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Priority Area 2.4: Quality of life issues relating to handicapped/disabled people

Task 1: Accessibility of public transport systems for people with disabilities

Title of Report:

State of the Accessibility of Public Transport Systems for People with Disabilities in Belgium (BE)

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PTaccess – Public Transport Systems' Accessibility for people with disabilities in Europe

One specific area, for which there is still a lack of EU level data, is the accessibility of public transport for people with disabilities and its impact on their employment and social integration prospects.

The European project 'PTaccess' offers the chance to fill this gap in knowledge and obtain information on the current state of accessibility of urban and rural public transport systems in 25 EU member states. For each member state PTaccess analyses the state of accessibility of public transport from the point of view of national disabled organisations, national transport operators, and governmental authorities. For regions where public transport is not accessible PTaccess identifies and analyses applied alternative transport solutions (WP1).

PTaccess also identifies and analyses good practices and innovation in making public transport accessible, and enhances the scientific base of policy by providing a sound assessment of the costs and benefits of making public transport accessible (WP2).

Furthermore PTaccess deepens the understanding of the transport-related contexts of social exclusion of disabled people, and draws conclusions about the effects that accessible public transport has on the employment and social inclusion prospects for disabled people. (WP3).

The PTaccess-project runs from the 1st of February 2007 until the 31st of January 2009.

More information about PTaccess can be found on the project's website: www.ptaccess.eu

The PTaccess consortium:

- FGM AMOR (Austria)
- Independent Living Institute ILI (Sweden)
- TU Dresden, Lehrstuhl für Verkehrsökologie (Germany)
- JMP Consultants Limited (United Kingdom)

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Priority Area 2.4: Quality of life issues relating to handicapped/disabled people, Task 1: Accessibility of public transport systems for people with disabilities]

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1 Introduction

This document aims to give an overview on the current state of the accessibility of public transport in Belgium (BE).

This document has been prepared within the framework of the European project PTaccess by FGM-AMOR based on interviews conducted with representatives of people with disabilities, transport operators and governmental authorities in 25 European countries.

In order to draw a comprehensive picture of the current state of the accessibility of public transport in Europe, the following topics have been discussed with the interviewed national experts:

- Statistical data
- Legal and regulatory framework conditions
- Organisational framework conditions
- Accessibility of passenger information
- Accessibility issues in ticketing
- Accessibility of stops and stations
- Accessibility of vehicles
- Safety, reliability and services
- Alternatives to public transport

How this report has been made

In order to obtain actual information on the current state of accessibility of urban and rural public transport systems in Europe, the PTaccess team has directly contacted and interviewed national experts within 25¹ EU member states. In each of these 25 member states a representative of a national disabled organisation, a representative of national transport operators, and a representative of a governmental authority have been interviewed and asked to provide their point of view regarding the accessibility of public transport in their country. In order to obtain comparable interview results in each of these countries, interview guidelines and questionnaires have been prepared by the PTaccess consortium. The interviews (at least three per country) have been conducted personally by “national contact persons” in their national language.

For each of the investigated 25 countries the results of all the interviews with the national experts have been compiled into a draft “country report” by FGM-AMOR. These “country reports” describe the state of the accessibility of public transport from the point of view of disabled people, transport operators and governmental authorities. In order to make sure that the interview results have been interpreted correctly, these draft country reports have been checked and corrected by the national contact persons, who had conducted the interviews with the national experts. This is the finalised country report for Belgium (BE).

What can be expected from this report

This report gives an overview of the state of the accessibility of public transport in Belgium (BE). However, this report does not provide only “official” data and information, since in most countries such data and information does not exist. Instead the report provides spotlights on the current situation regarding the accessibility of public transport from the subjective, but informed, point of view of people with disabilities, transport operators and

¹ At the time of the preparation of the PTaccess-project Bulgaria and Romania haven't been member states of the European Union, yet. Therefore no interviews have been conducted in these two countries.

governmental authorities. Since each interview-partner brought in her/his subjective viewpoint, it must not be expected to get an objective overview of the situation in the country. However, by asking different experts (representing three important stakeholder groups) about their point of view, and by taking into account the viewpoints of all these concerned stakeholder-groups the authors of this report hope to be able to draw a picture of the situation regarding the accessibility of public transport for people with disabilities in Belgium (BE) that is not too biased.

Important: The reader of this report must always keep in mind that this report is based on the viewpoints of individual people (i.e. each interview partner has brought in her/his personal point of view and her/his personal experiences), and therefore the information given in this report must not be interpreted as an objective official “national” view!

How to use this report

People, who are interested to get **more (detailed) information on the accessibility of public transport in Belgium (BE)**, should read this “country report”. There are also “country reports” for each of the other 24 countries, where PTaccess surveys have been made.

People, who are interested to get **a quick overview on the actual state of the accessibility of public transport in Europe**, should read chapter 3 of the summary report “State of the Accessibility of Public Transport Systems for People with Disabilities in Europe”.

