

# Pavilion Labour Disabled Members' Branch

## Making Labour Conference Accessible

**1.1 Contributors:** seventeen (17) members of Brighton Pavilion CLP who identify as disabled or live with a chronic health condition.

**1.2 Background:** This is a detailed note of the discussion of access issues disabled members encountered at 2021 Labour Conference ('Lab21') in Brighton. Our conversation built upon previous discussions of access issues experienced at Party conferences at different venues. This paper includes suggestions to resolve access issues – made by members of the Pavilion Labour Disabled Members' Branch ('DMB') who are Brighton residents and regular users of the Brighton Centre.

During Lab21, our Branch Secretary was one of several disabled delegates to raise issues of access at the podium. In response to her comments, she was asked to attend a meeting with Conference Arrangements Committee ('CAC'), at which the Chair of CAC, Harry Donaldson, the Eastern Region Director, Hollie Ridley, and a Labour staff member (Katarina?), were present. From that meeting, Pavilion DMB was asked by CAC to update previous submissions on making conference more accessible and also to forward a copy of our accessibility guidelines (the section on documents is appended to this report).

**1.3 Discussion: Making Labour Conference accessible** – Numerous access problems, both inside and outside the Brighton Centre, have led disabled members in other areas to conclude that Brighton is an inaccessible city. Disability Labour members have been calling for some time for conference to be removed from Brighton. Yet Pavilion DMB members have experienced **severe access issues at other venues** used by Labour Conference, **notably Liverpool**. As Brighton residents we know that many issues for disabled members during Labour Conference 2021 were caused by poor organisation or delegates' behaviour, not the Brighton Centre. Pavilion DMB is urging action to make conference accessible in all venues, including Brighton.

### A. Representation

CLP delegations to Party conferences should include an **additional disabled members' delegate**. There should be disabled members' representatives on the CAC, the WCAC and Regional / sectional CACs, as well as the NEC.

# Pavilion Labour Disabled Members' Branch

## Making Labour Conference Accessible

Contact details for all disabled members' representatives should be available via the Party's website and circulated to all DMBs and CLP Disability Officers. Labour conferences will never be properly accessible until disabled members are fully involved in their organisation. **Nothing about us, without us.**

### B. Notifying reasonable adjustments before conference

Many **members miss the box on the conference application form**, to indicate that they have access needs. Without ticking that box, disabled delegates or visitors receive no contact from Conference Services regarding specific needs. This is a fundamental failure from the outset. The option to disclose access needs and request adjustments must be far more visible to all applicants. It should be highlighted at the start of the application.

Other members struggle to submit their access requirements because the Party seems reluctant to accept that, for some disabled people, completing an online form is either impossible or will result in a bare minimum response. It is essential that members can **request – and receive – an alternative format**, whether paper form, or simple phone discussion of their needs.

Not unreasonably, Labour members arrive expecting an accessible conference but **Party staff are unprepared** for the range and numbers of disabled members attending – because so many miss the 'entrance' question in the Party's online application system.

The **access questions asked need review** and major updating. There must be **adequate space** for members to be able to inform Conference Services of the reasonable adjustments they require. There must also be **sufficient staff** numbers allocated for these adjustments to be discussed in the time available – and the **necessary budget** for all reasonable adjustments to be provided, as is legally required.

Members repeatedly report contacting the Party about their disabilities but receiving **no reply**. Ignoring communications from members is rude and also places conference in breach of equalities law on reasonable adjustments.

# Pavilion Labour Disabled Members' Branch

## Making Labour Conference Accessible

**After conference**, it is insulting to ask disabled delegates to complete an online feedback questionnaire when those delegates have notified the Party that their adjustment needs include alternatives to online documents. Sending feedback requests to members via a mechanism which they can never complete is one way to ensure a false positive. Once again, the alternatives of paper or phone options are essential to providing equal access.

### C. Conference Materials

Disabled members need **time to access and absorb conference materials**. For example, this could be due to learning or developmental disabilities, problems with information processing, visual impairment, chronic fatigue or other conditions.

Accordingly, other than emergency resolutions, **all conference documents must be made available to all delegates by a deadline at least one month prior to the first day of Labour Conference** and, ideally, earlier. This includes all reports, all submitted motions and rule changes, whether originating from CLPs, CAC, the NPF, officers or the NEC.

**Without this, there is no equality in the Labour Party. The importance of this cannot be stressed highly enough by our members.** This should apply to all Party conferences – regional, sectional, etc, and not just Annual Conference.

