



Transport User Panel

Northern: rail passengers' views of customer service

December 2016

Background and aims

- Northern asked us to help them explore their passengers' views and experiences of customer service. We know that the way a train company deals with their customers is important in building passengers' trust.
- This report presents the findings of an online survey using Transport Focus's Transport User Panel. We worked with Northern to determine the 20 questions. The survey received 936 responses from people who had used Northern in the last 12 months. Fieldwork was undertaken between 25 November and 2 December 2016.
- The key aims of the survey were to:
 - understand the importance of customer service to passengers travelling with Northern
 - capture examples from passengers of good and poor customer service
 - explore the impact of good and poor customer service on passengers' opinion of Northern
 - explore ratings of customer service provided by Northern and compare with other sectors.

Executive summary

- More than three quarters of respondents said that customer service on trains and at stations is important. Customer service is more important on the train (87 per cent) than at the station (77 per cent). 76 per cent said it is important at both trains and stations.
- Customer service is not seen as important as cleanliness of the train, the price of the ticket and the punctuality of the train. Punctuality was rated as important by 99 per cent of respondents. This reinforces the importance of delivering the core service effectively and reliably.
- Only 52 per cent of respondents report being satisfied with Northern overall. This compares with the finding that 82 per cent of passengers reported they were satisfied with their last journey (National Rail Passenger Survey, Spring 2016). This supports the finding of Transport Focus's research '[Passengers relationship with the rail industry](#)' which identified a gap between passengers' perception of individual journeys and their overall perception of train companies.

Executive summary (2)

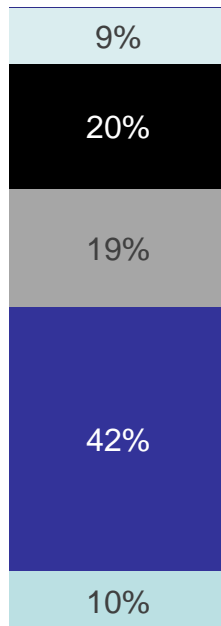
- More than a third (34 per cent) said they had received good/excellent customer service, while 15 per cent had received poor customer service and 58 per cent said neither good nor poor customer service.
- A wide range of examples of both good and bad customer service were provided. Themes included provision of information during disruption, information about ticketing, visibility of staff and staff attitude towards passengers.
- Of those who experienced good customer service, 50 per cent said it made them feel more positive about Northern as a company. However, 69 per cent of those who experienced poor customer service said it made them feel more negative. This seems to show poor customer service has more impact on passengers' opinions of the train company.
- The rating of the customer service provided by Northern compares disappointingly with other sectors. Northern received a similar score to utility companies, but performed worse than airlines, banks and supermarkets.

Overall satisfaction and value for money ratings

Overall satisfaction

Total satisfied 52%

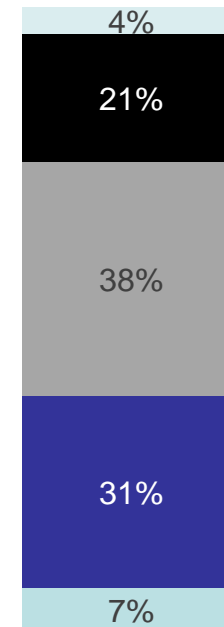
- Don't know
- Very dissatisfied
- Fairly dissatisfied
- Neither / nor
- Fairly satisfied
- Very satisfied



Value for money rating

Total good 38%

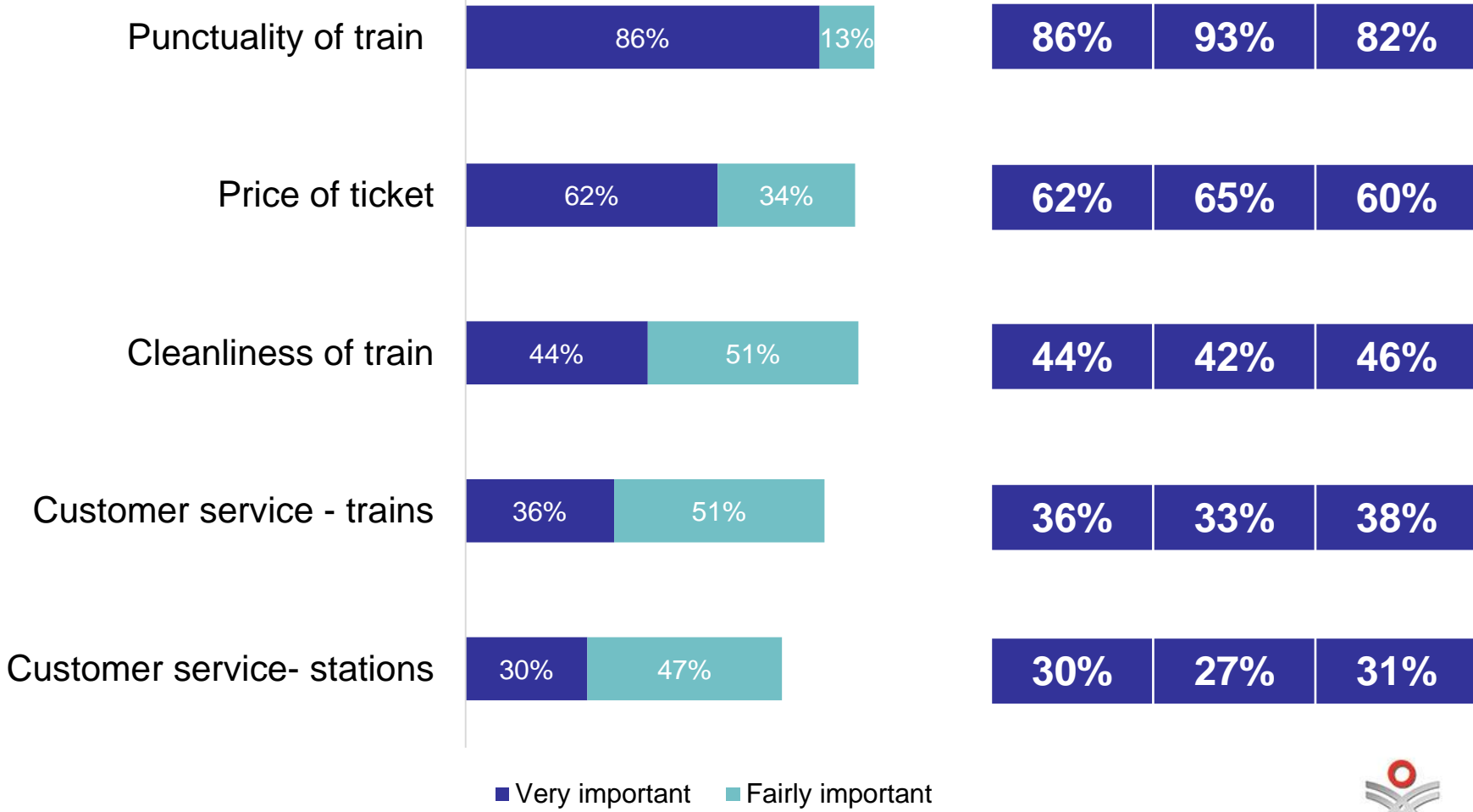
- Very poor VFM
- Poor VFM
- Neither good nor poor VFM
- Good VFM
- Very good VFM