People, who would like to know more **details about the interviews** which form the basis of this report, should read Annex II of the summary report “State of the Accessibility of Public Transport Systems for People with Disabilities in Europe”, where all interviewers, interview-partners and questionnaires are listed.

2.1 General Information

2.1.1 About the PTaccess interviews

Interviewer:	Name	Organisation
PTaccess National Contact Person	Tim Asperges	University of Hasselt, Instituut voor Mobiliteit (IMOB)
Interview partners:	Name	Organisation
Representatives of Transport Operators	Els Cosyns	NMBS (national railway company)
	Cynthia Langenaken	De Lijn (Flemish bus operator)
Representatives of People with Disabilities	Veronique Duchenne	Belgian Disability Forum (BDF) , National Council for Disabled Persons
	Lutgart Rens	Vorming (Flemish disability organisation)
Representative of Governmental Authority	Peter Keppens	Flemish government

Table 1: Interviewer and Interview-partners in Belgium

It is important to mention that the Belgian situation is a very specific one: Belgium is a federal state with 3 communities and 3 regions. The responsibility for public transport is a regional one. Therefore, three different governments are responsible for public transport. The operators of buses and trams are also regional. On the other hand, railway is a federal responsibility and has a national operator (NMBS). Furthermore, 'De Lijn', the Flemish operator for buses, is not only an operator but also an agency in the Flemish government and thus takes part in policy-making. This complex situation makes it impossible to interview all relevant national experts. Therefore, a selection of national experts has been made to get a good picture of the Belgian situation regarding the availability of accessible public transport: Interviews were conducted with 'De Lijn' (the Flemish bus operator), NMBS (the national railway operator), the Flemish government, and with two organisations representing disabled people (Vorming and BDF/National Council for Disabled Persons).

When conducting the PTaccess-interviews with the stakeholders, the interviewer had the feeling that availability of accessible public transport services is an important issue in Belgium and all interviewed parties are very interested in the results of the PTaccess project.

2.1.2 Statistical Data from Belgium

Statistical Data for Belgium	
Number of inhabitants	10,511,382 ²
Inhabitants with disabilities	21.5% of the total population ³
Inhabitants with motor impairments	2.1% of the total population between 15 and 64 years ⁴
Inhabitants with visual impairments	2.9% of the total population between 15 and 64 years ⁵
Inhabitants with hearing impairments	5.1% of the total population between 15 and 64 years ⁶
Inhabitants with cognitive / learning impairments	0.8% of the total population between 20 and 65 years ⁷
Inhabitants who are functional illiterates	12 % of the total population between 16 and 65 years ⁸
Share of disabled people living in urban areas	no data available ⁹
Share of disabled people at working age	70,9% ¹⁰
Share of disabled people at working age who are actually working	49,6% ¹¹

² 1,018,804 inhabitants in Brussels Region; 6,078,600 inhabitants in Flemish Region; 3,413,978 inhabitants in Walloon Region; Source: <http://ecodata.mineco.fgov.be/mdn/bevolking.jsp?sessionId=mji9kqtqn1?CMDNAME=NAV8224>

³ There is only information available of surveys. The 'socio-economische enquête' is the most extensive survey. 21,50% of the population mentioned to have one or more disabilities or chronic disorders. There are no percentages available for children under the age of 6 years. (Source: Socio-economische enquête 2001: Gezondheid en Mantelzorg)

⁴ 2,1% (estimated share) of the total population between 15 and 64 years do have MOBILITY disabilities (Source: Socio-economische enquête 2001: Gezondheid en Mantelzorg (<http://aps.vlaanderen.be/statistiek/publicaties/pdf/stativaria/stat34/stat34.pdf>))

⁵ estimated share according to the "Socio-economische enquête 2001: Gezondheid en Mantelzorg" (<http://aps.vlaanderen.be/statistiek/publicaties/pdf/stativaria/stat34/stat34.pdf>)

⁶ estimated share according to the "Socio-economische enquête 2001: Gezondheid en Mantelzorg" (<http://aps.vlaanderen.be/statistiek/publicaties/pdf/stativaria/stat34/stat34.pdf>)

⁷ According to Samoy, E. (1999). Cijfers en tendensen. Bijdrage tot de programmatie van voorzieningen voor gehandicapten. HIVA-KULeuven, p. 63 (<http://aps.vlaanderen.be/statistiek/publicaties/pdf/stativaria/stat34/stat34.pdf>); In the Flemish Region, between age 20y-65y: 12000 with severe cognitive impairments; 36000 with slightly cognitive impairments. No estimates for Brussels Region and Walloon Region. (There are no studies in Belgium, but there is a studie of the Netherlands. The dutch results are applied to the Flemish situation. The results for the more severe disabled persons is reliable. The results for the slightly cognitive disabled persons is a rough estimate.)

⁸ Source: <http://taalunieversum.org/taalunie/publicaties/laaggeletterd.pdf> (reference to Van Damme et al., 1997 and Houtkoop, 1999) In Flemish Region 41,9% of the total population (between 16y-65y) is functional illiterate. No estimates for Brussels Region and Walloon Region. In general functional illiterates are not considered as people with disabilities in Belgium.

