# Best practice concerning mobility for blind and partially-sighted persons in The Netherlands

Name: Joep Aarts

Organisation: Eye Association Netherlands

Function: Director

Name project: All train stations in the Netherlands accessible for blind and visually impaired (partially-sighted?) passengers

## Introduction

The Eye-association has been involved with this project from the beginning. This started with lobby (from 2008) and later (from 1013) advice for the construction. Many Eye-association volunteers participated in users tests for the choice of materials and measurements. At the same time route descriptions have been made to find the way using tactile guidelines and tactile signs. These can be found on the website of the NS (Dutch Railway) in printed and spoken versions. We have also been actively involved with the publicity (the project made national publicity). When all the provisions were ready, trainings were organized in order to let the target group and professionals get acquainted with the network of provisions and the underlying directions.

## A short history of the project

All train stations in the Netherlands have been made accessible for blind and visually impaired passengers. The Netherlands is unique in the world with this. Guidelines which are clearly visible and tangible and other provisions such as tactile signs have been installed in the same manner everywhere.

In this way blind and visually impaired people can find their way independently on every train station, even if they have not been there before. They know what to expect in the station. This is as tremendous boost for this group of people. After all, for mobility they depend on public transport.

## The intended result

The intended result has been reached. Here are some facts and figures:

410 train stations have been fitted with new guidelines

90 km of guidelines has been installed

About 5000 different descriptions’ have been made of often-used routes from the street to the platforms and back

2500 object markers (yellow sound tiles) have been fitted

240 km of platform edge marking has been painted in contrasting colours

All obstacles on the main route (such as wastebaskets) have been removed

800 tactile signs have been applied to stair banisters and lifts (at the top of the bannister the platform number can be read in braille.)

Of the 4 largest train stations (Amsterdam Central Station, Rotterdam CS, The Hague CS and Utrecht CS) tactile maps have been made

The film ‘Univocal and predictable route assistance on train stations’ (Dutch and English) can be found on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&v=aZYx_q5bIsk>

The most important result is that all train stations have been made accessible in exactly the same way. Because of these blind and visually impaired passengers can rely on the accessibility of the station of their arrival (predictable, orientation directed and consistent route assistance).

Apart from the tangible results the project has also provided knowledge about accessible walking routes for blind and visually impaired people a Design Directive Route Assistance has been drawn up. This Directive is an important tool with which we can make the Netherlands more and more accessible for blind and visually impaired people.

## Lasting effect of this project

ProRail (the company responsible for railway maintenance) has guaranteed the accessibility for blind and visually impaired people in their organization. This means that all the provisions made by ProRail will be managed and kept in repair.

A second lasting effect is the publication of the Design Directive Route Assistance. In future this can be used by city councils and transport organizations to design accessible walking routes for blind and visually impaired people.

We hope the Netherlands can be an example for other countries. In December 2017 French television (France 2) spent an item on this:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hef1ArRbxIw>.

What the Eye-association contributed to this project

Lobby work: argue for univocal route assistance in public transport (first of all in train stations)

Advice: help thinking about the construction of route assistance on railway stations, contribute solutions for complex situations

Testing: tens of volunteers have contributed to testing different types of guidelines, spoken route descriptions, tactile signs and so on.

Publicity: a joint approach of and talking to the press at the completion of the project in October 2017, (for example NOS radio and television news and De Telegraaf)

## Target group experience

The situation on railway stations in the Netherlands used to be so different that it was impossible for a passenger to travel independently away from the well-known town or region. With the increasing attention for the accessibility of public transport this situation proved to be undesirable and untenable.

A group of active volunteers who were well informed on the subject contributed solutions, always in consultation with the target group and the responsible organizations such as ProRail, NS and PBTconsult. This was organized partly by the Eye-association working group Public Transport.

Test teams of the Eye-association totalling more than 100 blind and visually impaired people with a great diversity of eye disorders have taken part in users tests.

## Contribution to the quality of life of the target group

There is a great improvement in the self-reliance of blind and visually impaired people concerning their mobility (work, leisure, social contacts), for which they depend on public transport. Because the accessibility of all trains stations has been realized in the same way people know what to expect. This increases confidence to make use of public transport.

All blind and visually impaired people in the Netherlands who travel by train benefit from this project. It follows that all of society benefits as it contributes to the social participation of blind and visually impaired people. Among other factors, it enables them to organize their life in the way they would like themselves.