Commuters (44%) less satisfied than non-commuters (57%)
and give lower Value for money ratings (32% v 41%)

Over ¾ think customer service on trains and stations is important

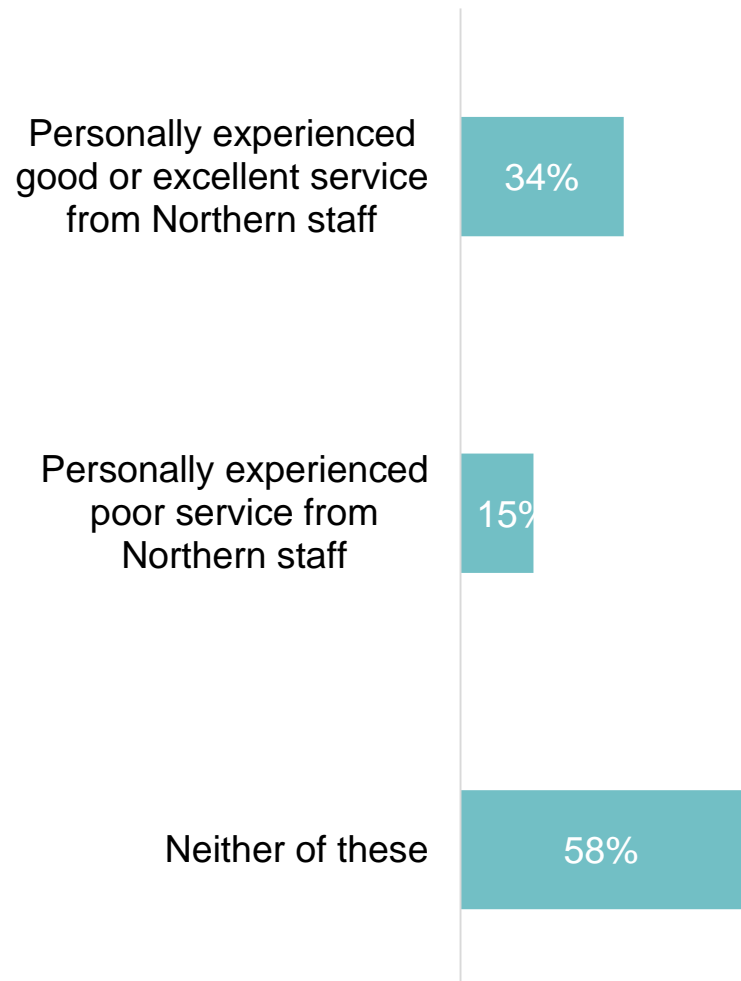
Punctuality stands out as essential factor



Q7 How important are each of the following to you when you travel by train?
Base: all (936)



A third have experienced good or excellent customer service in the last 12 months



	Good or excellent service	Poor service
Commuter	39%	25%
Other journey reason	31%	9%
Under 35	22%	23%
35-54	35%	17%
55+	36%	11%
Very satisfied with Northern overall	64%	4%
Fairly satisfied with Northern overall	37%	8%
Dissatisfied overall	28%	28%

So 39% of commuters have received good or excellent service, and 25% of them poor service



Q8 Thinking about when you have travelled with Northern in the last 12 months, have there been occasions when...
Base: all (936)

Examples of good customer service – during disruption

“The guard on the 08.49 train to Blackburn via Todmorden from Salford Central was helpful, informative and friendly on a day when there were lots of delays. He kept passengers informed and entertained.”

“On the train from Leeds to Carlisle the train crew explained the use of a replacement bus service very clearly. They also chatted to passengers on the journey and helped my husband on and off the train without needing to be asked.”

“On Friday 25 November when the train came to a stand still due to signal problems, staff continual gave announces as to what was happening. Even when there was nothing to report he kept in touch over the tannoy, very re-assuring. He also gave information of how to claim due to the length of time it took to solve the problem.”

“I had planned a holiday in Bamburgh and had to travel by train. Looking online I saw that Saturday trains between Newcastle and Bamburgh were cancelled. As I was travelling with my dog I could not use replacement bus. I mentioned this to a guard on my normal commute and he found alternative travel times for me, and after my holiday checked with me that I had managed to travel.”

“During service disruption, staff were very good at keeping passengers informed, although the quality and accuracy of information being provided to staff appeared to be patchy.”

“During a recent incident which resulted in a delay, the guard kept everyone informed of developments, walking through the train, answering questions, being polite and pleasant to customers.”

Good customer service examples – dealing with anti-social behaviour

“Guard dealt very professionally with an aggressive person and made them get off the train. Guards will often exchange a few pleasant words with you if they are not busy. Guards generally thank me if I have the correct change.”

“A few weeks ago a guard got on a Saturday train to support a younger colleague who was experiencing resistance from several young men who were refusing to buy a ticket. Train, bound for Huddersfield, standing at Stalybridge.”

