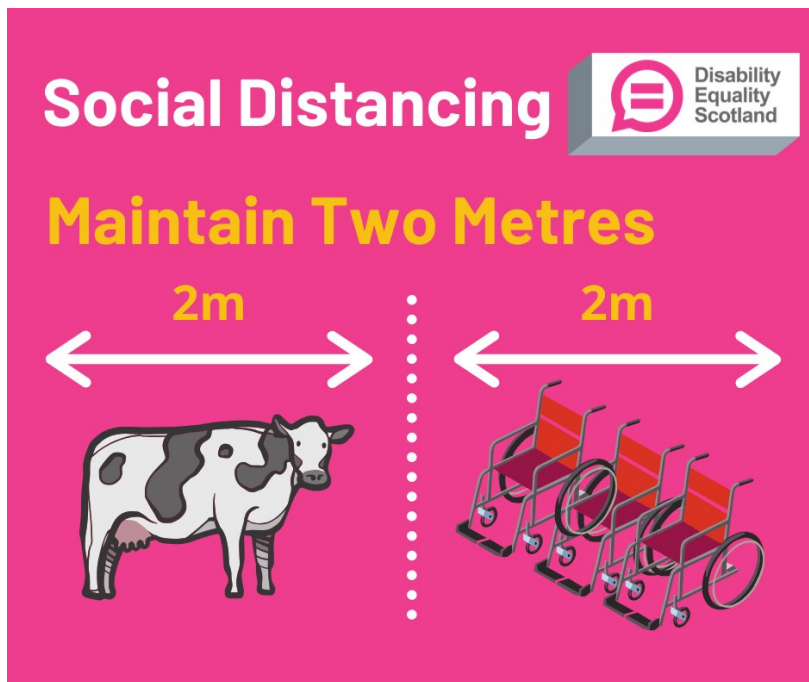


# COVID-19: Social Distancing as a Wheelie



What is two metres? The height of a human who is six feet and six inches, the total length of a buffalo or cow or the approximate width of three wheelchairs side by side. You choose which image to keep in your mind.

As a wheelie trying to maintain social distancing during my once a day exercise or when connecting during essential journeys, I am finding it difficult and frustrating trying to maintain a two metre distance from others. Let's start from home.

We all know the good old saying "there's no place like home" though I would suggest for some of us just now, alternatives would be nice as we head into week 5 of lockdown. For me, as a wheelie, lockdown and the government guidance has brought some particular challenges. Firstly came the "exercise only from home" guidance.

Anyone else having problems undertaking their once a day exercise due to pavement parking (more people home so more cars parked), poor pavements in terms of design, maintenance, width and obstructions and a lack of dropped kerbs to name but a few challenges?

I normally drive to somewhere accessible to exercise and walk my dogs but not being able to do this, to follow guidance, I found the infrastructure from home impossible as a wheelie. This wasn't exactly new to me as I struggled to get from door to bus stop resulting in an inability to use public transport and an over reliance on my car.

The barriers as a disabled person have always been the first and last part of my journey and connecting between transport modes but like many, my solution was the car. Take that solution away and I became a bit stuck and the barriers **significantly amplified**, as was the reason I was so reliant on my car.

Here is an example of inconsiderate parking that even with the changes to the transport bill to ban pavement parking, the lack of public education and enforcement has in effect meant – **no change**.



I keep thinking public awareness and education is the answer and we just need to let people know the problems they are causing others by parking inconsiderately and on pavements. These problems are not just for wheelies but for everyone including people with poor mobility, blind and visually impaired people, children and people using buggies – all of whom are often forced onto dangerous roads due to pavement parking. Surely if people were made aware of these issues they would be considerate and stop parking on our pavements without the need for enforcement, which should always be a last resort?

I have often been heard repeating my mantra – “pavements are for people”. Seems simple and clear enough – “pavements are for people”. Should I hashtag that?

So, as I couldn't safely navigate my home streets due to inaccessibility and human made obstructions, I opted for a short drive to an area where I knew money had been spent on the infrastructure and where paths and pavements were more accessible and a bit wider. Although there was limited guidance, on checking, this short drive was permitted due to the circumstances and as long as my need for a short drive was reasonable and I followed a common sense approach.