(There are also other reasons for an earlier deadline for distribution of all conference materials, such as a democratic desire by delegates to discuss proposals with the bodies they represent. However, this report deals only with disability access issues and, thus, the equality of disabled members.)

All conference materials must be presented or **available in accessible formats simultaneously with being made available online**, including daily CAC reports during conference. Party staff and officers should realise that this necessitates issuing, or making available, printed documents (including large print versions) to members requiring such formats prior to uploading

# Pavilion Labour Disabled Members' Branch

## Making Labour Conference Accessible

documents online – rather than only addressing these access needs as an afterthought.

Staff behaviour conveying irritation or inconvenience to members requesting accessible formats, or making members repeatedly chase up such requests, must be recognised for what it is – insulting and an example of **ableist abuse**.

Making essential conference documents only available online – and not providing printed copies to members who have previously notified this as an access requirement – is discriminatory and a breach of equalities law on reasonable adjustments.

Party representatives should also consider that many disabled people exist on some of the lowest social security support across the UK. Expecting disabled members to self-finance necessary printing **reinforces political exclusion** of people on low incomes, which Labour claims to oppose.

Whether online, electronic or printed, all Labour Party materials should be **presented in accessible fonts**; eg, using dyslexia and autism aware fonts also suitable for the visually-impaired, with clear, well-spaced text, with appropriate colour or bold text, rather than underlining or italics (see addendum).

### D. Getting to conference

Brighton is hilly, including for some people between the station and the Brighton Centre. While local residents are used to the local topography, we suggest that other members should be warned. It is possible for buses, coaches or mini-buses to go down to the Brighton Centre and the Party should consider **a local transport service during conference**, perhaps in arrangement with either Brighton and Hove City Council or one of the local bus companies. This would certainly be appreciated by many members and would make the pooled fare seem more reasonable.

We also suggest that the **free bus pass for delegates** should be highlighted in the conference pack, as other conference host cities do not provide one. It was clear that very many members were unaware that they had one at Lab21.

# Pavilion Labour Disabled Members' Branch

## Making Labour Conference Accessible

### E. Entrance / exit to Brighton Centre

The Brighton Centre's **Russell Road entrance** was designed to be a disabled entrance / exit and should be dedicated to this purpose at Labour Conference. Russell Road is a better drop-off / pick-up point for vehicles and lift access to other floors is also far less congested from this entrance – both important factors for wheelchair users and mobility impaired people.

This would **allow for a dedicated team of stewards** at the Russell Road entrance, who would become familiar with disabled members attending conference. It should prevent the situation where disabled members face long waiting times to enter the venue. This, for example, is a particular issue for wheelchair users caught in bad weather, mobility impaired people who struggle to queue, or sufferers from chronic fatigue / ME who might only gain access in a state of exhaustion.

It would also **allow disabled members to learn the best routes** around the Brighton Centre, starting from a quieter, calm spot. If, as we believe, the dedicated quiet space and the first aiders station are nearby the Russell Road entrance, it has the added benefit of allowing disabled members to increase their familiarity with those facilities.

**All conference stewards should receive disability awareness training**, which is clearly lacking. Members with invisible disabilities report being insulted and demeaned by stewards at doors inside and outside the venue. Being required to explain and convince a gatekeeper demonstrating a hostile degree of ableism was upsetting, humiliating, laborious and a waste of time for disabled Labour members and everyone in queues which formed behind us.

Regardless of any stewards not being Labour staff, they are the first in-person contact any members have with Labour conference. They have given a very poor impression of the Party to disabled members.

### F. Inside the Brighton Centre

The change to the **Covid checks** mid-way through conference confused many, including some disabled members. Knowing that Brighton has poor internet

# Pavilion Labour Disabled Members' Branch

## Making Labour Conference Accessible

reception in many parts, including the Brighton Centre, local delegates had obtained Covid passes on paper or downloaded their passes to phones. Such practical advice should have been given to everyone coming to conference.

There was a general **lack of signage** around Lab21, making it unnecessarily difficult to get round and easy to get lost. Familiar with the Brighton Centre from UNISON conference, one disabled delegate still had problems at Lab21. Labour should consider that the Brighton Centre's own signs fade into the background of our conference exhibition. All Labour conferences should produce clear, colour-coded, directional signs, with route lines along floors, etc.