“The conductor showed concern for the behaviour of two adults on the train. He left the scene but, unknown to the passengers, he rang for BTP assistance at the next station (Bolton). Two BTP officers boarded the train and escorted the troublesome passengers onto the platform. I complimented the conductor afterwards.”

“Very disruptive female passenger seemingly high on drink of drugs and using bad offensive language. The lady conductor tried hard to reason with this obnoxious person, trying to talk to her and deflect her abuse away from other passengers in the carriage. It would have been easy for her to stay out of the way in her rear compartment but she did not. Luckily this woman left the train at Ulverston, but without the intervention of the conductor the situation would have been much worse.”

Good customer service examples – revenue protection

“When ticket office at station is closed, then good experience when purchasing ticket from on board staff who are very helpful. They recognise when there is a genuine reason to purchase on board, and that I am not simply trying to avoid paying.”

“Incorrect class of ticket issued by ticket office (human error). The Northern guard went out of his way to ensure my ticket was valid for my forward journey and to minimise any further hassle.”

“Was travelling on the wrong train but only released when my tickets were checked. The member of staff (can't remember his name unfortunately) was incredibly helpful and reassuring. He made sure I knew where I needed to change and gave me the times of the connections I needed to get to my destination. He couldn't have done more to help. It was in September 2016 on a train leaving Manchester Piccadilly.”

“Polite ticket inspection staff on trains out of Manchester Victoria.”

“Cannot remember when but I count checking tickets as good customer service. Anyone travelling without a ticket is distorting station footfall counts which are very important if I want to justify a better service from my local stations.”

“Last Spring I visited Carlisle for the day, where I had my purse containing my return ticket stolen. The station staff at Carlisle and staff on return journey were exceedingly helpful. The train was late arriving in Shipley and I thought I had missed my connection to Guiseley. However the ticket collector who had dealt with my lost ticket, got off the train at Shipley and shouted to me down the platform that if I was quick I would catch my connection as that too was running late. Thanks to him I rushed to change platforms and caught my connection.”

Good customer service examples - ticketing

“Good customer service is the order of the day at Hazel Grove. There's always a smile and a greeting even if I've already bought a ticket and am just passing through and they're not engaged with another passenger. When booking advanced tickets they always ask about 'airline' or table seats and facing backwards or forwards. No particular time just most times I pass through.”

“The train I originally planned to travel on, off peak, was cancelled meaning a number of other passengers and I had to travel on a peak service train. When we explained this to the conductor he issued off peak tickets. Excellent service and good common sense.”

“I had left my season ticket at home and had to buy a ticket on the train. I went to the station I bought my season ticket from and the ticket man looked into a refund for me including calling his manager. My refund was not straight forward and he told me I had to come on another day to speak to the manager. I came on the day and the refund was processed. Both people were helpful and my refund promptly dealt with. This happened at Menston train station.”

“[name] at Holmes Chapel station always delivers fab customer service! He is always polite, cheerful and always goes out of his way to find the best tickets for myself and my family. He treats us like friends and always has a friendly word for us. Thank you!!”

“[name] in the Guiseley ticket office went out of her way to spend time finding us good seat reservations on a long trip we were doing.”

“A train manager who ensured a group of 6 travellers got the best value ticket.”

Good customer service examples – going beyond the call of duty and showing initiative

“The conductor on the 10.32 MetroCentre to Carlisle train was especially helpful to cyclists on several occasions. He ensured we all carried our bikes safely and used his common sense, rather than the 2 bikes rule in the Northern timetable.”

“When arriving at local station at night conductor asked me if I would be ok getting home.”

“The train began to smoke whilst stopped at a station. The staff acted quickly and quietly to move all passengers to safety and bring the situation under control.”

“Trains were being delayed at Blackpool, the staff member advised me to travel on an earlier train quoting her permission to the conductor if needed. She told me it was best to go early, good advice. Friendly person as well.”

“The good experience was when travelling home, I had hurt my leg and was struggling with bags etc. Help was forth coming and even on and off the train.”

“On one trip there was a conductor from Blackpool North to Preston who was extremely polite, there were some delays, but his personality shone through on the PIS and he was constantly up and down the train making sure everyone was ok and answering any questions as best he could, he also contacted the appropriate people if people had a connecting service to make sure their tickets were accepted on the next train if they missed their connection.”

Good customer service examples – general attitude

“Generally all conductors are friendly, polite and sometimes creative and funny as we arrive into our destination station, which is very welcome.”

“I almost always have an excellent encounter with on-board staff when travelling on Northern Rail services: cheerful, friendly and down-to-earth. Nothing in particular stands out but generally a pretty good team.”

“Despite unreliable rickety running rolling stock the train crews do a great job even when things go wrong.”

“Northern ticket office staff in Bolton station are always helpful and friendly, but in a natural way not forced. Geoff gives particularly good advice on tickets to minimise cost. I've seen on train crew dealing with abusive passengers very well, fair and calm and professional. Station staff at Oxford Road and Bolton are good too, calm fair and helpful.”

“Generally, they will all go out of their way to help you if you have a problem. They are chatty and talkative, and keep you informed when things go wrong.”

“Pleasant staff who talk to you and check tickets to make sure that everyone pays for their travel.”

“The vast majority of Northern staff are very professional, friendly and a credit to the company. Irrespective of time of day so it is difficult to say one time.”

Poor customer service examples – lack of visibility

“On the late running 18.10 from Rochdale to Manchester there was no heating, no working toilet, leaking windows, rowdy drunk people and no sign of the guard, who spent the journey in the rear cab and did not come out until Victoria. No customer service at all on a miserable journey.”

“Guard staying in cab when train was extremely rowdy. More bothered about own safety than their passengers.”

“Unhelpful attitude from platform staff at Salford Crescent. Guards who do not come down the train on Saturdays when full of drunken people (Manchester Victoria to Huddersfield). On Monday, 21 November, no support from station staff at Stalybridge when all trains ceased running due to weather. No information, no idea what we were supposed to do.”

“Conductor on train didn't go through the train to enable me to buy a ticket. Had to queue at the ticket office on the station, wasting my time.”