⁹ about 4,8% of the total population (older than 15 years) is living in an urban area and is limited in his mobility (can only move around the house or less). Source: Gezondheidsenquête, 2004 (http://statbel.fgov.be/figures/d364_nl.asp#5)

¹⁰ according to "Socio-economische enquête 2001: Gezondheid en Mantelzorg" (<http://aps.vlaanderen.be/statistiek/publicaties/pdf/stativaria/stat34/stat34.pdf>)

¹¹ 49,6% of the disabled people are working (in comparison to 63,2% of the total population- age between 15y-64y) Source: European Social Survey, 2002. (cited in: Handicap & Arbeid. Overzicht van 10 jaar ontwikkelingen. december 2006. Samoy, E.)

Table 2: Statistical data for Belgium

2.1.3 Legal and regulatory framework conditions in Belgium

An anti-discrimination law (mainly dealing with labour issues) exists in Belgium. However, there is no law regarding the accessibility of public transport, and there is no policy to guarantee mobility for people with disabilities. Accessibility of public transport is not a mainstream topic on the political agenda in Belgium, but it is becoming more and more a key-issue at a regional level.

Anti-discrimination law

There is a federal anti-discrimination law existing in Belgium (25 February 2003 + 10 May 2007). Per region there are the following decrees:

- a Flemish decree 'proportional participation on the labour market' (8 May 2002)
- decree of the French community 'application of the principle of equal treatment' (19 May 2004)
- decree of the Walloon region 'equal treatment regarding employment and professional training' (27 May 2004)
- decree of the German community regarding the guarantee of an equal treatment at the labour market (17 May 2004)

Due to this federal antidiscrimination law it is possible to contest discrimination, based on age, gender, and disability, at the court. The federal anti-discrimination law includes the principle of 'reasonable adjustment' (i.e. reasonable measures in the environment you may expect of an employer to adjust the environment to the disabled person). The law also enlarged the competence of the centre of equal opportunities and opposition to racism (federal institution) with disabled persons. At this centre you can make a complaint.

Regulations regarding the accessibility of public transport

In Belgium there is no general policy to guarantee mobility for people with disabilities.

According to the BDF/National Council for disabled persons, legislation that provides several rules concerning the accessibility of public buildings and patrimony in Wallonie is existing since 2006.

According to the disability organisation “Vorming”, in Flanders there is no law that can be enforced relating to accessibility of public transport.

The Flemish government states that in an order of the Flemish government concerning the exploitation and tariffs of the Flemish Transport Association, there are a number of aspects about accessibility included: accessibility of stops (art 20), low floor of the buses (art 43), size of the travellers' info (art 29), and reduced tariffs for disabled people (art 75). This Order (from May 2004) is mostly about the accessibility of new vehicles and stops, but it does not guarantee anything.

According to the Flemish government there is a general right to basic mobility in Flanders, but for disabled persons there is only the right to have a stop in front of their house, if they are recognised by 'Flemish Fonds'.

“Priority” of accessibility of public transport on the political agenda

According to the disability organisation BDF/National Council for disabled persons, accessibility of public transport is not a mainstream topic on the political agenda in Belgium.

According to the Flemish government the accessibility of public transport is more and more a key issue at a regional level - the fact that the Flemish minister for mobility is also minister of equal chances is definitely an advantage in this respect. The Flemish government also supports projects about accessibility of public transport (e.g. making a database about accessibility).

Monitoring of the accessibility of public transport

The interview-partner of the Flemish government does not know whether monitoring of the accessibility of public transport is done on a national level – however, he thinks that such monitoring is probably done by a number of organisations as e.g. “Accessibility Bureau” rather than by the government.

According to the disability organisation “Vorming” monitoring of the accessibility of public transport is done on a national level for the trains and on a regional level for cities and regions. The BDF/National Council for disabled persons states that, as far as they know, monitoring of the accessibility of public transport is not done at all.

Special fares and public transport tariffs for people with disabilities

The interview-partner from the Flemish government stated that there are special tariffs for people with disabilities in Flanders. According to “Vorming”, buses in Flanders are free for all people with a disability who are registered at the Flemish agency. For the train disabled people (with special cards) can get a discount, can get priority for a seat, or can take a companion with them.

2.1.4 Organisational framework conditions

Belgium is a federal state with 3 communities and 3 regions. The responsibility for social inclusion issues and for public transport is a regional one. Therefore, three different authorities are responsible for social inclusion issues, and three different governments are responsible for public transport. There are also three regional operators of buses and trams. Railways are a federal responsibility and have a national operator.

Disability organisations in Belgium ask for a structural cooperation with the government, since up to now there has been only loose cooperation without structured vision or policy. There are a number of individual cooperation efforts between transport operators and disability organisations. (The cooperation among the operator of the Brussels’ underground, the administration of transport of the city of Brussels, and users’ associations is stated as a “good practice” example by the PTaccess interview partner from the BDF/National Council for disabled persons.) Cooperation between governmental authorities and transport operators is done on a regional level.