## Impact/results of the project

The project was completed at the end of 2017. In the coming years we will get experience. The first adjustment to the ProRail directive is planned for 2023.

Involvement volunteers/Eye-association

Many volunteers were directly and indirectly involved with the project. Regional groups of Eye-association volunteers had a delegate in the national working group Public Transport. In this way regional dissimilarities between stations could and had to be inventoried and often overcome in order to arrive at a univocal directive. Everyone realised that if there was to be no conformity, neither would there be a national directive with which ProRail would be able to work.

This keeping up the pressure has taken a lot of effort and empathy on the part of the volunteers. It was they who had to make important decisions on the accessibility of public transport in name of all visually impaired and blind passengers. The number of consultations was very high, both in Utrecht at the main office as by telephone, there was a hotline to the staff involved of the project office PBTconsult, and sometimes tensions were high.

Meanwhile test groups were set up and set to work on testing part aspects – such as switching form a 60 cm guide-line to a 30 cm width line – and a lot of time was spent on testing and establishing the specifications of the tactile signs in braille and relief.

Little was left to chance. Subjects such as warning marking, attention surfaces, object markings, SOS markings, stairway and lift markings, pillars and gates for checking in and out, all these rapidly passed by and it was sometimes difficult for the working group to keep track of the situation.

The final choice in route assistance on train station to opt for two-way traffic following the mainstream walking route put an end to the big question ‘where to put and where not to put the guidelines. This decision can be called historic. It was made during a large meeting in Utrecht in which more than 30 volunteers took part. The green light for the new directive was given unanimously.

Cooperation

The Eye-association and its predecessors have always valued the input of its members, after all it is they who use public transport and depend on good provisions on train stations and on information about them.

This project demanded an extra special approach because it had to ‘polish off’ old habits and preferences in the regions to make room for a nationwide network of guidelines and markings. The regions therefor participated intensively in the project. When this proved to take up too much (travel)time, meetings by telephone were used in order to make enough progress. In the regions the proposals were studied critically and put forward again in a new meeting. Meanwhile there was a lot of mailing and telephoning.

At that time the working groups looked at the international situation because a nationwide system should not be at odds with European habits and regulations. this international rapport was also reached thanks to PBTconsult. the result is that in this field we are now the front runner in Europe.

The cooperation within the Eye-association would never been as successful if ProRail and PBTconsult had not worked with great drive using their own specific expertise. After all, they were the ones who had to judge the feasibility of our proposals, and often suggest adaptations. In short, the cooperation in this dossier was broad. The diversity of interest sometimes complicated the cooperation but it was always directed at improving the accessibility of public transport for blind and visually impaired passengers.

## What makes this project innovative?

This project is innovative in that the accessibility of all train stations was regulated in exactly the same way, and so has become consistent, predictable and orientation directed. Not only the material side is innovatory, the fact that audio route descriptions to all train stations are available for PC and smartphones makes this project so spectacular in its adaptation to modern times. The trains stations of Maastricht and Groningen – and all stations in between – are now all part of a large network with identical marking and user-friendliness.

Of special value moreover is the fact that responsibility for maintenance, adaptation, expansion and information is guaranteed by the parties which realized the project, ProRail and NS. This is unequalled in the world. For passengers with a visual impairment it is vital that route description stays up-to-date and operational. Some problems with the accessibility of trains stations, such as crossing a footpath or a railway crossing have not been solved anywhere else in the world. By means of this project a solution is being found.

## Recommendation ProRail

Name: Mr Bram ’t Mannetje

Organization: ProRail

Position: Programme manager Accessibility

Why do you recommend this project with input of the patient perspective for this prize?

The realization of a tactile and contrasting route on all train stations is – in international perspective – a unique task which has been carried out. Not only was the project of a singular size, its approach is also unique.

The approach started with the question: what do blind and visually impaired people want? The Eye-association has indicated what the most important requirements were (‘univocal and predictable instead of complete and custom-made’), and was then involved with the development of routes per station. All provisions form ribbed tiles up to tactile signs were tested extensively by Eye-association volunteers before they were taken into production and applied.

The result is a provision which is appreciated enormously by the target group. Making a train journey independently has now become a possibility. Even when the destination is a trains station where the visually impaired passenger has never been before.

ProRail warmly recommends this project because it gives a lasting contribution to inclusiveness which we as a society value so highly.