“Little information available on delay, the cause, likely time to remedy, normal service likely to resume. All staff seem to disappear as soon as a problem occurs.”

“Northern staff are often gruff and not polite. Ticket checks are not always pleasant. Staff are often not visible when you want them to be.”

Poor customer service examples - information

"I was travelling back from Warrington Central to Manchester Piccadilly on the 9 October. When I arrived at Warrington station, there were lots of passengers standing outside waiting for a bus because all the trains had been cancelled. I went to the ticket desk and was told (rather unpleasantly) that I couldn't buy a ticket because of the cancellations. When I asked what was happening, the man at the ticket desk told me that buses were supposed to be coming, but hadn't arrived and that I had to 'wait and see' if a bus would come. There were hardly any staff there giving passengers information. Nobody knew what was going on. I waited about 20 minutes for a bus or some further information, but nothing happened. I ended up taking a taxi to Manchester with three other desperate passengers. A common occurrence when travelling with Northern Rail. Always delays, always cancellations and staff usually unhelpful and rude."

"A few weeks ago we had both snow and a tree on the line near Harrogate but there was little communication with the passengers."

"Poor information when there are serious delays on the network e.g. train failure on 29 Nov 2016. Delays and duration of service disruption are rarely made clear. Stations become crowded with confused customers. Patchy attempts to help people complete their journey."

"Not been informed or offered cheap day return or northern duo tickets when they are available to buy during the day from the station. Instead, I am simply sold the most expensive ticket."

"Train delayed stopped on tracks for over 20 minutes no information from the guard just left wondering what was going on."

Poor customer service examples – revenue inspection / ticket checking

“The revenue collection staff have a difficult job to do but that's no excuse to treat customers like they are all dishonest - there's no need to be surly asking to see the season they cite you've seen every day for several years. The train crew seem to be able to manage politeness and a smile does the same thing.”

“Not bothering to check and issue tickets unless we are approaching barrier controlled stations. Why should I pay more for my ticket (which I always buy) when others ride for free just because the guard cant be bothered to sell tickets? I firmly believe in everyone paying a little so no one has to pay a lot. its a pity that northern doesn't feel the same.”

“Too many times, fare collection is haphazard or non-existent. Proper focus on 100 per cent inspection of tickets would create a better environment and would keep fares down!”

“When they can't be bothered to check tickets on a night. A couple of conductors very rarely check tickets.”

“Ticket collector refused to move someone sitting in my reserved priority seat. I am a disabled passenger and had Pre booked a priority seat as I knew the service would be busy. Ticket collector told me they didn't have authority to remove anyone from a seat even when it had been reserved by another passenger. In the end I told the person sat in my seat that I would sit on them if they didn't move and they eventually moved after a lot of moaning.”

Poor customer service examples – ticket buying rules

“Another horrible occasion was when my wife and I travelled from Salford Crescent to Salford Central without a ticket as there didn't used to be a machine and the ticket office was temporarily closed. On arriving at Salford Crescent and asking to by a ticket the revenue protection people explicitly accused us of lying about our journey, repeatedly telling us that we hadn't come from Salford Crescent and we weren't allowed through the barriers until we'd confessed. It was unbelievable! My wife and I always buy our tickets, usually with a two together railcard, and we are truthful and honest even though we see many people not paying for tickets day in day out.”

“Very rude staff shouting at me and telling me to buy a ticket before I board but my station is unmanned and I can't. I have a staff member telling me to get off the train didn't get off the train very rude.”

“One particular incident stands out - my mCard did not work on one particular morning and I was verbally abused by a Northern Rail member of staff at the ticket gate and basically accused of being a thief for no apparent reason.”

“I am particularly concerned regarding the mixed messages from Northern about it is against the law to not buy a ticket before travel. However my local ticket machine is often out of order and does not take cash. It is unclear where this leaves me in terms of not purchasing a ticket in advance but will buy it from the guard or conductor. I totally accept if there is a ticket office but the legality of a non cash ticket machine is very unclear. At Knaresborough there is only one ticket machine on the Leeds bound platform and nothing on the York bound platform. Connection between the two is via steps and subway. Also the Northern Duo ticket is not available via the ticket machine. The ticket machine is in the open air so when raining passengers are expected to get wet fiddling with reading glasses, credit card etc. Northern currently has a poster campaign with the you must buy a ticket but do not qualify and reasonable exceptions because of the poor facilities they currently offer to passengers.”

Poor customer service examples – interpretation of rules

“I suffer from epilepsy and the conductor removed me from the train without helping me. This has happened on four journeys. The conductors don't help or contact my supporters. The phone numbers can be found in my SOS wrist band. I have video footage of a conductor doing what he did. They don't care. They need training more.”

“On the Sunday of the 2016 Manchester Sky Ride, an overzealous guard stopped families with bikes from boarding the first train from Glossop. She said she was only insured for 2 bikes and became quite aggressive when challenged. The train could easily have accommodated the bikes in the right-hand doorways as we had passed Hattersley and these doors were not needed again till we reached Piccadilly. She spoilt a day out for several families with young children who may well have been deterred from future use of the train.”

“The guard on the train made an announcement over the tannoy in which he blamed (paying!) passengers for the 4-minute delay for 'all trying to get in one door'. It has been a while since I have heard northern staff talk about customers as if they are a nuisance - in earshot of customers! I assumed there had been some sort of directive as I saw this happen on several occasions but hadn't for a while. This latest incident happened last week on an early evening train leaving Leeds. Some guards are quite brusque, but many are jovial which is much appreciated by commuters - a little joke or light-heartedness goes a long way.”

“A conductor told us we weren't allowed to put the toddler in a buggy in the wheelchair space (and had to use a different door), even though Northern's own policy on their website says buggies can use the space when there aren't any wheelchairs in it. I emailed customer services, but haven't had any response.”

Poor customer service examples – general attitude

“No information from station staff, train left without passengers as there was no conductor available, but the train had a driver and 4 other members of staff aboard as it left Victoria. Staff on board the train found this highly amusing. Not impressed and abysmal customer service. When Northern staff think it’s funny to laugh at paying passengers as they leave them on the platform is dreadful.”