All interviewed stakeholders think that the accessibility of public transport is an important issue. The interviewed representative of disabled people stated that alternatives to public transport are not desirable from the point of view of disabled people, since solidarity should stay an objective of the government.

Governmental authorities dealing with anti-discrimination and social inclusion issues referring to people with disabilities

- **Federale overheidsdienst Sociale Zekerheid; Directie-Generaal Personen met een handicap**
Directeur-Generaal: André Gubbels; Adviseur-generaal: Daniel Tresegnie; Zwarte Lievevrouwstraat 3c; 1000 Brussel; Tel: 02/507.87.99 ; Fax: 02/509.81.85 ; Mail: HandiN@minsoc.fed.be

- **Vlaams Agentschap voor personen met een handicap (VAPH)**
Sterrenkundelaan 30; 1210 Brussel; Tel: 02/225.84.11; Fax: 02/225.84.05; Mail: informatie@vaph.be
- **L'Agence Wallonne pour l'Intégration des Personnes Handicapées (AWIPH)**
Site Saint-Charles; Rue de la Rivelaïne, 21; 6061 Charleroi; Tel: 071/20.57.11; Fax: 071/20.51.02; Mail: secgen@awiph.be .Le Service bruxellois francophone des personnes handicapées; Administrateur général : Mr Patrick Debouverie (t:02/800.83.96) ; Administrateur général – adjoint : Mr. Jean-Jacques Masquelier ; Rue des palais 42 ; 1030 Bruxelles ; Tel: 02/800.80.00 ; Fax: 02/800.80.01 83.96
- **Dienststelle für Personen met Behinderung**
Aachener Straße 69-71, B - 4780 St. Vith ; Tel: 080/22.91.11 ; Fax: 080/22.90.98 ; Mail: info@dph.be

Governmental authorities responsible for public transport

- **Federale Overheidsdienst Mobiliteit en Vervoer**
Competences: analyzing mobility, suggesting strategies for mobility and transport issues; sustainable mobility.
Vooruitgangstraat 56; 1210 Brussel; Tel.: 02/277.31.11; Mail : info.mob@mobilit.fgov.be .
- **Vlaams Departement Mobiliteit en Openbare Werken**
Competences: responsible for everything concerning transport, mobility, infrastructure and public works in the Flemish Region.
Graaf de Ferrarisgebouw; Koning Albert II-laan 20 bus 2; 1000 BRUSSEL; tel: 02/553.81.75; fax: 02/553.71.08; Mail: peter.keppens@mow.vlaanderen.be .
- **Ministère de l'Équipement et des Transports**
Competences: Ensure the best possible use of the Walloon large-scale network, carrying out traffic reviews and surveillance and providing information to the general public.
Boulevard du Nord 8; 5000 Namur; Tel: 081/77.32.83; Fax: 081/77.38.00.

Main transport operators and Public Transport associations

- **Vlaamse Vervoermaatschappij - De Lijn (Bus en Tram Vlaanderen)**
Motstraat 20 , 2800 Mechelen; Tel.: 015 44 07 11 ; Fax: 015 44 07 09 ; Mail: info@delijn.be .
- **Transport En Commun En Wallonie – TEC (Bus en Tram Wallonië), Société Régionale Wallonne du Transport (SRWT)**
Avenue Gouverneur Bovesse 96; 5100 NAMUR (Jambes); Tel.: 081 32 27 11; Fax.: 081 32 27 10.
- **Maatschappij voor het intercommunaal vervoer te Brussel – MIVB (Bus en Tram Brussels Hoofdstedelijk Gewest)**
Gulden Vlieslaan 15; 1050 Brussel; Tel. 02 515 20 07; Fax. 02 515 32 84.
- **Nationale Maatschappij der Belgische Spoorwegen – NMBS (trein geheel België)**
Frankrijkstraat 85; 1060 Brussel (Sint-Gillis)

Main disability organisations

- **GRIP** (which in English stands for Equal Rights for Each Person with a disability) is a non-profit organisation existing since 2000. GRIP is part of a global civil rights movement. Its task is to achieve equal

rights and opportunities for everyone, but primarily for people with disabilities. Koningsstraat 136; 1000 Brussel; Tel. 02/214.27.60; Fax. 02/214.27.65; info@gripvzw.be

- **Vorming** is the catholic Association for Disabled Persons (KVG)
KVG – Nationaal, Arthur Goemaerelei 66, 2018 Antwerpen, Tel. 03-2162990, post@kvg.be
- **BDF/National Council for disabled persons.** BDF is a non-profit organisation founded by representatives of disabled people. BDF represents the interests of disabled people in Europe.
Belgian Disability Forum, Zwarte Liebevrouwstraat 3c, B - 1000 Brussel, Tel. : 02 509 84 21 or 02 509 83 58 bdf@minsoc.fed.be
- Accessibility Bureau is a non profit organisation which aims to enlarge the accessibility of public buildings, living, mobility, public transport, leisure time, etc. It is also the Flemish expertise-center for accessibility.

