



**EcoAbleism**

# INTRODUCTION

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Greener, more sustainable lifestyles are a topic of conversation across various communities - from schools to community groups, to businesses and policymakers. But what about people with disabilities and long-term health conditions?

The different needs and lifestyle adaptations of those living with these challenges are often left out of conversations when it comes to changing government policies to reduce carbon emissions and improve the planet.

In August 2022 researchers at Heriot-Watt University carried out the Eco-Ableism project, in collaboration with West Lothian Libraries and The Ability Centre in Carmondean, to ensure these voices are heard.

The Eco-Ableism project aims to identify the challenges and barriers that people with disabilities in West Lothian face in trying to adopt greener, more sustainable, lifestyles. The research project engaged with local groups and individuals to identify the potential discrimination they face as efforts are made to enact new eco-friendly policies at local and national levels.

This leaflet includes the findings from the research, conducted by Dr Mandy Littlewood. It also maps forward plans as a result of the project's findings.

We would like to thank and are very grateful to our project partners and focus group participants for sharing their stories and lived experiences.



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### *Decisions around packaging and food*

People had to be very focused on financial concerns and this drove the types of choices that they had to make. There were some who expressed the view that 'you can't buy quality food, it's too expensive'. It was acknowledged by many that the main priority for them was price, with ready meals and more heavily packaged items often cheaper to buy, with some people needing to buy ready meals to make cooking times shorter. 'How easy and how much will it cost are my most important things'

Some people were only able to stand for short periods or relied on carers to prepare food, which needed to be done quickly.

There was a view expressed that it was more difficulty to get items wrapped in paper nowadays – 'In an ideal world there wouldn't be plastic wrapping'. There was also the view that suppliers need to use less packaging. People with disabilities often tended to use online shopping or large supermarkets without access to the types of smaller, independent shops that might wrap food in paper. There was some interest in re-fillable containers to be used by larger supermarkets such as ASDA and Tesco etc. Having water fountains around was also seen as a positive thing, although this was missing from The Ability Centre.

For some people, cleaning out containers for recycling was not practically possible for them and some care packages meant that carers were not funded to do 'cleaning' related tasks and so plastic food carriers that came through 'meals on wheels' would go into landfill.

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### *Physical barriers*

People with disabilities often relied on friends or neighbours to put their recycling out, with some lacking the space in their home to sort recycling for different bins. Some also felt that there was not enough room in their garden for all the recycling bins, while others were confused about what items were allowed to go in different recycling bins. The lack of frequency of emptying bins was also raised as a down-side on having different bins, with some overflowing by collection day and difficulties if you missed a collection. The lack of kerbside collection of glass was raised as an issue, as glass is very heavy for people with mobility issues to carry and so impractical to recycle.

There appeared to be a lack of help received by people with disabilities, with no-one receiving special help from Council workers to have their bins taken to the kerbside and back. Some lamented how far the bins were left from the property and the difficulties that this caused, in retrieving them or navigating pavements generally with wheelchairs or mobility aids. Bins were also very heavy and some suggested having four wheels rather than two might make these easier. Having bins at a lower height was also discussed, though it was recognised that bin lorries may struggle to accommodate this. It was noted that additional bins are provided for clinical waste but are smaller than is required.

Being able to take clothing to clothing banks, to supermarkets and sell online were all talked about as positive developments. However, mobility issues affected how practical this was. Some people knew about charities who pick-up clothing and furniture for recycling, but this was not universally the case. There were also some who said they had experience of clothing recycling companies dropping off bags to be filled with clothing but not collecting items left out, with concerns about theft and littering around charity shop doorways, for example.

## Public transport

The focus group participants spoke about the many negative experiences they had had of public transport and how this affected their confidence in using this. For some *'it depends on whether you're having a good day or not'* with public transport only viable when mobility is better or when you are psychologically more able to take this on. Every trip needs to be researched with assistance booked on trains in advance. It was suggested that people with disabilities cannot travel spontaneously, with examples of bus lifts not working and assistance not being provided where asked for. This has scope to be hugely limiting - *'It can take courage and time to get ready... if travel on public transport doesn't go well...You can't just walk out the door'*. Poverty alongside disability was particularly challenging, with one respondent saying they would need two buses to get to the local food bank.