“Extremely rude ticket seller who didn't want to give me change because he had run out of 10ps. He expected me to leave the station without my change and didn't see why it was his problem.”

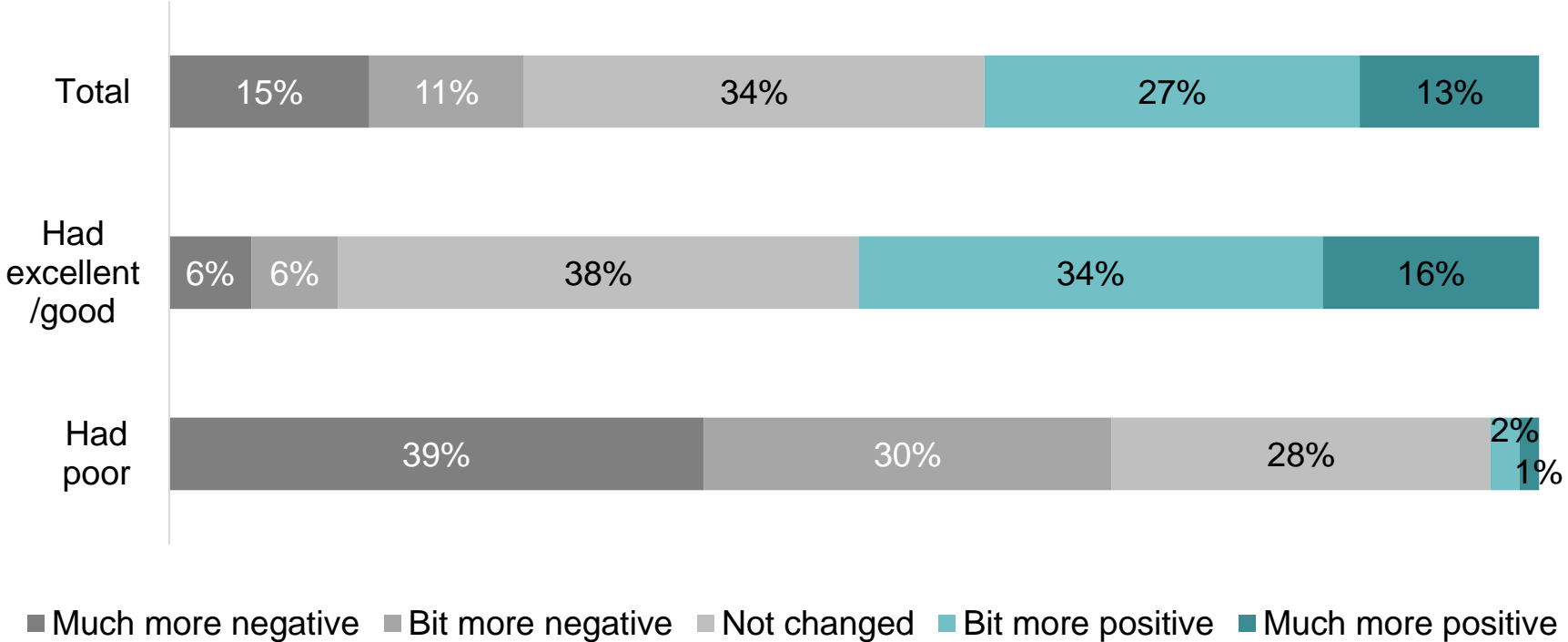
“Train late and when arrived the cleanliness of the train was very poor. Staff seemed disinterested and unapologetic. Complete lack of information.”

“Freezing winter night in Maryport. Had my bike with me. Train arrives, there were suitcases in the bike rack, no bikes. Guard refuses to let me on just saying ring Northern if you're not happy. I'm not moving those cases. Left me stranded in Maryport.”

“Trying to buy a ticket at station while one ticket seller is having a smoke and one is chatting to his girlfriend.”

“Staff being sat on the train talking to each other but letting passengers wait on cold platform for 10 mins before opening the doors.”

Impact of good and poor customer experience on feelings towards Northern



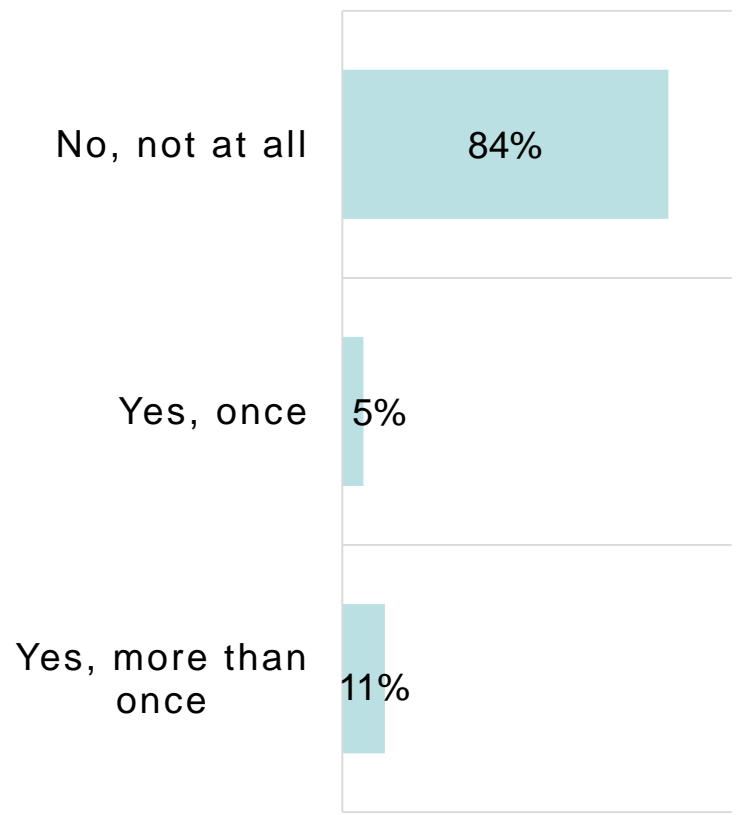
50% of those who have experienced excellent or good customer service say it had a positive impact on feelings towards Northern