Cooperation among stakeholders

Cooperation between the governmental authorities and disability organisations

The BDF/National Council for disabled persons states that there is a lobby of a few associations of people with disabilities, who ask for a structural cooperation with the government. Up to now the cooperation of governmental authorities and people with disabilities is moderate, depending on the sector, and there is no structured vision or policy.

Vorming stated that cooperation of governmental authorities and people with disabilities is conducted, especially in theory.

Cooperation between the transport operators and disability organisations

The interview-partner from the Flemish government stated that he has the impression that disabled people in Flanders are open for working together with other stakeholders. There is a continuous cooperation between the Flemish transport association and the non-profit organisation “accessibility bureau”.

According to the Flemish disability organisation Vorming, disabled public transport users try to cooperate with the public transport operators, but it is not easy.

De Lijn organises information sessions for disabled people in order to get feedback on projects. De Lijn cooperates with OCMW (Social Service Department of a town) and with “less-mobile centres”¹² – these organisations are involved in decision making regarding the improvement of the accessibility of public transport. De Lijn carefully studies complaints of (disabled) passengers (“De Lijn” maintains a database of complaints) to make the service better. “De Lijn” has also introduced an ombudsman.

NMBS, the national railway operator, cooperates with “Licht en Liefde” and with the National Council for disabled people in defining and developing better accessibility of public transport.

The cooperation of MIVB (Brussels’ underground), administration of transport, city of Brussels and users’ associations is stated as a good practice example by BDF/National Council for disabled persons.

Cooperation between the transport operators and governmental authorities

¹² These centres are founded to offer transport possibilities to less mobile persons. The centre is run by volunteers.

From the point of view of the Flemish government, the public transport operator in Flanders is aware of the importance of accessibility and is doing some efforts. The Flemish government in cooperation with the transport operator “De Lijn” is currently making a database on the accessibility of public transport.

De Lijn is working very close together with the Flemish government. De Lijn works together with the 'accessibility office' to set up a website including a database on accessible transport, set up a collection of standards necessary for accessible transport, and set up a mobility point where disabled people can get advice.

Attitude of the stakeholders regarding the importance of accessibility of public transport

Both of the interviewed representatives of public transport operators in Belgium (NMBS and De Lijn) think that the provision of accessible public transport would help people with disabilities to find or keep a job. The operators in Belgium are working on a new policy regarding accessibility of public transport, and several pilot projects are running at the moment. The national railway operator NMBS already started to make railway stations accessible upon renovation. The Flemish bus operator “De Lijn” stated that accessibility is a very important issue for the company to profile as provider and “accessibility coordinator”. Currently “De Lijn” is working on a pilot project about accessibility whereby they want to guarantee a minimum of accessibility. “De Lijn” is interested in getting feedback from the (disabled) passengers in order to be able to improve the service, therefore they maintain a database of complaints and provide an ombudsman.

According to the disability organisation “Vorming” disability-organisations in Flanders are working together in “Accessibility deliberation Flanders” to achieve better accessibility of public transport, since many disabled people in Flanders do not use public transport because public transport is often not accessible.

“Vorming” stated that inaccessible-transport is one of the reasons for unemployment among disabled people.

BDF/National Council for disabled persons stated that accessible public transport gives more autonomy and self-confidence to the disabled person. Although the main reason for unemployment among disabled people is the fear of the employers, transport is now too expensive for several disabled people.

According to the interview-partner from the Flemish government, the main barriers that hinder faster improvement of the accessibility of public transport in Belgium are financial aspects: *“Financial aspects are always slowing down the projects. Thereby, it is not possible to replace all vehicles in once, it needs long term planning. There will always be a number of disabled people who can't use normal public transport.”*

Attitudes of the stakeholders towards alternatives to public transport

From the point of view of the Flemish government, disabled people wish to public transport as much as possible and ask for more guarantees.

The interview-partner from BDF/National Council for disabled persons stated that no alternatives to public transport are desirable, since solidarity and answer to the needs should stay an objective of the government.

Attitudes of the stakeholders regarding the use of public transport by people with disabilities

Both interviewed disability organisations stated that for people with an electric wheelchair it is unlikely they will use public transport because until now there is almost always one link in the accessible transport chain missing (e.g. an accessible footpath, vehicle, information, help of a third party). For blind people, however, it is very likely to use public transport, since the physical accessibility is not so important. Vorming and BDF/National

Council for disabled persons both think that for people with cognitive/learning impairments the use of public transport is very likely for regular trips (e.g. there are persons who go every day to a sheltered workshop by public transport). It is attainable if the bus always does the same route, otherwise there can be panic; normal road is good, improvisation is more difficult because there is always a lack of clear understandable information.