People commonly experienced negative attitudes from staff on buses, for example, with the feeling expressed that *'they treat you like an inconvenience'*. There was also competition for wheelchair spaces with families with children in buggies, with example of drivers not intervening in conflict. People also gave examples of a more general lack of empathy and understanding around disability and needing to *'prove'* your disability – such as when using a Blue Badge for parking, or toilets for disabled people. Non-visible disabilities were also a challenge in this regard, with the view expressed by one person with non-visible disabilities that post Covid, attitudes had hardened so that sunflower lanyards been *'ruined'*, leading to more stigma than support.

Some people also felt there had been a chipping away of the provision for the mobility of people with disabilities. This includes taxi cards for people with disabilities, the increased costs of mobility car payments and a lack of electric mobility cars. The affordability of electric cars in future was seen as a significant barrier to uptake among people with disabilities.

## Loss of benefit entitlements and costs of services

It was hard to separate out financial decisions about the environment and what to buy from the wider issues affecting people with disabilities, such as loss of benefit entitlement and the means testing of council provision. This meant that people often felt *'Punished economically for things we can't help'* and that the council was *'Trying to isolate disabled people'* by limiting access to community services by charging for these.

More generally, there were concerns about the cost of living crisis and the impact on the household budgets of people with disabilities who have hoists, chairs and various medical machines to keep charged up, as well as limited mobility to keep warm without heating. Some needed to use the washing machine and tumble dryer more frequently if their disability caused incontinence. There are many cases where higher energy needs are critical. People felt that disability benefits do not cover these additional costs adequately and being expected to use benefits for living costs to pay for support services was unfair.



There was also the view expressed that the greater energy needs of people with disabilities needed to be considered in carbon offsetting, for instance. Those in need should not have to feel 'guilty' about needing to use more energy.

The service offered by the Ability Centre offered vital social contact and support. The service users had protested so that the council would not close The Ability Centre, feeling that the council was specifically ableist since 'whenever there needs to be cuts, we're the first impacted'. The Ability Centre had been saved but the café was lost and participants felt the quality of service and the 'community' nature of the service had been lost. There was noted to be a general lack of accessible community facilities.

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### Views on future policy

People were asked whether they were aware about the 20-minute neighbourhood concept, with the focus on active travel and having access to local services within the local area. The general view was that this was nice in theory, but some people could not see this working in practice in rural areas.

There were concerns that this would lead to more telephone appointments for healthcare, for example, which a number of people were averse to – 'They can't tell you what's wrong with you on the phone'.

As highlighted above, the need for more inclusive public transport would need to be part of an effective 20-minute neighbourhood to provide options for disabled people. For many disabled people – 'If I can't get out in my car, I won't go out'. Some would like to see more open public spaces for people to be able to sit out but again, accessing uneven or blocked pavements when outdoors is a barrier to using outdoor space.

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### Giving people a voice

Although the focus group participants valued the opportunity to take part in the focus group discussion, there was a strong feeling that they did not have a voice in policy or local provision. The way in which The Ability Centre had been reprovisioned was an example of this, with service users and the wider community losing the café as a result of funding cuts.

The view was expressed that The Ability Centre had been a busy hub, a safe space and a community area and the new Partnership Centre including the library was '*not what we were sold*'.

People were aware of local community initiatives, such as litter picking in Livingston, but some people felt there might be a lack of community support in other areas if not enough people know about these initiatives. Some people felt that people with mobility issues may not have as much access to information if they do not get out as much, also.

People with disabilities often felt 'invisible' with a lack of services that suit their needs. Many of those who we spoke to came to the Ability Centre once a week as this was all they could afford, and often did not go anywhere else. This significantly limits their ability to fully engage in the community. The negative experiences people have had when outside the home, from service providers and members of the public, also leads to isolation – 'you don't get out the house, you don't speak to as many people when you're disabled.