Now I had somewhere to go so imagine my frustration on being forced to choose between breaching the two metre social distance rule or having to wheel off the paths onto a grass verge at the side to allow cyclists to zoom past me and joggers to run past. I was disappointed that there didn't seem to be any consideration about my limited options to maintain social distancing or any understanding of how hard it was for me to detour and leave the tarmac path to try and maintain the length of a cow, a buffalo or three wheelchair widths between us. Maybe I could take a cow or buffalo on the wheel with me as a marker? I can't meet up with another three wheelies because that would be breaking the rules and in effect three of us would be crash test dummies! Decisions, decisions.

Anyway, back to reality, it struck me that even during a public health crisis; inequalities not only persist but also are heightened. Many plans had been made and guidance issued without the input of disabled people to ensure that they worked for us and that we weren't overlooked or left behind. Yes we do still have to undertake essential journeys and exercise during this crisis.

As an interim measure it would be good for authorities to look critically at neighbourhood resources and look for opportunities to intervene. This could include opening up green space to the public to allow people to have more options (that don't mean wheeling or walking along poorly designed pavements and neighbourhood infrastructure), diverting or restricting traffic to allow safe use of road space. A good start to reclaiming some of it for people not vehicles.

I am hopeful that we will become more considerate when designing our neighbourhoods and although currently heavily reliant on my car, I would like to reduce this reliance, do my bit for climate change and be able to leave the car at home and navigate my streets with safety and ease. I welcome reduced traffic on our roads and communities that lend more to people and less to vehicles. I also welcome and push for more opportunities for disabled people to be involved in active travel initiatives, including helping with the design of places, spaces and the surrounding infrastructure. I welcome being

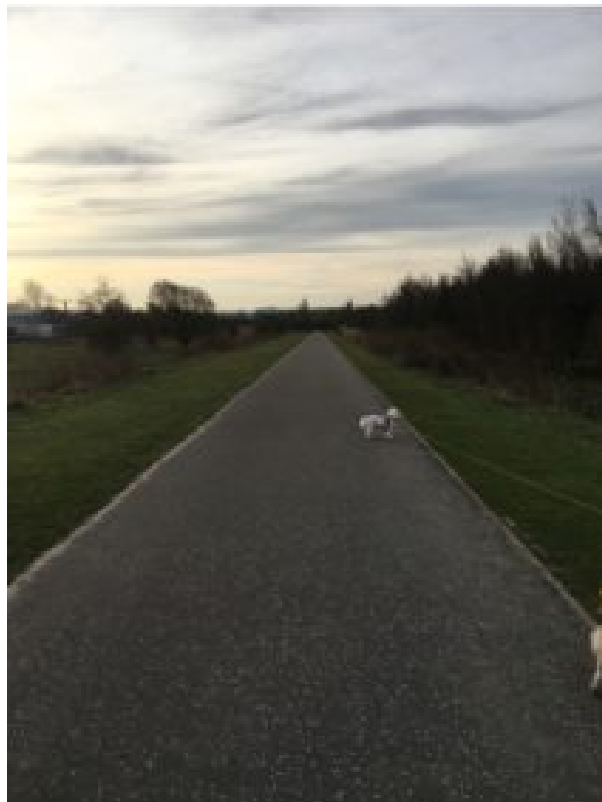
included in the roll out of ebike hire initiatives, and being given the same opportunities to participate if I so choose.

This is an areas where recent initiatives have seen the inequality gap widen as these schemes have not been designed to include the needs of disabled people i.e. no adapted bikes, mobility scooters or wheelchair power boosters for hire. This in effect means that disabled people are missing out on the opportunities to explore areas and make use of the new walking and cycle paths to enhance their health and wellbeing. It seems strange to me that under “active travel initiatives” assistance is there to encourage participation from those more able and no assistance is there to support those less able.  
#InequalityWidens.

But for now let us get back to the off road, newly designed pathways and I take my hat of to Falkirk Council, Transport Scotland, Sustrans Scotland and Paths for All for some of the more recent work to open up our places of interest, rivers and canal paths and make them more accessible for all in terms of infrastructure.

But, and there is normally always a but, during social distancing measures, these very paths are failing me, mainly due to the lack of consideration of many cyclists and joggers.

