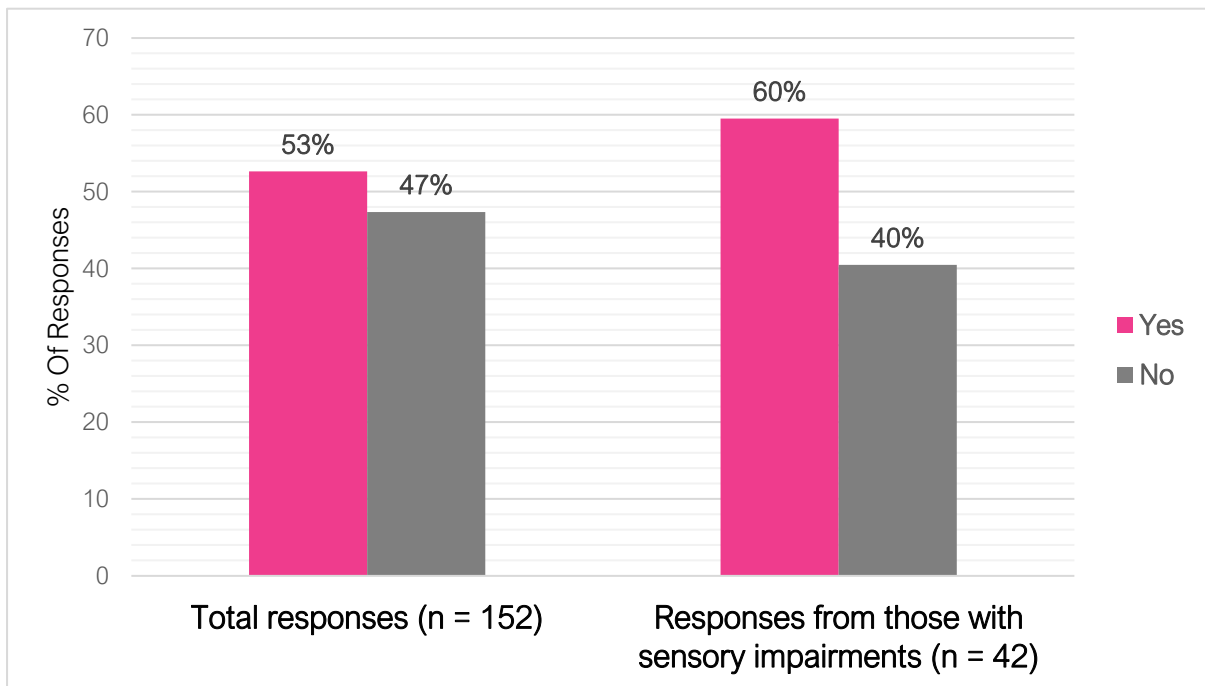


Weekly Poll - COVID-19: Return to Public Transport

Each week Disability Equality Scotland send out a poll question to our members on a topical issue. For the week beginning 21 September 2020, we asked a question about disabled peoples' experiences of using public transport during the COVID-19 pandemic. This poll was on behalf of Transport Scotland's Accessibility Team who wanted to hear feedback from disabled people as lockdown restrictions ease and there is guidance in place to ensure commuters remain safe when using public transport. Transport Scotland were particularly keen to hear from those with sensory impairments, and so the following report will show both the total responses and the views of those with sensory impairments, commenting on any differences.

