

Aerodynamic Accessibility

Can air travel be accessible to disabled people and environmentally friendly? Columnist **Carole Edrich** was dispatched to a training day hosted by Aerobility & 4AIR

When I was very much younger, adventurous, and up for any kind of extreme sport or experience, provided I got paid to write about it, my mother would repeatedly tell me that one day I would dig myself a hole that I couldn't dig myself out of. It has never happened. At least, not so far...

It's a beautiful day. Bright sun. Not too hot. I've driven for hours to get to Blackbushe Airport. There's no apparent M.E. today, so life is good.

I find the place with no problem and am introduced to my teacher, Cliff Hawkins. He volunteers as a

flying instructor for Aerobility, the charity that teaches disabled people to fly. We chat about what to expect and the vast range of disabilities Aerobility caters for. Our Pipistrel (the only certified electric plane) has a 45-minute flight time with an extra 15 minute contingency.

“It has never happened. At least, not so far...”

We go airside. I get in, then get out again. There's no point waiting in the sun, and a flat-tired plane needs towing from the runway. My ADHD-excitement stops buoying me. I start thinking about what I'm



Credit: Carole Edrich

doing. Back in, and belted up with a 4-way belt like you put on a child's car seat, only adult-sized. I don't feel too adult. The glider look of the plane suddenly hits me. What am I doing? I'm too old to be risking my life for an article. I have been, since chemo.

I remember what Cliff said in our introductory chat: "Like riding a motorbike, it depends on what you do. If you take risks and ride fast, it's a dangerous thing. If you look after what you're doing and are sensible, it's safe." I ask for a minimal lesson. Just learn about the instruments, get the feel of the plane, find the magic of it. I take notes.

Cliff built Formula One gearboxes for 35 years, has been a pilot since 1999, and now donates his time to Aerobility. Being electric, the Pipistrel is way quieter than a prop plane (look at me using the lingo already), and I clock what he meant by saying the sound is "soothing, relaxing" (that's not silent). With few moving parts, the plane just needs annual maintenance, and my 45-minute flight took about £1.50's worth of electricity. So it's cheaper to run and better for the environment.

My nerves are forgotten, and I'm floating. Well, flying... We see a film set, Reading University, pass two no-fly zones, Reading City itself, in its spread-out dark-coloured glory. And everywhere below are the greens of the fields and the trees,

and lakes, and long grey roads, like the models I tried to make as a child.

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Just like Adam Twidell, 4AIR's Future of Flight lead, puts it: you can put accessibility, flight, and sustainability in the same small sentence. 4AIR's loan of this Pipistrel to Aerobility has removed my barriers and those of many others. My disability doesn't figure with them, and I won't be burning the planet. I'm coming back.

For more information, please visit **aerobility.com**, **4AIR.aero**

FUN FACTS:

Founded in 1993, Aerobility is a UK charity that makes flight possible for anyone, with any disability. It supports nearly 1,000 disabled people a year and has introduced over 10,000 to flight. It runs on the three pillars of flying, education, and advocacy, and provides adapted aircraft, flight simulators, classroom sessions, and funded programmes. Its 2026 Chair, Neil Tucker, embodies the mission. After losing a leg and the use of an arm, he trained through Aerobility and has since flown everything from light aircraft to ex-military jets. The charity received the King's Award for Voluntary Service in November 2025.

Aviation sustainability company 4AIR's twelve-month sponsorship has placed the world's only certified electric aircraft with Aerobility, creating a global first for electric disability flight training. ■

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