Social isolation was at its worse during Covid, with many clinically vulnerable people very reluctant to mix in the community - 'I'm scared, I don't want to go out' - and a common feeling that 'everyone else has moved on' and 'Disabled people have been left behind'. The Ability Centre is a life-line to many but due to changes in funding, many have to pay for the service now (which is means tested), so limit their use of it.

## How libraries can help

Respondents felt that the library could be a provider of information about opportunities and services for people with disabilities. There was clearly a lack of awareness about services, with little known about additional information or support services for people with disabilities. For example, people with disabilities should be able to request additional help to have their bin taken to the kerbside, but no-one was aware of this. More generally, the library could be a more open and welcoming space, if it did some marketing and offered teas/coffees for example, games clubs and more audio books. Having transport to the library would help people with disabilities to be able to visit more often.

The Ability Centre and the Library were identified as having significant potential as a community hub, if the café were reinstated and more support services/activities encouraged to co-locate there. This would be more inclusive and enable people with disabilities to mix with the wider community, for example. This could start to address some disability awareness issues. There is scope to consider the networking opportunities around support provision for people with disabilities.



## Other policy responses

The research has already given people with disabilities some voice but needs to be part of longer-term awareness-raising about the experiences and views of people with disabilities.

The targets for awareness raising would be public service providers, with those working in public transport provision a key audience. However, the public can also lack empathy with people with disabilities, so more general awareness raising is needed including work on invisible disabilities.

In terms of policies around environmental sustainability and disability, there needs to be recognition of the multi-faceted barriers that people with disabilities face. This needs to include additional physical help such as more inclusive recycling facilities but also how to offset the additional care needs and financial burden faced by people with disabilities in enabling more sustainable choices.

More inclusive transport policies and infrastructure are needed to enable people with disabilities to get out and about, reducing their isolation. The 20-minute neighbourhood concept has failed if people with disabilities are not able to go out.

Isolation also relates to having community spaces that are accessible and inclusive. The Ability Centre is an example of such a space but its use is heavily constrained by the financial costs to service users. Giving voice to people with disabilities needs to be enabled by having a space to 'be'. This needs creative thought from local service providers across the statutory and voluntary sector on leveraging in additional funding.

There is a lack of awareness about services that might support people with disabilities to live more sustainably and the library service could provide more information about recycling services generally and services focused specifically on helping people with disabilities. Building networks across the public sector and voluntary sector would help to map provision and understand where potential gaps are.

## HW Engage

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Heriot-Watt Engage is an initiative to promote, support and stimulate public and community engagement activities at Heriot-Watt University, with the overarching aim to create a culture where the research sector and researchers themselves value engagement as an important activity.

Research at the University is driven by societal needs, and the HW Engage team works closely with academics across the UK campuses to facilitate two-way dialogue between researchers and the publics impacted by their research.

HW Engage also work closely with community partners to ensure active participation and voice throughout Heriot-Watt University research.

## West Lothian Libraries

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West Lothian has fourteen Community Libraries and one Local History Library. West Lothian staff are already integrated with our Council Information Service and Community Centres, they deliver a full range of services to their community.

## Ability Centre

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The Ability Centre offers a centre based and outreach service to adults aged between 16 and 65 who have a physical disability, based on assessed eligible need.

- Our mission is to provide a flexible, responsive service where the need of the service user is the impetus for continued improvement.
- Our vision is that the individuals supported by the service will be empowered to be as independent and included in their own community as possible.
- Our values are that the service will value each individual enabling them to make choices and take risks and, where appropriate, advocate on their behalf.

West Lothian Council  
[www.westlothian.gov.uk/](http://www.westlothian.gov.uk/)

HW Engage  
[www.hw.ac.uk/uk/research/public-engagement.htm](http://www.hw.ac.uk/uk/research/public-engagement.htm)



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