**Wider, clear gangways** are needed by wheelchair users and mobility impaired people, particularly users of larger, modern assistance buggies. A reduced number of stalls made it easier to navigate the exhibition spaces and this should be maintained to ensure access in future. Many disabled members object to charities based on experience and other members object in principle. Eliminating different commercial stalls which are anathema to Labour values, reducing the number of charity stalls (say, to a maximum of three nominated by the local CLP), and requiring all organisations in the exhibition be trades union approved employers, will ensure that our Party's ethics are represented throughout our conference and make conference easier to navigate for all.

It was reported regularly at Lab21 that **lifts were not working**, but there was no clear announcement of this, nor anyone directing members to the nearest alternative lift. This was indicative of a lack of care for wheelchair users and mobility impaired conference attendees, as well as reflecting a **lack of staff**. Equality demands access for disabled people – neither can be scrimped on.

More **information desks** were needed at different points across the Brighton Centre. Although there were maps in the conference guide, that required attendees to carry a heavy document around or be able to access the internet – both problematic for people with different disabilities or struggling with the poor connectivity. There should have been **large scale venue maps on display** and **pocket maps available as handouts** throughout the venue, so that people could see where they were and where they needed to get to. More assistance staff in different locations around the venue were also desperately needed.

# Pavilion Labour Disabled Members' Branch

## Making Labour Conference Accessible

### G. Seating / tables

Even having submitted pre-conference accessibility needs (as required by the Party), members arrived to find only normal **chairs** – where supportive, high-backed seating was needed and had been requested. This was a common issue, experienced by several members even within our CLP's delegation. There is also an issue with the poor suitability of chairs provided and their set locations, which has been repeated at many conferences over various venues.

At Lab21, disabled delegates were originally **allocated seats** at corners of the hall far from the rest of the delegation. One, having stated that they needed to be on the flat, was in tiered seats. Another, having stated that they needed to be with someone who knew them and how to deal with a seizure, was on their own. A third was unable to obtain the **table** they need and was only offered a chair for their laptop – causing muscle strains and back problems.

### H. Participation in the Conference Hall

Disabled members recorded a huge range of difficulties – all basic access needs which members were shocked that a Labour conference ignored.

The **lack of subtitling, or captioning**, while people spoke made it incredibly difficult for hearing impaired delegates to follow what was going on and the progress of motions. The Party must recognise that, if not born profoundly deaf, the vast majority of people do not use BSL, so need subtitles / captioning.

**Harrying delegates at the podium** was a major issue voiced by many disabled delegates. Yet Party Chair, Margaret Beckett, among others, persisted. Several neurodiverse ('ND') delegates specifically explained that they needed a little extra time to get through points but, disgracefully, were interrupted, hurried and harassed. People in mental distress were put off becoming delegates by seeing such abusive behaviour.

The **positioning of timers** at 0 and 180 degrees to the podium, made them invisible to almost all delegates speaking and certainly to mobility impaired delegates. Timers are required straight ahead of delegates speaking at the

# Pavilion Labour Disabled Members' Branch

## Making Labour Conference Accessible

podium – so positioned on the south balcony and, perhaps, on or replacing a front seat. Putting small lights on the podium would be an advance on Lab21 only if those lights do not render the podium inaccessible to ND delegates.

**Venue lighting** is problematic for people with a range of disabilities. Flood lights in use at Lab21 forced some delegates to wear sunglasses. Bright overhead lights were particularly fierce at the front of the conference hall and triggered headaches throughout Lab21. This should be simple to avoid either by angling overhead lights onto the stage (not the first rows of seating), or reducing the brightness of lights (as platform members also have needs).

Chairs **rushing through votes at a pace** was another problem, both for learning disabled delegates struggling to locate what was being voted on and physically disabled delegates unable to raise and lower their hands at the required speed. In doing this, Mark Ferguson directly disenfranchised disabled delegates and the organisations they represented, including our CLP.

Additionally, time given over to card votes seemed to be squeezed, so that tellers were rushing by delegates with ballot boxes, leaving delegates unable to vote if they could not join-in '**chase the ballot box**'. This made it problematic for some disabled delegates to vote and prevented other delegates from voting. Either more time must be allocated to card votes or more tellers and ballot boxes must be available.

**There must be adequate time and facilities for all delegates to be able to vote. Disabled delegates must never again be disenfranchised in this way.**

Disabled delegates should not be harassed for raising issues of access and equality. When such **ableist harassment** is reported, it must be immediately acted upon and treated as seriously as other abuse based on protected characteristics or similar breaches of the members' code of conduct.