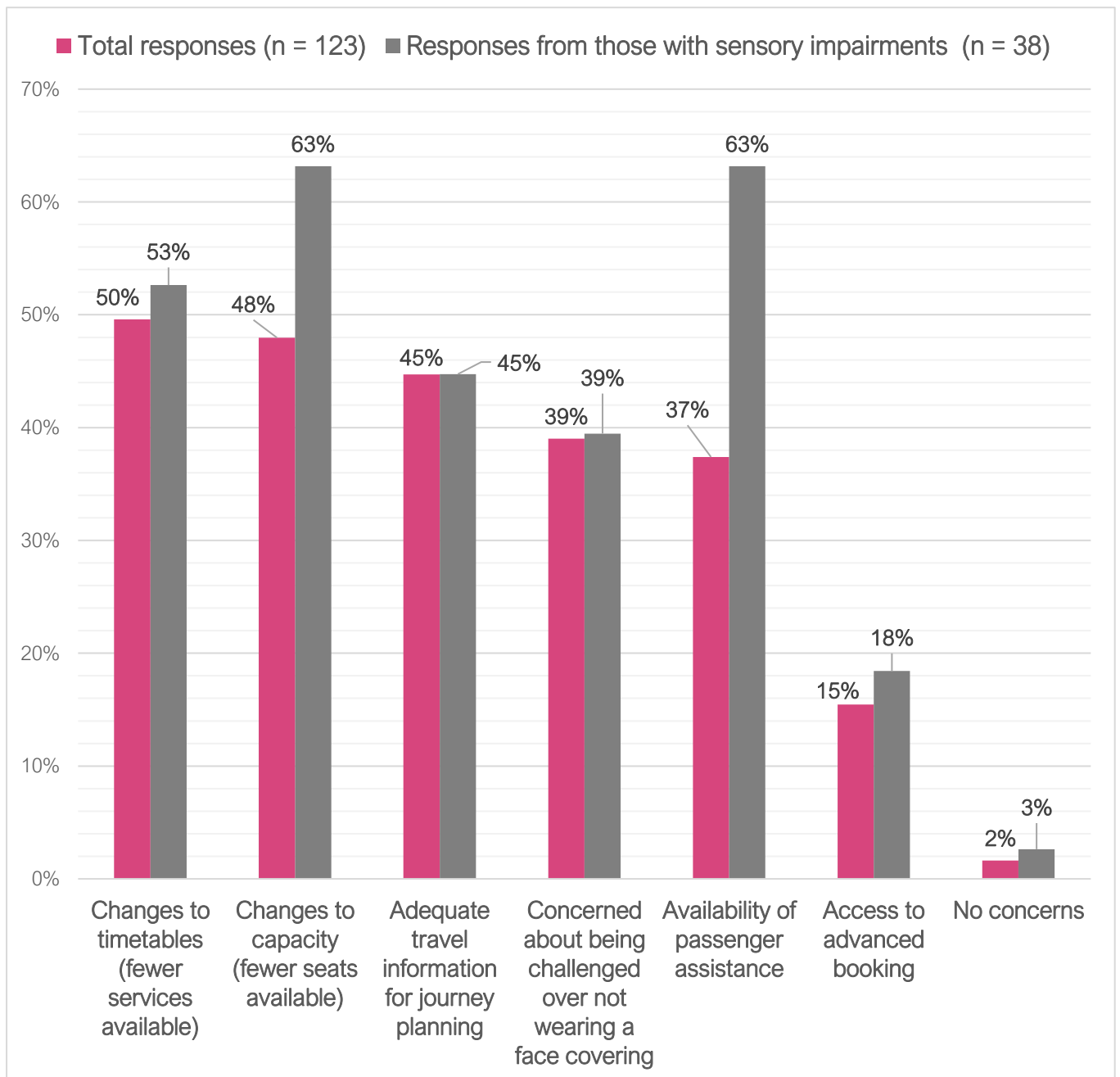
Results

Question 1: Have you used public transport since the easing of lockdown?
This could include travelling by bus, train or ferry?



In total, just over half (53%) of total responses had used public transport since the easing of lockdown. Those with sensory impairments were slightly more likely to have used public transport during this time (60%).

Question 2: What are your main concerns about using public transport as we ease out of lockdown?



In total, half (50%) of respondents indicated that changes to timetables was their biggest concern about returning to public transport, followed by changes to capacity (48%) and the availability of adequate travel information to allow journey planning (45%). When exploring the data from a sensory impairment perspective, we find that the biggest concerns are around changes to capacity (63%) and the availability of passenger assistance (63%).

Comments

Concerns about using public transport

Respondents were asked to elaborate on some of the concerns they had about returning to use public transport. The following verbatim comments help to demonstrate strength of feeling or specific experience of our members.

Physical distancing

The main issues were around physical distancing and being able to maintain the recommended 2 metre distance.

“Too many people wanting fewer seats, people pushing, arguing, no social distance.”

“On a bus, in a powerchair/wheelchair space, everyone passes you and they're all breathing/talking on the phone/coughing in your direction!”