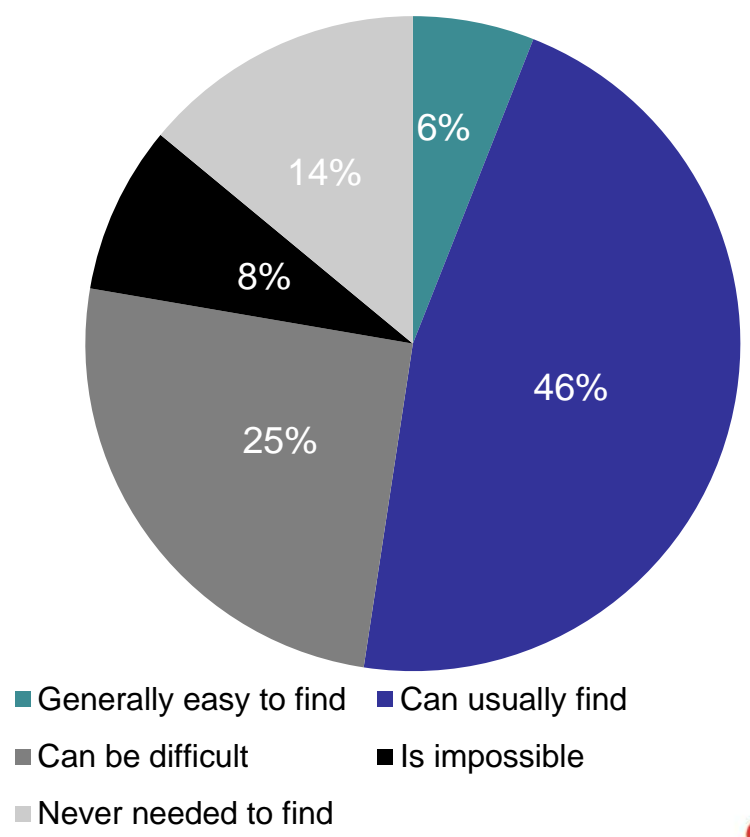
Q11 And thinking overall about the customer experience you have just told us about, how has it made you feel towards Northern as a company
 Base: all who have had good, excellent or poor customer service (390)

Most had no problems getting advice about tickets, although 1/3 report it can be difficult to find staff in station

Had difficulty finding advice on ticket to buy

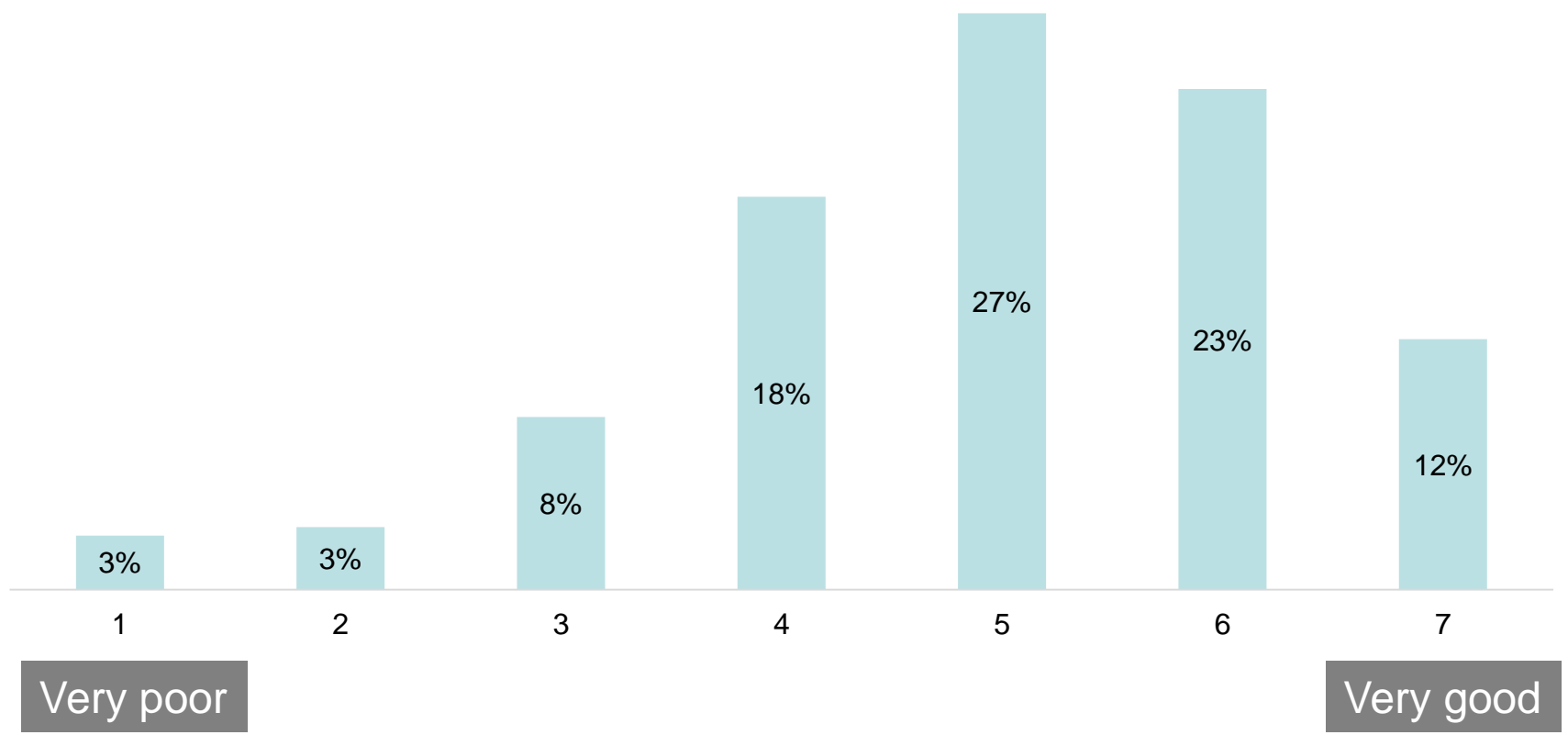


Ease of finding staff who can help at station



Q12 Have you had difficulty in finding advice on which ticket to buy, either on a train or in a station
 Q14 Thinking about when you are at a station and need some help or want to ask a question, which of these applies...
 Base all (963)