**Spaces for wheelchair users and mobility-impaired delegates** should be available where members feel comfortable, with easy access to the podium. That will not always be at the back of a block or the end of a row. It may be at the front of the hall. Importantly, delegates themselves should be asked.



# Pavilion Labour Disabled Members' Branch

## Making Labour Conference Accessible

**Flash photography must be banned** throughout Labour conferences (and all Party events) to ensure access for many different disabled people. Skilled photographers do not require flash in well-lit venues (as the Brighton Centre was throughout). Flash excludes by exacerbating many different disabilities, including seizures, migraine and sensory difference.

The lack of **visual presentations and limited use of slides** was a welcome development for some at Lab21. Slides can be an aide for many delegates, by providing information when voting. But CAC must ensure that, when used, all slides meet disability access standards (ie, dark text on vanilla – not white – background, or light text on coloured background). Further, all visual presentations must be carefully pre-tested for neurodiverse impact.

The **huge illuminated platform backdrop** puts many ND delegates (among others) under considerable stress, as do the large side screens used for signing. All platform members and session Chairs should receive training on the impact their movements have on people with sensory difference or some neurological conditions. This also applies to movements of delegates on the conference floor. For example, depending on the angle of view, at Lab21 the raising of hands and waving of fingers, whether by members of the platform or delegates in the hall, caused a major flickering effect in front of the illuminated platform backdrop. The impact ranged from distressing to debilitating or threatening for delegates with different ND or neurological conditions.

NB: **Sudden loud noise**, including whistles, hoots, horns or similar, and prolonged applause, have the same alarming impact on ND people and should never be encouraged without a preceding clear warning and pause. A minute of silence is far preferable.

### I. Assistance Stewards

Generally regarded as “**absolutely amazing**” when available inside the Brighton Centre, **but there were far too few on duty** and they were **overwhelmingly occupied within the conference hall** – so there was a dearth of assistants and assistance in all other parts of the Brighton Centre and throughout the Metropole – despite it being part of the official conference venue. While some Labour Party staff were very helpful in filling the gaps left

# Pavilion Labour Disabled Members' Branch

## Making Labour Conference Accessible

by inadequate numbers of assistance stewards, the reactions of other staff members, which ranged from questioning or dismissive to outright hostile, were a distressing display of ableism and prejudice.

### J. Creche, Caring and Rest Facilities

We welcome the provision of a quiet space at conference but our members **could not locate it**. Consequently, we cannot comment on whether it was decorated and lit to be inclusive of ND people. This is extremely important as the ND community will benefit more than many others from such a space due to sensory difference.

These facilities must be fully accessible, fully funded and provided on a sufficient basis.

### K. Official Fringe / Breakout venue – Hilton Metropole

Regarded as horrendous by disabled members. It is **too far away** from the Brighton Centre for disabled members to move between the two venues regularly, if at all; to which no thought appears to have been given. (NB: We note that **these factors also apply to the Liverpool venue**, where the vast distances required to be travelled simply to enter and leave conference are exhausting, as is travel between the conference hall and breakout rooms, and where navigation presents an almost insurmountable barrier.)

The Metropole's **heavy, manual doors**, its revolving doors, an accessible entrance which considerably adds to distance travelled in and out of the venue, and inadequate available internal seating in the bar, lobby and breakout rooms, makes it a very off-putting and tiring venue for disabled members. Official venues for Labour conference should have modern accessible entrances with wide, automatic doors. Revolving gateways should not be required to be used.

The **narrow entrance lobby** at the Metropole is always very crowded with people, which internal Covid checks exacerbated. Those checks should have taken place outside to ease crowding, which ND and other disabled people find very disturbing. The cacophony of noise was also a problem for hearing

# Pavilion Labour Disabled Members' Branch

## Making Labour Conference Accessible

impaired members. Inside breakout rooms, many people including disabled members, had to sit on the floor, with no seats offered nor any assistance stewards available to resolve these or other issues.

There were very long queues for **disabled toilets**, suggesting misuse or vast under-provision. Very worryingly, the help cords were tied up in the disabled toilets in the Metropole (photo available), totally undermining their installation.

The **lack of assistance stewards** in the Metropole was a major issue for disabled members, with no assistance given down corridors or inside conference rooms and Labour Party staff unwilling to assist disabled members.