The interview-partner from NMBS thinks that it is likely for people with disabilities to go for work by public transport (he knows of an example where a blind passenger with a guidance dog is on the train every day). He also thinks that it is possibly that people with disabilities can go shopping or visit friends by public transport. According to his opinion, the train is not suitable to go for cinema/theatre/disco/etc., since trains do not run late at night; and the train is usually not used to bring children to kindergarten/school/leisure activities, since the distances to these activities are short.

The interview-partner from De Lijn thinks that it is possibly likely (depending on the specific situation) for disabled people to use public transport to go for work. To go for shopping, disabled people can be picked up at home and brought to a shopping centre, but it will be the nearest shopping centre (they have not the freedom of choice of the shopping place). It is possible that disabled people use public transport to go for cinema/theatre/disco/etc., but one needs to take into account the timetable (this is the same for all passengers). It is not likely for people with disabilities to use public transport to go for visiting friends as this is expensive and it is not likely for people with disabilities to bring their children to kindergarten/school/leisure activities by public transport (this is not easy).

2.2 Accessibility of Public Transport

Pre-trip information: The accessibility and availability of pre-trip information (by internet, telephone and brochures) regarding public transport tariffs and tickets is assessed by the interviewed disability organisations to be quite good, and there are some good initiatives to provide necessary pre-trip information. However, there is no structured program or vision regarding accessible pre-trip information on public transport in Belgium.

On-trip information: At the underground and train stations and vehicles there is acoustic and visual passenger information provided. However, most information provided at smaller stops is not accessible for people with motor impairments and there is no accessible information for people with cognitive/learning impairments.

Ticketing: Public transport tickets can be bought in the vehicle itself, at vending machines, shops, and window offices. However, the existing ticket vending machines are not accessible for people with motor impairments.

Stops and stations: The accessibility of big railway stations and underground stations is quite good. However, people with motor impairments are not satisfied with the level of accessibility of stops and smaller stations. Only part of the manned railway stations are equipped with inclined planes and guidance lines and there are no inclined planes operated during peak hours with some of these railway stations offering no weekend-service. In general the accessibility of stops and stations is gradually improving as accessibility issues are taken into account during renovation efforts and when new stops and stations are constructed.

Vehicles: there are still many problems regarding the accessibility of public transport vehicles in Belgium. Many footboards are too high (due to low platforms), a lot of doors are too small and disabled people cannot travel in a group. In order to increase the accessibility of rail-transport NMBS have developed long term plans to make platforms higher and to equip them with inclined planes. The strategy towards the improvement of the accessibility of public transport vehicles is to buy only accessible vehicles and so over time the public transport vehicle fleet will become more and more accessible. However, there is no strategy to improve the accessibility of the existing public transport vehicles. The Flemish bus operator buys only buses with a low floor that are accessible for wheelchairs, and all call-buses also need to have an elevator or a platform. A person in a wheelchair can only take a bus, if stop and bus are officially accessible AND he/she has made a reservation. The level of satisfaction of people with motor impairments regarding accessible boarding/alighting and regarding accessible interior design of public transport vehicles in Belgium is poor.

Safety, Reliability, and Service: In Belgium disabled people are quite satisfied with the safety equipment in trains and undergrounds, but less satisfied with safety equipments (safety belts) in buses. Evacuation plans in case of an emergency do exist for trains, although disabled people do not know about these plans. The reliability of the accessibility of trains is assessed to be quite high, whereas the reliability of the accessibility of buses is not assessed to be that good by disabled people. Usually public transport vehicles are quite punctual in Belgium. The national railway operator offers assistance for disabled people at the stations and in the trains: specially trained staff members guide disabled people to/from the trains; local trains are equipped with an “assistance button” for calling staff when wheelchair users need to use the toilet. The Flemish bus operator “De Lijn” stated that a personal companion of the disabled passenger can travel for free, and the bus driver helps wheelchair users to get on/off the bus. Special training (with respect to special needs of people with disabilities, interaction with people with disabilities, etc.) is included in the staff-training-schemes of the Belgian public transport operators.

2.2.1 Accessibility of passenger information

Pre-trip information

According to the interview-partner from the Flemish government, travel planning information is available in the form of brochures, on the internet, and on the telephone; he stated that he “has no idea” what is offered specifically for disabled people. The interview-partner from the Flemish government also does not know whether information on customer services offered by public transport operators for people with disabilities is available in Belgium.

The Flemish bus operator “De Lijn” stated that pre-trip information for public transport passengers is available on a website, in brochures, and from a call centre. Special information for passengers with disabilities is available in form of a brochure, and there are also special information sessions for disabled passengers. However, De Lijn pointed out that disabled people do not have to look for pre-trip information themselves, since there is a central phone number for customer information and the people working in this information centre look for a custom-made solution to the transport question of the disabled person; if necessary the railway company NMBS is also contacted. Accessible buses are indicated in the timetable by a special logo; currently there is a project to put the same logo on accessible busses and at accessible stops as well.

The national railway operator NMBS stated that there is a brochure "Guide for people with limited mobility" and a website (info-gares) available for people with disabilities, who want to travel with NMBS, and in addition there is a special telephone number that disabled people can call for information. There is also information about the accompanying service and the luggage-transport service offered by NMBS.