Rating of customer service from Northern



Very poor

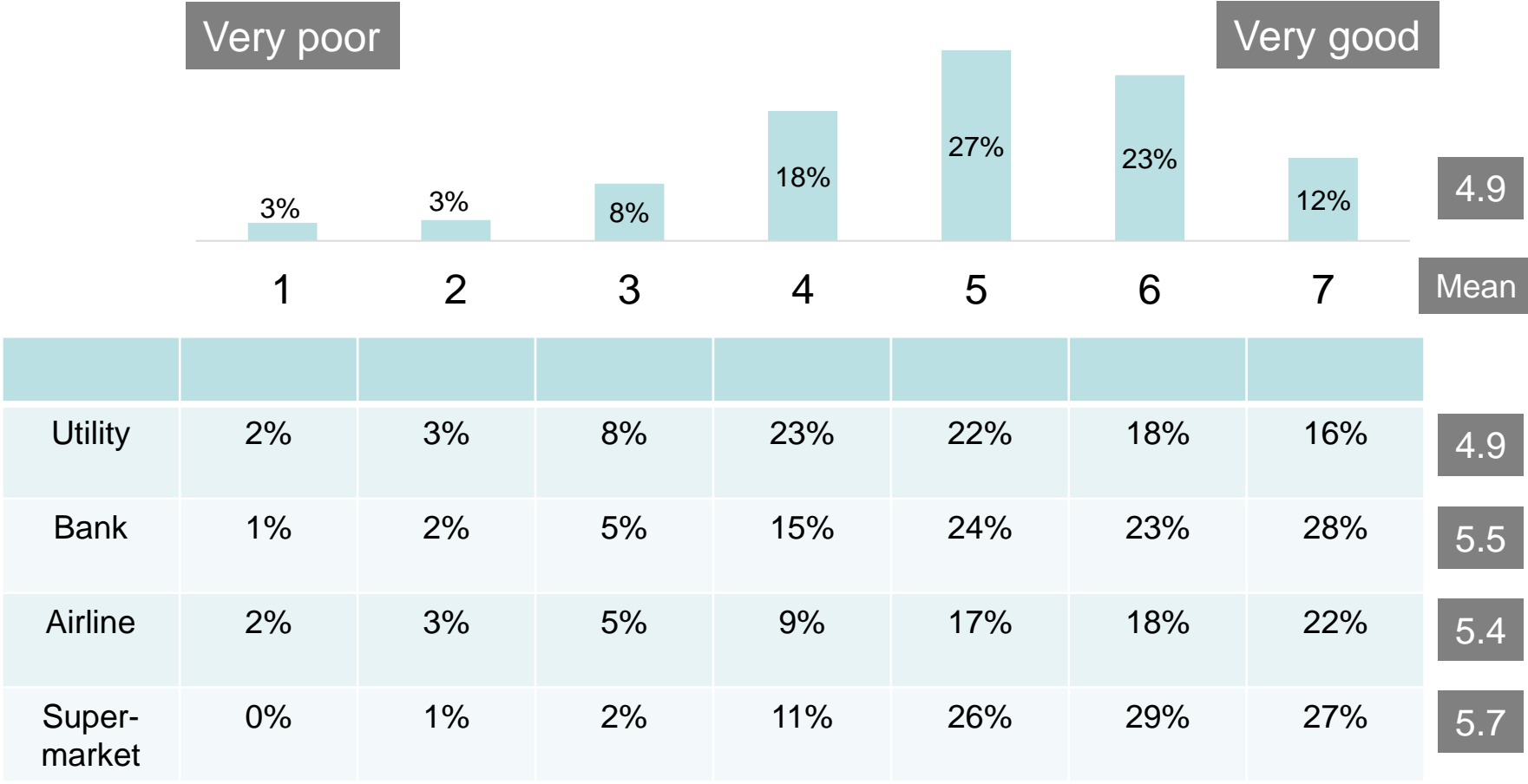
Very good

Mean 4.9 overall
4.8 commuters, 5.0 other reasons

Q15 Thinking about the customer service you get from Northern, how would you rate it on a scale where 1 is very poor and 7 is very good
Base: all (936)



Rating of customer service from Northern – compared with other companies

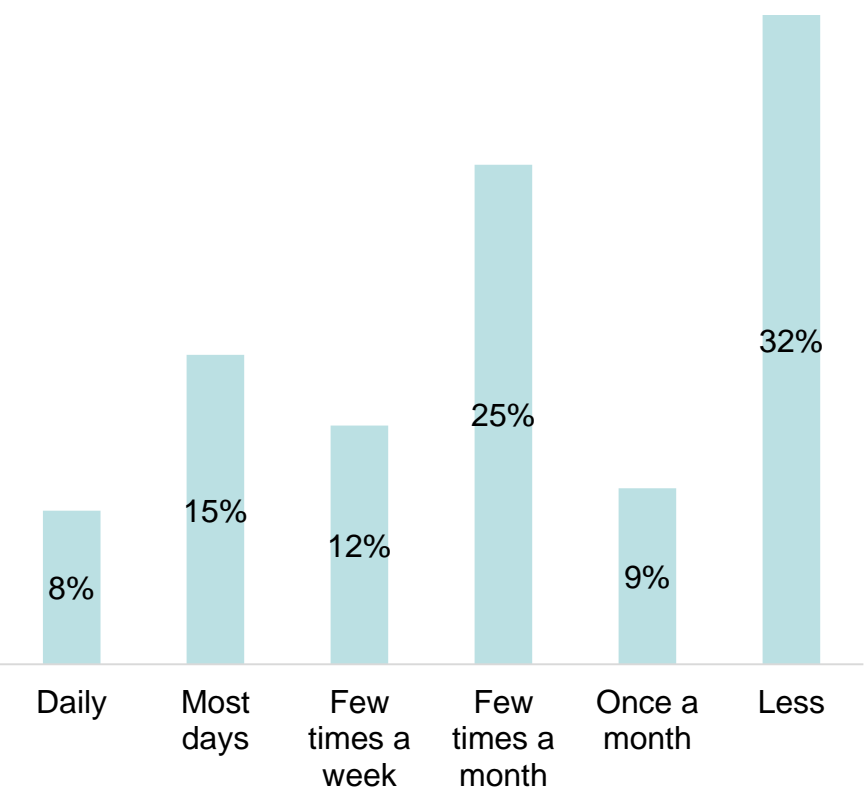


Q16 using the same scale, how would you rate the customer service you get from ...
 Base: all (936)