### **Helix Park and the Kelpies**



These are some of the paths that most cyclists and joggers can't give me my two-metre distance on. Most times I have to move onto the grass verge, to let them zoom past at speed and it's not easy in a wheelchair or on a mobility scooter. My ask – please be considerate, slow down and give me my space. It's easier for you to move over than it is for me.

If you're unsure about the space; think of that cow or buffalo between us or my three imaginary wheelie friends.

As a wheelie it's hard for me to get off a pavement or path, to give you your two-metre distance (due to a lack of dropped kerbs, poor design, grass verges). I have nowhere to detour to so my ask is for you to help me and maintain or create the two metre space.

My blind, visually impaired and Deafblind friends are struggling with this too as they can't always see or hear you coming, they have no boundary lines to follow and guide dogs and assistance dogs are not trained on social distancing.

Please be thoughtful and considerate and maintain the space.

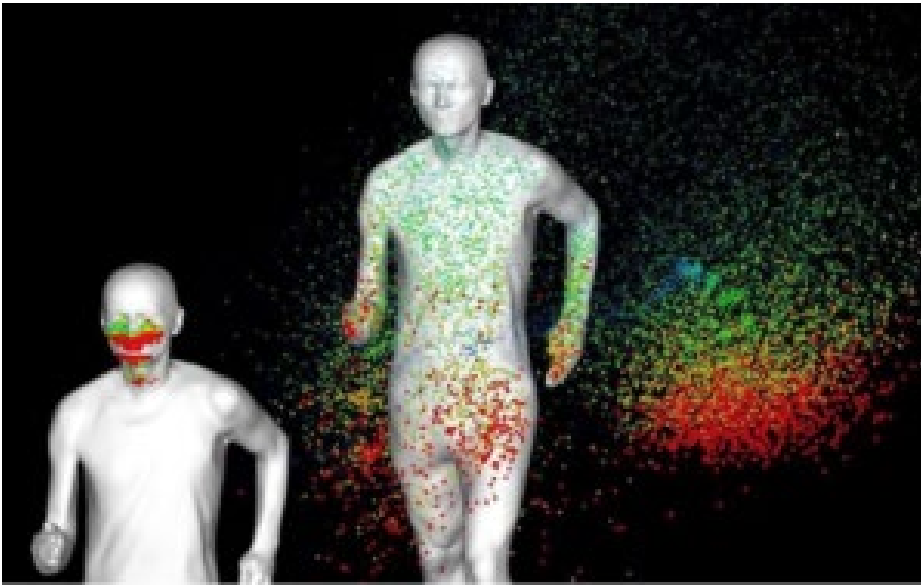
This space and slower approach will also assist autistic people and their families who are finding it harder to work around these changes to their routines.

I often hear cyclists complain about motorists passing them too fast or too close and it's the same for pedestrians when cyclists pass us too fast or too close so please be considerate and remember the old saying "do unto others".

Although I have specifically mention cyclists I am experiencing the same scenario with joggers and my worry is that as most pass too close and they can be understandably huffing and puffing – all my mind sees is the airborne pollution that will settle on me as they are not far enough away when passing. So please joggers – give people space and again it's easier for you to detour slightly to maintain this space than it is for others to try and avoid you..... and you have the right footwear!

### **Micro-droplets that may carry the coronavirus will flow behind a walker, runner or cyclist**

And now for the piece de resistance, which is mainly an issue with joggers – please, please, please don't spit where I have to wheel. It transfers from the ground to my wheels then to my gloves and hands. I'm trying to stay safe and infection free on my once a day exercise.



Please stop the spitting where I need to wheel. For us wheelies this really is a cross contamination and public health issue and it's pretty disgusting to boot!

**So let's finish with my asks:**

- Please be considerate of others when out exercising and remember it is harder for most disabled people to move out your way but with some thought and consideration we can work together to adhere to social distancing and keep each other safe.
- Cyclists and joggers, please also slow down when you are passing and remember – some people can't see or hear you and for some your speed and close presence will be intolerable and increase their anxiety.
- Please don't spit where we have to wheel.
- At home don't park on the pavement. You are blocking access for us and either making our journey dangerous or causing many people to have to abandon their journey or plans all together and return home defeated and less likely to try again.

I thank you.

Linda Bamford

Convener

Disability Equality Scotland