**Required access equipment was lacking** – most notably a missing ramp at the Lab21 disability fringes. All rooms used must also have a working PA and induction loop, with adequate sound-proofing for this to be effective. This has not always been the case at the Metropole in our members' experience. It was unclear what, if any, provision was available for hearing impaired people in the Metropole.

The **lighting** throughout the Metropole makes it inappropriate for many different disabled people. Rooms in use were very brightly lit with huge glass chandeliers, mirrored light fittings and mirrored walls, making the environment intolerable for neurodiverse people and dangerous for other people with neurological conditions.

### L. Outside Conference

Many disabled members choose to watch Labour Conference rather than attend. As it was inexplicably not televised but broadcast via You Tube, **Lab21 was inaccessible to anyone without the internet**. Whoever made this decision had **no regard for digitally excluded people**. Such prejudice against a group who include people with learning and developmental difficulties, as well as people on low incomes and many older people, should never be repeated.

As delegates are required to travel between conference venues (eg, at Lab21 this was the Brighton Centre and the Metropole), Labour staff must stay aware

# **Pavilion Labour Disabled Members' Branch**

## **Making Labour Conference Accessible**

of what takes place along these routes and seek to ensure access is preserved for all members. During Lab21, one group lobbying members was playing intolerably loud music which greatly disturbed many disabled people, including ND people, people with sensory difference and people with some hearing impairments. **For Labour Conference to be accessible, the routes between its venues must be able to be traversed by all delegates without impediment, pain or distress.**

### **M. Conclusion**

Everything recorded herein impacted the abilities of Pavilion Labour members to participate at 2021 Labour Conference.

In 2017 we were appalled when Labour staff told members of our Disabled Members' Branch that Labour Party rules on access did not apply to Women's Conference and that the access adjustments promised for Labour Conference did not cover Women's Conference. Then, our Women's Delegate was left unable to hear proceedings and two of our other Labour Conference delegates were forced out of 2017 Women's Conference because of access issues which Labour Party staff refused to resolve.

Subsequent Labour conferences have improved by addressing some points raised by disabled members. For example, there is now a fairer method of being called to speak. However, access remains poor. Pavilion Labour's Disabled Members' Branch is working to improve access at Labour Party events and equality for all disabled people.

Many disabled members have limited energy or time to spare, so will only get involved if they believe they can have a meaningful impact and not be excluded or thwarted by lack of access. Making visible adjustments to events will demonstrate to disabled members that Labour is serious about access and representation for, by and of disabled members.

**Labour cannot pick and choose which disabled people it wishes to acknowledge. Until Labour ensures that all access issues are fully covered it cannot represent disabled people. Nor can it claim to be a party of equality.**

# Pavilion Labour Disabled Members' Branch

## Making Labour Conference Accessible

### Addendum: Accessibility of documents and media

Equal access for disabled people includes ensuring that all documents and media the Party produces and circulates are accessible.

#### Minimum standard for documents

- a) arial type, font size 12, but preferably 14.
- b) **either muted coloured backgrounds used with light (not white) text**, or black text on a light (ie, vanilla, not white) coloured background.
- c) Italics should never be used – this is a major issue for many people who are neurodiverse, as well as the partially-sighted
- d) Underlining should be avoided for similar reasons as italics.
- e) Highlight points by use of **bold fonts** or **different coloured text** – with adjustments if circulating to a colour blind person.
- f) Keep watermarks in pale, transparent colours.
- g) Avoid using any vivid or bright contrasting colours in text as this presents a major issue for neurodivergent people. A useful summary is found at <https://www.autism.org.uk/what-we-do/website/accessibility> .
- h) Avoid cluttered layout – spacing is key for neurodivergent people (eg, dyslexia, autism). If line numbers must be used, keep these in a pale, transparent grey, clearly faded from the main body of text.
- i) paragraph spacing so that there are clear lines between each paragraph - creating a wall of text is a problem for neurodivergent people.

**Large print copies** of all documents should always be available, both for circulation and at meetings

**Circulation of documents in advance of meetings** is another important equalities measure allowing disabled and chronically sick members time to review documents.

#### More information about accessible formats:

<https://accessibility.blog.gov.uk/2016/09/02/dos-and-donts-on-designing-for-accessibility/> .

**Submitted by Pavilion Labour Disabled Members' Branch**

**Nothing About Us Without Us**