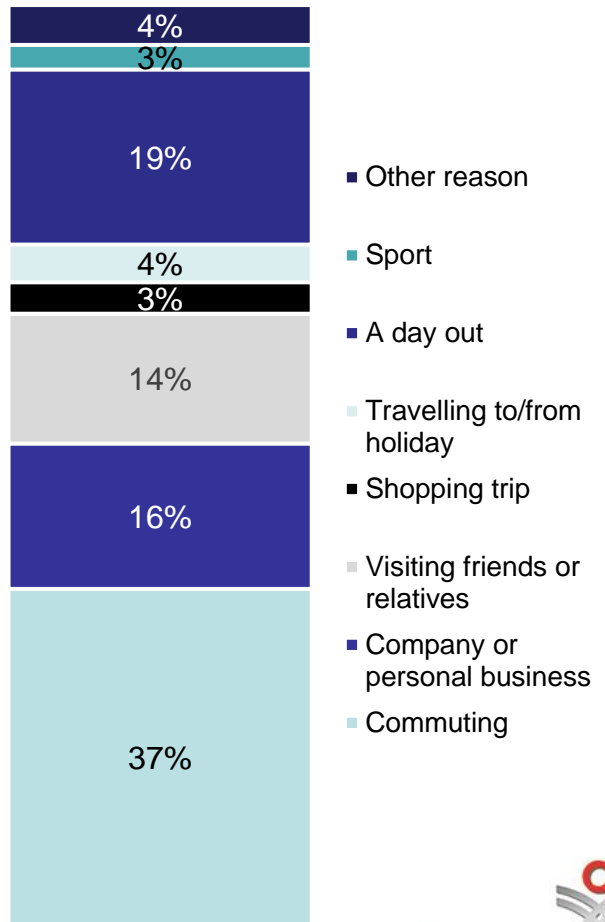
Appendix

A third travel with Northern at least a few times a week – commuting being the most common reason

Frequency of using Northern

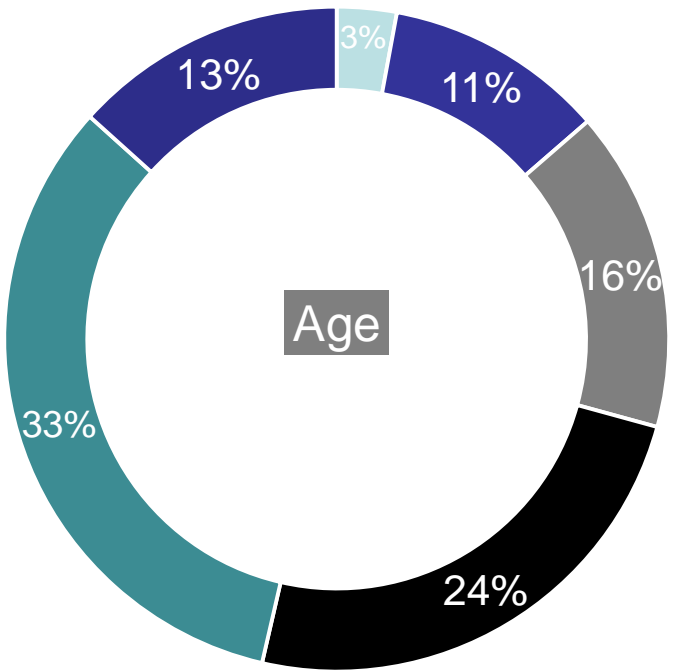


Main reason for use



Q3 And how often on average do you travel on trains operated by Northern?
 Q4 Which of the following represents your main reason for travelling with Northern?
 Base: all (936)

Demographics – sample achieved reflects that of the Transport User Panel



■ 16 - 24 ■ 25 - 34 ■ 35 - 44 ■ 45 - 54 ■ 55 - 64 ■ 65 +

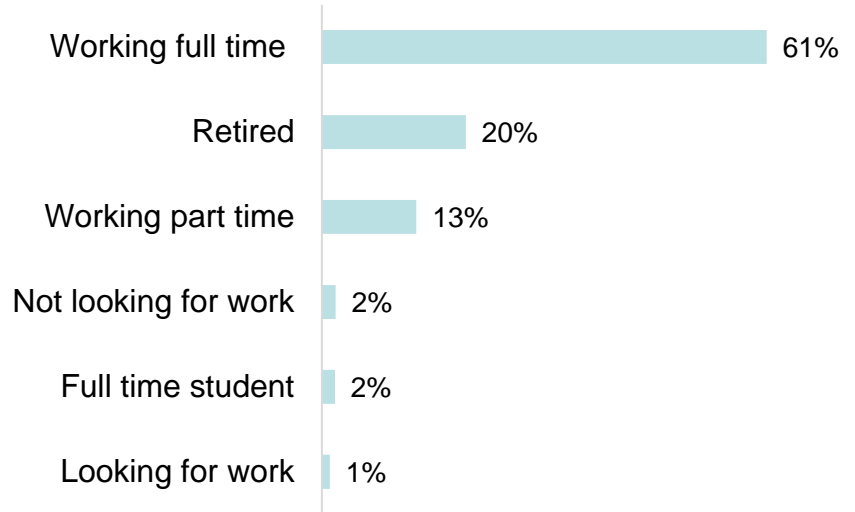
Panel profile of Northern users	
16 - 24	4%
25 - 34	14%
35 - 44	19%
45 - 54	27%
55 - 64	32%
65+	2%

Gender



Panel profile of Northern users	
Male	60%
Female	40%

Working status



Base: all (936)