According to the interview-partner from the Flemish government, a database on accessible transport containing all information available on accessibility of stops and vehicles is currently in elaboration. This database will be available on the internet and via telephone.

According to BDF/National Council for disabled persons the website information on transport tariffs and tickets is in general good.

BDF/National Council for disabled persons stated that there are some good initiatives (websites, brochures) but there is no structured program or vision regarding accessible pre-trip information on public transport in Belgium.

On-trip information

BDF/National Council stated that at the underground and train stations and in the vehicles the stop is orally announced and indicated in writing.

According to NMBS new local trains are equipped with acoustic and visual passenger information.

According to Vorming, most passenger information provided at stations is readable for people with motor impairments, whereas passenger information provided at stops is mostly not accessible for people with motor impairments. According to Vorming, passenger information that is accessible for people with cognitive/learning impairments does not exist at all, and passenger information that is accessible for people with motor impairments does not exist in the public transport vehicles.

2.2.2 Accessibility issues in Ticketing

In Flanders public transport tickets can be bought in the vehicle itself, at vending machines, shops, window offices, and will soon also be available via the internet and mobile phone.

NMBS stated that people with disabilities most often buy public transport tickets at the window office and on the internet.

The interview-partner from the Flemish government stated that he “has no idea” about the share of ticket vending machines that are accessible for people with disabilities. According to “Vorming” none of the existing public transport ticket vending machines are accessible for people with motor impairments.

2.2.3 Accessibility of stops and stations

The interview-partner of the Flemish government stated that “De Lijn” is currently making a list of all stops indicating the situation with respect to accessibility. On request, disabled people can get a call-bus-stop in front of their house.

According to the interview-partner from the Flemish government the accessibility of stops and stations is continuously getting better: when making new stops, accessibility issues will always be taken into account. The Flemish Transport Association has made plans for the improvement of the accessibility of public transport stops and stations.

De Lijn stated that the number of accessible stops is rising, since accessibility issues are always taken into account when new stops are made; the adaptation of old stops has to be completed in cooperation with the city/municipality. De Lijn always takes the target group of disabled people into account, when constructing or adapting stops or stations; in several test projects De Lijn works closely together with the Flemish government.

NMBS stated that 216 (out of 541) manned railway stations are equipped with inclined planes and guidance lines. However, there are no inclined planes operated during peak hours, and some of these railway stations offer no weekend-service. There are no light signals for hearing-impaired people, yet. 93 stops and stations (spread throughout the country) will be made accessible upon renovation (renovation has already started in 24 of these stations).

BDF/National Council for disabled persons stated that there is a tendency to improve accessibility (on certain lines): elevators in underground stations and in railway stations, Braille information in the MIVB (underground) stations. Lines and stops are clearly visually indicated. Pictograms in the public transport stops and vehicles provide information accessible also for illiterate people and for people with cognitive/learning impairments.

Vorming stated that most railway-stations are accessible (except Brussel-Central during peak-hours, and TGV-station of Antwerpen Berchem), but only very few railway-stops are accessible. Regarding the strategy to improve the accessibility of public transport, Vorming stated that initially it was planned to make 90 railway stations accessible, now it is only 50; In small railway stations that are now only accessible during the week, this accessibility is not going to stay. The strategy for bus and tram stops is that new stops are made accessible if possible.

According to Vorming the level of satisfaction of people with motor impairments regarding the accessibility of stops and stations is poor, except for large railway stations.

2.2.4 Accessibility of vehicles

NMBS stated that the general situation regarding the accessibility of public transport vehicles in Belgium is difficult, since there are still many problems: many footboards are too high (due to low platforms), a lot of doors are too small, disabled people cannot travel in a group. In order to increase the accessibility of public transport NMBS on a long term plans to make platforms higher, and equip them with inclined planes. Furthermore NMBS implemented a registration office and a call centre for disabled people and offers disabled passengers support for orientation. Local trains have reserved spaces for wheelchair users.

According to De Lijn the accessibility of buses is quite high: disabled people can bring a companion for free, and when disabled people are picked up, they always get help from the staff to get into the bus. The accessibility of buses is also improving but the operator has to wait to replace older buses until these buses are debited.

According to Vorming, in most of the big train stations there is assistance provided for people in a wheelchair; Up to 15 minutes before the train leaves, they can ask for an elevator or an inclined plane to enter the train.

Flemish government: Accessible vehicles: 'De Lijn' buys at the moment only buses with a low floor that are accessible for wheelchairs, all call-buses also need to have an elevator or a platform.

According to the interview-partner from the Flemish government the accessibility of public transport vehicles is continuously improving: when buying new vehicles, accessibility issues will always be taken into account. The strategy towards the improvement of the accessibility of public transport vehicles is to buy only accessible vehicles and so over time the public transport vehicle fleet will become more and more accessible.

