management schemes, so if your neighbourhood is plagued by rat-running, you might be able to link your demand for easier pedestrian mobility with those of others, such as the parents of young children, concerned about safety. The government has required local authorities to demonstrate a 40 per cent reduction in the number of adults killed and seriously injured by 2010. They also have to show a 50 per cent in children killed and seriously injured than was the case a decade ago. So if you can link a demand for access improvement to a safer route to school, you may increase your chance of success.

Road crossings

Organised road crossing points can also advance both mobility and safety. Many busy roads have insufficient opportunities for crossing. Where crossings are in place, they may lack the full panoply of lights and a little green man, or the pedestrian phase may be too short for people with mobility problems. Again, combining with groups with other interests can increase pressure for change.

Lighting

Dark streets are particularly forbidding for the frail and visually impaired, but there are no statutory requirements on numbers of streetlights. A lot of street lighting is past its shelf-life, and contracts are currently being placed for replacement, so now is the time to lobby your local council. The Building Research Establishment has worked out that to read the facial expression and therefore likely intent of a stranger at night, you need lights at 12-metre intervals. Yellow sodium lighting makes it impossible to detect colour, so ask for white lighting instead.

Public lavatories

Three million Britons have to cope with some degree of incontinence, while changes to the kidneys mean that we all need to urinate more frequently as we grow older. Yet councils do not have to provide public lavatories, and many of those laid on as a matter of civic pride by our Victorian forbears have been closed to save money. More than half the public conveniences in England and Wales have disappeared over the last 20 years.

Some councils are different. East Lothian council in Scotland considers widespread public lavatories are a vital resource not only for local people but also for tourists; it has opened two new conveniences over the last two years. Use examples such as this to shame your council into action.

The countryside

For those with problems seeking to move around in the countryside, one of the biggest problems is the stiles which interrupt public footpaths. A lot of these are no longer necessary for land management, particularly in areas where farmers have ceased to keep cattle and sheep which had to be kept out of fields of crops. Legally, gates and stiles are the responsibility of the landowner, but councils are responsible for footpaths. Approach your council and ask it to do what it can. Lincolnshire is a county with many redundant stiles, and there the county council removes unnecessary stiles on routes walkers favour on behalf of landowners. If a gap is not acceptable, it proposes a self-latching gate or a kissing gate. During 2004-05, Lincolnshire disposed of 260 stiles. If a landowner in your area insists on retaining a stile because he is stocking a lot of animals, you could suggest making it easier to cross. There are stiles with small steps and a broad plank on top, which you can sit on and thereby swing your legs from one side to the other.

Opening the countryside to people with walking difficulties may seem a tough task, but take heart: local councils are beginning to take this issue on board. An opportunity to suggest improvements is presented by new plans being drawn up called "rights of way improvement plans". Also, councils and national park authorities should be facilitating access to many new stretches of land under new 'right to roam' legislation, and you could lobby your council or park authority to make sure that as much of this as possible is available to all.

Help

Living Streets is a group which campaigns for more street-friendly environments for young and old, healthy and not so strong. Disabled Ramblers and the Fieldfare Trust campaign for better provision for those with mobility problems in the countryside. Philip Connolly is a consultant who advises local groups on securing pedestrian and traffic improvement schemes. In the end, however, much depends on the individual efforts of people on the ground in lobbying everyone from their local council to the National Trust and the private-sector providers of services. It is the steps we take ourselves which will do most to help those in need, permanent or temporary, to take steps.

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Department of Transport Mobility Unit:

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Disability Rights Commission:

Freepost MID 02164, Stratford-upon-Avon, CV37 9BR

Tel: 08457 622 633

Textphone: 08457 622 644

www.drc-gb.org

Disabled Ramblers: 14 Belmont Park Road, Maidenhead, SL6 6HT

Tel: 01628 621414.

<http://www.disabledramblers.co.uk/>

Fieldfare Trust: 7 Volunteer House, 69 Crossgate, Cupar, Fife, KY15 5AS

Tel: 01334 657708

www.fieldfare.org.uk

Living Streets: 31-33 Bondway, London SW8 1SJ

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Marion Shoard is a campaigner on older people's issues and the author of A Survival Guide to Later Life (Constable and Robinson, 2004).

Photograph Captions

1. Absence of seating at bus stops is a real problem if standing is painful or tiring.
...Robert Edmondson
2. Lack of lowered pavements presents a challenge if you are pushing someone in a wheelchair.
...Robert Edmondson
3. Here at Haddington in East Lothian, public lavatories are spotlessly clean while users' contributions go to buy decorations and flowers.
...Ann Cook
4. This chicane at Clitheroe in Lancashire has taken over road space in order to provide pedestrians with an attractive place in which to sit and rest.
...Living Streets
5. In the countryside, the most important need for people with mobility problems is paths without obstructions such as stiles.
...Countryside Agency
Bruce Tanner