Changes to infrastructure

The Spaces for People initiative has been introduced to try and make outdoor spaces more user friendly during the pandemic, and involves projects which have closed roads to increase space for walking, wheeling and cycling as well as widening pavements and removing parking spaces. In some cases, people were concerned that there were unaware of how

these changes might impact on their usual route, location of their bus stop or the layout of streets with which they were familiar.

“Changes to bus stop boarding areas. Some temporary raised platforms for boarding areas in Princess Street are poorly designed and make it impossible to board in a wheelchair without help.”

“Bus routes changed roads closed and buses do not give access to city centres.”

“Most of the bus stops have been moved. No information about this now or before they were moved.”

Lack of information about service changes

In some cases, disabled people were reluctant to return to using public transport because they felt there was a lack of information available to them about changes to services, such as timetable changes. Disabled people found it difficult to plan journeys in these instances.

“All these changes have been made and there has been no information.

“All the changes to timetables and streets are too confusing.”

“I am hoping that the government responds to people’s concerns and makes public transport easier to use and communicates all the timetable changes and repositions bus stops better. No communications about all the changes in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire.”

Face covering exemptions

Face coverings became mandatory in Scotland on public transport on 22 June but there are many reasons why someone may be exempt from wearing a face covering. Disabled people continue to be challenged for not wearing a face covering while travelling on public transport. This can be a deterrent to travel on public transport, as our previous polls show disabled people are concerned about being a victim of hate crime for not wearing a face covering.

“I keep getting challenged for not wearing a face mask by other passengers when waiting for and on the bus.”

“I have been challenges numerous times for not wearing a face covering. I am exempt. Some people have been pretty aggressive.”

“Already been challenged frequently about face coverings and I am exempt. Some people challenge can be rude and embarrassing.”

“So much abuse for not wearing a mask and the bus driver didn’t help.”

Others were concerned about those who refused to wear a covering and how this might expose them to a greater risk of infection.

“People not wearing masks and talking on the phone.”

Refused assistance

There were some examples of disabled people stating that they were refused access or assistance by transport staff to help them make their journeys, and as such are reluctant to return to using public transport.

“Bus driver was very unhelpful and more or less questioned why I was out and if it was a necessary trip.”

“Have been refused assistance from bus drivers due to their need to distance from me. Pre COVID I would have been helped as I am blind.”

Too anxious to travel

There were some examples of disabled people feeling too anxious to travel during this time. Some had recently ended a period of shielding and were cautious about negotiating the outside world, including transport, while others were anxious about the increased passenger numbers trying to use a reduced service. Wheelchair users were anxious about using public transport, stating they felt vulnerable when travelling.

“Just out of shielding and too anxious to go out considering all the changes to the pavements and bus stops.”

“Just too many people, not just people trying to get to wherever but far too many tourists as well all demanding space on reduced services! Reduced capacity is making waiting crowds longer and more irritable!”

“No social distancing, very few masks, no encouragement for people to wear masks, a clear annoyance between those that do and the irresponsible ones that don't. Feel very vulnerable and insignificant in a wheelchair.”

“I am avoiding using buses because of the lack of COVID protection measures for wheelchair users.”

Specific issues relating to people with sensory impairments

Transport Scotland are specifically interested in the views of people with sensory impairments. Key issues here relate to the challenges of communication while people, including transport staff, wear face coverings for those who rely on lip reading. There were also general concerns about

maintaining physical distances and being able to navigate new layouts without assistance, especially among visually impaired respondents.

“Concern that others will not remove face coverings to communicate with me.”

“Being able to find the ticket scanner in buses is difficult as they are in different places. The driver has to take the pass from me to scan it.”

“Problems physically distancing at bus stops as there are no tactile and some other people are not sticking to the distancing guidelines and some pushing me because I’m too close. I have no way of telling distances.”

“It’s hard enough to get a seat on the bus in normal times, never mind trying to social distance and drivers are not helpful to assistance dog users.”

Good practice examples

Respondents were then asked to identify any examples of good practice they had encountered during lockdown, enabling their travel on public transport. Community transport services and the provision of passenger assistance were commonly cited as ways that disabled people were encouraged to travel during lockdown.

There were also reasons why disabled people were cautious to return to using public transport, reasons included a lack of information about service changes, or a fear of being challenged over not wearing a face covering.

