



Disabled and Living in Fersfield The Trouble with Transport

I first came to live in Fersfield with my family about 8 years ago. At first I was a bit hesitant about settling in the village because I feared that nothing could compare to the warm, close-knit community that I had experienced whilst growing up in Shelfanger, how wrong I was. Dinner and friendly cups of tea with neighbours, a street party, the speed-watch scheme, Christmas and New Year's eve get-togethers, film nights, carol services and harvest suppers at the church, not to mention rounder's matches and fetes on the playing field. Living in Fersfield one very much gets the sense that someone is always looking out for you. However, it's not just the sense of community that I love about living in Fersfield, but also the beauty of the surrounding countryside. Whenever I am free-wheeling down the hill on my trike with the wind rushing through my hair I am always struck by the tranquillity and charm of the landscape. The birds singing in the trees, the vibrant colours of a sunset as they swim across the sky, the stunning clarity of the stars at night, even the pungent smell of manure in the air fills me with an inner sense of comfort, it is a smell that reminds me of home. Nonetheless, in spite of its appeal, village life is not always straight forward for me.

As a young girl my mum would drive me everywhere, but as I grew older I began to feel frustrated. I wanted to be like other young people my age-able to get around independently without the help of my parents, to feel more mature. Consequently, I began looking for other ways to get myself around.

I have been heavily reliant on local taxi companies ever since I started using them to travel to high school. I tend to find taxis the easiest form of transport to use, not only do they offer a door-to-door service, but the vehicles are generally accessible and their drivers are friendly and helpful. However, in spite of these benefits I have also encountered some problems over the years when traveling with local taxi firms, most noticeably the cost of a return journey from Fersfield to Diss. I only tend to use two taxi companies when in Fersfield because the drivers tend to know me, know what help I need and know where I live, so I don't have to add on an extra 20 to 30 minutes on to my travel time for fear of the driver getting lost and me being late for my train or my appointment. Consequently, I know that I have a biased picture of local taxi prices, but from my experience, when used on a regular basis local taxis fares can be quite expensive. One of the taxi companies I use, Able Taxis tends to vary their prices from £10-16 for the same journey, whilst the other, 'Diss Town Taxis' had a fixed price rate of £10. However, I have recently learned that the company have upped their fair for a trip from Fersfield to Diss from £10 to £12.

The other problem that I have encountered whilst using local taxi firms is that a lot of them seem to partake in school runs. This then means that from about 3-4pm I am unable to book a taxi unless it is with 'Diss Town Taxis'. Diss Town Taxis seems to me to be one of the very few local taxi companies that do not accept school runs. In a bid to find cheaper ways to travel I have gone on to use other forms of transport, such as the Borderhoppa bus service.

It was my mum that first told me about the local Borderhoppa bus service. It seemed the perfect form of transport for me, cheaper than a taxi, more accessible than an ordinary bus, helpful drivers and a door-to-door service. Nevertheless, using the service requires me to book a seat 24 hours in advance. I have booked a seat with the company on a few occasions and been very happy with the facilities they provide, but there have been other times when, having booked within the 24 hour window I have been told that I am unable to reserve a seat because no buses are available in my area for that day. Having to book a seat 24 hours in advance does not only not always guarantee me a bus, but also means that I am unable to travel spontaneously when journeying with the Borderhoppa.

Moreover, I recently discovered that, customers wishing to travel from 3pm-4pm are unable to book a seat with the Borderhoppa because, as with many of the local taxi companies, the Borderhoppa also partakes in school runs. The Borderhoppa already operates a limited service, only running for five days a week from 8:30am-5pm, but the adoption of school runs limits the operation time of the service still further. Another service that prohibits me from traveling spontaneously is the train.

I first really began traveling by train independently when I started university in Aberdeen. Initially I was terrified at the prospect. As a disabled train passenger travelling in the UK I was expected to book assistance from station staff 24 hours in advance. However, the thought that I would be completely relying on strangers to get me safely to my destination filled me with anxiety, what if my luggage got left behind by mistake? What if staff forgot that I was on the train and I ended up in the middle of nowhere, would I have enough money left to buy another ticket, get a taxi home or if need be stay in a hotel? What if I was put on the wrong train? What if my train was cancelled and I was forced to use a replacement bus service, what if I lost my balance and fell through the gap between the train and the platform? All these fears whirled around my head as I contemplated the prospect, but deep down I knew that there was no feasible alternative. Independent plane travel seemed a far more terrifying and pricy prospect, I couldn't drive and I couldn't expect Mum to drive me there. However, I found that my fears were unfounded, when it came to booking my tickets and assistance over the phone the operator was extremely friendly and helpful, putting me at my ease. Then, when the big day finally arrived, staff helped to get me on and off trains with the use of wheelchairs, ramps and even buggies at some stations, they helped to carry my luggage, escorted me from platform to platform and ensured that I got safely into a taxi at the other end. Being able to travel independently from Diss and Thetford by train has been exhilarating; it has afforded me a freedom that, up until that point I had never really known before, enabling me to go on lone holidays with friends and allowing me to feel more like an adult. Nevertheless, In spite of the perks, assisted train travel has not been without its ups and downs. No ramps at some stations, no lifts at others, staff being confused as to which carriage I was in, my assistance becoming disrupted when I missed my train, one stubbornly unhelpful phone operator, and one journey where both in-train toilets were out of order. Although such problems are a rare occurrence, they help contribute to my 'transport anxiety'.

I first came across the term 'transport anxiety' when researching for my dissertation. I have decided to include an explanation of it in this article, because I feel that it clearly highlights why effective travel assistance is so important for disabled people. According to a report published in 2014 'transport anxiety' refers to the fears that disabled people may have about traveling on public transport due to the problems they expect to encounter, (fears made worse in my opinion by negative experiences of travel assistance). These anxieties stem from fears that they may get stuck and have no control over reaching their destination. Effective travel assistance is vital when travelling independently because, as a disabled person you are reliant on others for help and if that support fails then it knocks your confidence and leaves you feeling helpless. However, it is not only traveling on 4 wheels that makes me feel anxious, but also on foot.

For as long as I have lived in the village we have had problems with speeding traffic. Lorries and farm vehicles regularly rumble through the village at such speed that they make the house shake, boy racers zoom up and down the road and other vehicles frequently take advantage of the quiet lanes. Though the lanes maybe quiet, the residents of Fersfield use them regularly to walk their dogs, to post letters, to play games or attend fetes on the playing field, to visit their neighbours, to visit the church, to stretch their legs or to cycle. However, the speed at which traffic whizzes by makes these daily tasks very hazardous, particularly for disabled villagers such as myself. I am not very nimble on my feet so getting speedily out of the way of oncoming vehicles is not easy. Moreover, the roads and verges surrounding Fersfield can sometimes be rough, bumpy and uneven, making balancing difficult and increasing the possibly that I may fall into the road, particularly in icy and windy conditions. There are a number of children, elderly and disabled people living in our community and I feel strongly that more needs to be done to reduce the speed of traffic travelling through the village before there is a serious accident. I think that if such action were taken then I would feel more confident about walking and cycling around Fersfield because I would feel safer.

Finally, a few months ago I joined the 'Spotted in Fersfield' Facebook page in an attempt to keep myself abreast of what was going on in the community, but I also hoped to use the site to set up a village car sharing scheme. Not only will it offer a cheaper alternative to public transport, but will be environmentally friendly and will provide residents with an opportunity to make friends and support each other. I hope to update you on my progress in my next article.