

1. Address by Amanda Mackenzie Stuart: Disabled Access to the Westgate

Relating to motion 15b

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to address Full Council.

The issue I want to speak about is the problem of access and safe parking for large Wheelchair Accessible Vehicles (WAVS) in the new Westgate and elsewhere in Oxford.

Specifically, the problem is one of height restrictions. This may sound trivial but it's not. The Westgate car park has a height restriction of 2 metres. The standard height of a large wheelchair accessible vehicle (WAV) is 2.4 metres. There's therefore no way that a large WAV can get into the new Westgate.

Once inside, the Westgate is potentially an empowering space for disabled people, including those in larger electric wheelchairs, allowing them to enjoy a great new civic space along with everyone else.

So, it's all the more frustrating that for those arriving at the new Westgate in large WAVs that the complex is, in reality, an impregnable fortress - a situation I believe is at odds with the Council's stated mission of 'Building a World Class City for Everyone'.

Large WAVs are high for a reason. Sufficient headroom allows single users to load and unload safely using a built-in ramp system. Sufficient headroom allows carers for more seriously disabled people to move round the patient and wheelchair easily, ensuring safe care during transit, and reducing chances of further head injuries while the vehicle is on the move. For these reasons, 2.4 metres is a standard height for large WAVs, although some can be even higher, as can passenger cars with hoists on the roof.

For these reasons, BS8300 – the code of practice for design of building and their approaches to meet the needs of disabled people - stipulates headroom clearance of 2.6 metres as a minimum for car parks built within the last 2 years.

Passengers using large WAVS include those with Multiple Sclerosis, Parkinson's Disease and Motor Neuron Disease, as well as paraplegic and tetraplegic drivers. Charities, care homes for elderly adults and specialist children's homes, as well as individuals, are all users of large WAVS. I understand that the new generation of school buses are also being designed as wheelchair accessible vehicles and will thus come into the large WAV category.

But in the case of the Westgate, I believe the current provision for large WAVs is not only non-existent but unsafe. There are no signs warning of height restrictions until the driver is already committed to going down the ramp into the car park. Indeed, signs to the excellent Shopmobility scheme ironically leads to the belief that all disabled vehicles are welcome. It is only once one is on the ramp that a dangerous situation becomes apparent. At that point the sign orders you to do a U-turn – on the ramp, with exiting cars accelerating round the corner up the ramp having passed through the ticket barriers. This design flaw needs urgent attention before an already vulnerable person in the back of a large WAV is seriously injured.

All new car parks like that at the Westgate should be consistent with BS8300, with reasonable adjustments for disabled people laid out in the 2010 Equalities Act.

I have made a short film, illustrating from a personal point of view the problems faced by users of large WAVs which I hope council members will have a chance to view before the meeting.

Finally I would also like the council to consider the implications for users of large WAVs of **the headroom barriers currently going up in car parks all over Oxford.** Whatever the reasons for this, I would ask councillors to bear in mind that these headroom barriers have the potential to exclude disabled people and groups in large WAVs from every space where such barriers exist. This, I'm sure, is an unintended consequence of some other decision. But it's one with consequences for disabled people nonetheless.