Community Transport

Community transport was mentioned by several respondents as an example of good practice during lockdown. In some cases, community transport provided transport to hospital appointments and other local amenities where public transport was not available.

“In North Lanarkshire I have been taken to hospital by community transport and the service level has been great. Bus services were reduced and I would have been too anxious to use the bus.”

“Community transport drivers in my area have been a saviour (Highlands). People shouldn’t have to volunteer to provide transport where the council fails but that the reality over the highlands.”

“Glasgow Community Transport have been great. They have provided a great service since lockdown and I hope they can continue. The drivers are all so helpful and friendly and nothing is any bother.”

“Dial a ride have added drivers and vehicles and stepped in where public transport wasn’t available. The tailored journey and transport had been great.”

“Our local community transport drivers have been a godsend. They have helped with taking me for shopping, bringing my meds and taking me to medical appointments. I would have been lost without them.”

Passenger assistance

Passenger assistance can be crucial to help disabled people to make train journeys. It usually involves a member of staff meeting an individual to escort them safely on or off a train. This service can be booked in advance and has been operating throughout the pandemic, with staff kitted-out with personal protection equipment. Respondents had received good service from ScotRail during this time, helping disabled people continue to travel.

“ScotRail passenger assistance at Queen Street and at Waverley stations has been second to none. They talked through how they would provide assistance when I arrived and even told me about all the COVID safety measures they had introduced.”

“Some of the ScotRail passenger assistance team are really helpful.”

Demographics

As Transport Scotland was particularly keen to hear from people with sensory impairments, the poll gathered data on disabilities. This helps us to identify whether there were issues specific to any group.

Q3: Do you have any of the following conditions which have lasted, or are expected to last at least 12 months? Please tick all that apply. This will help us identify if there are specific issues for different disabilities.

In total, there were approximately 50 respondents who identified as having a sensory impairment.

- A long-term illness – 58% (86 respondents)
- Deaf – 2% (3 respondents)
- Deafness – 3% (5 respondents)
- Hard of Hearing – 5% (8 respondents)
- Deafblindness – 5% (7 respondents)
- British Sign Language User – 2% (3 respondents)
- Blindness – 7% (11 respondents)
- Other vision impairment – 9% (14 respondents)
- A physical disability – 48% (71 respondents)
- A learning disability – 10% (15 respondents)
- A mental health condition – 19% (29 respondents)
- Other – 7% (10 respondents)

Conclusion

The results of this poll indicate that there is a concern among disabled people about returning to public transport. Transport providers could alleviate some fears by ensuring information relating to service changes is made available, and in accessible formats. Concerns over capacity could be rectified by the promotion of smart technology employed by some transport companies, whereby passengers can track their bus and check in

advance how full it is, and whether the wheelchair space is occupied. Of course, not everyone has access to smart-technology and so concessions should be made to assist disabled travellers where possible. There were concerns over the availability of passenger assistance; more so among people with sensory impairments who rely on assistance to board and alight trains. Transport operators could do more to reassure passengers of the steps taken to continue to provide this service safely.

Disability Equality Scotland, September 2020

About Disability Equality Scotland

We are a national charity working to make life more accessible, equal and inclusive for disabled people in Scotland.

We promote access in its widest sense, including access to the built and natural environment and access to the same opportunities as are enjoyed by others in our communities thus promoting a life of dignity, respect, choice and independence. This extends beyond physical access to include access to information, access to inclusive communication and inclusion in decision-making, whether with planners over inclusive design or transport providers about accessible travel.

We represent the views of individuals with any type of impairment, as well as disability organisations and groups who share Disability Equality Scotland's values.

We are also the umbrella organisation for all disability Access Panels in Scotland and the principal provider of support and guidance to the Access Panels presently representing disabled persons at a local level throughout Scotland. Access Panels are committed to improving access and equality in its widest form, which means access to the physical environment, Education, Housing, Health, Transport, Leisure & Recreation and Social Justice amongst other areas.

We are membership led. If you are an individual or an organisation, you can [join our membership](#) for FREE and help to further our aims. We work to influence the policies of the Scottish Government, which affect how disabled people live and we work to encourage others to be inclusive and informed in their attitudes towards disabled people.