According to Vorming the accessibility of public transport vehicles is poor, except for the new trains. There is no strategy regarding the improvement of the accessibility of public transport vehicles.

According to BDF/National Council for disabled persons the accessibility of public transport vehicles in Belgium is gradually improving, but there is no global policy on this issue. The strategy regarding the improvement of the accessibility of public transport vehicles is to test improvement-measures at one bus stop or railway station and then generalise.

Vorming stated that a person in a wheelchair can only take a bus, if the stop and vehicle are officially accessible AND he/she made a reservation; persons with a wheelchair that can be folded are allowed; one person made several complaints that 'De Lijn' does not apply its own rules although this is improving.

Vorming assess that the level of satisfaction of people with motor impairments regarding accessible boarding/alighting and regarding accessible interior design of public transport vehicles is poor.

BDF/National Council for disabled persons assess the level of satisfaction of people with motor impairments regarding accessible boarding/alighting of public transport vehicles as being very bad to sufficient: the infrastructure is adapted gradually but the service does not always follow. For example: a bus driver can help a disabled person but he also has to make sure he stays on time according to his schedule because otherwise other clients can protest.

2.2.5 Safety, Reliability and Service

Safety aspects

According to the disability organisation “Vorming;” generally people with disabilities do not think that travelling by bus or by train is dangerous. However, according to “Vorming”, people with disabilities think that riding by tram and by underground is dangerous.

According to the disability organisation “Vorming” people with disabilities are quite satisfied with the safety equipment in trains. However, people with disabilities are not satisfied with the safety equipment in buses (e.g. there is the question if the safety belt for wheelchair users is safe enough). There are no complaints about safety equipment being out of order.

“Vorming” does not know, whether there are special plans for evacuating people with disabilities in case of an emergency. However, even if such plans exist, the problem is that disabled people are not familiar with these plans.

According to NMBS, in emergency cases there are acoustic announcements in vehicles and stations. Disabled people will be evacuated from trains via a footbridge.

De Lijn states that there is no special plan for disabled people in their global evacuating plan.

Reliability and Punctuality

According to “Vorming”, the reliability of the accessibility of trains is assessed to be quite high since the elevators are rarely out of order and the personnel receive positive feedback from people with disabilities. However, only very few buses are accessible.

According to the interview-partner from the Flemish government, the level of reliability of the accessibility of vehicles in rail-based local public transport in Belgium is “medium”, since not all undergrounds and local trains have low floor; the level of reliability of the accessibility of long-distance trains is higher, since most long-distance trains have low floor.

According to the Belgian disability organisations, in general the level of punctuality of public transport is satisfying.

NMBS stated that 95% of the trains arrive with a delay of less than 5 minutes. De Lijn said that 85% of the buses arrive with a delay of less than 5 minutes.

Customer Service

NMBS perceives that the accessibility of customer services (luggage storage, counters, information desks, ticketing machines, etc.) is good. NMBS stations provide accessible counters and information desks equipped with sliding doors to enter window offices, and lower window office (not yet everywhere).

NMBS offers assistance for disabled people at the stations: special guides (who have a special training) guide disabled people to/from the trains; when disabled people start their journey the arrival station is informed by the NMBS staff.

According to NMBS local trains are equipped with an “assistance button” for calling staff when wheelchair users need to use the toilet.

De Lijn stated that a personal companion of the disabled passenger can travel for free and the bus driver helps wheelchair users to get on/off the bus.

The interview partner from Vorming stated that he does not know any person with motor-impairments nor any person with cognitive/learning impairments who has tried to use the luggage storage.

The interview-partner from the Flemish government perceives that the accessibility of customer services (e.g. luggage storage, counters, information desks, ticketing machines) is quite good in Belgium.

Staff Training

Special training schemes regarding the service for passengers with disabilities are included in the NMBS training schemes.

De Lijn stated that special training schemes regarding the service for passengers with disabilities are included in the training of bus drivers and employees of the call centre.

According to NMBS every conductor has a basic education regarding disability issues; some people of the staff have a more advanced training, for example to guide disabled people to the vehicle.

The interview-partner from the Flemish government perceives that the training (with respect to special needs of people with disabilities, interaction with people with disabilities, etc.) of public-transport staff is quite good in Belgium.

2.3 Alternatives to public transport

The national railway operator NMBS conducted in cooperation with the Flemish bus operator “De Lijn” a study on the use of taxis. There’s a project where “De Lijn” works together with OCMW, taxi service, and NMBS: a custom made door-to-door service is offered using several transport modes but the client only has to pay the tariff of “De Lijn”.

“De Lijn” works together with “accessibility office” on a pilot-project: this project is conducted in a few cities in Belgium, where “De Lijn” tests the use of a custom made service with which people can be brought to the nearest public places (picking them up at home and bring them to public places within a radius of 10 km).

The interview-partner from Vorming stated that there are some accessible city regions, where an accessible private taxi picks you up and brings you home. Furthermore, there are the usual call-buses that are mostly accessible; and some non-profit organisations organise transport for disabled people but not in the whole of Flanders.