



Transport User Community

Scientific evidence of safety on public transport

October 2020

What did we ask our community?

The Rail Safety and Standards Board

The Rail Safety and Standards board have published a statistical model about the estimated risk of Covid-19 infection on rail. We asked the community to read and digest this information, and give feedback on whether or not this information is helpful and reassuring.

In addition, do passengers want to see more scientific information of this type in public discourse? Is it helpful, and does it give an accurate and usable picture of risk that passengers can act upon?

Who is in our rail community?

60

people using rail to commute prior to Covid-19



Across England, Scotland and Wales



Mix of payment methods



Mix of those currently using rail and not using rail



A spread of age, gender and ethnicity



Some have disabilities

Who is in our bus community?

60

people using bus prior to Covid-19



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Mix of payment methods



Mix of those currently using bus and not using bus



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Issues of presentation and clarity aside, the community is glad to see that scientific analyses of risk exist

Evaluating this information revealed the importance of an independent body giving an impartial picture of risk

- **The material was refreshing.** Most had never seen an independent and not-for-profit organisation discussing the relative safety of rail in the context of Covid-19 and presented a helpful contrast from what many saw as confusing information from government and train operating companies.
- **The report was seen as a proactive and honest step,** and the fact that the report does not make any recommendation about whether or not to travel feels empowering – rail passengers felt informed, rather than ‘pushed’ towards travelling.
- If this information were to be disseminated more widely, however, it would need to be reduced down to its **key findings.** Few, if any, were interested in the underlying methodology – it was usually sufficient to know that an impartial and independent body was involved in the report and that there are no conflicting interests at play.

“I think whatever the information, this is done with a fine balance of being informative without pressing the ‘scare factor’ button. Most reasonable people could comprehend this but a vulnerable person could be more anxious.”

Male, 38, Scotland

“Given the volumes of people coming into Cardiff each day as Winter draws in, the heating and the contaminated services, it wouldn’t encourage me to take the risk.”

Female, 52, Wales

“I don’t feel like the conclusions are valid because we’re dealing with such an unknown entity and the variables are too wide-ranging to make a true estimate anyway – No, I don’t trust them.”

Female, 53, North West

“I’m really impressed with this. I think it’s a very important thing to have put out. Of course it would have been rushed and there are lots of variables to model but it shows a great start and shows that the train companies are thinking outside of the box on what information people care about.”

Female, 22, South East

Attitudes towards the underlying science varied significantly depending on attitudes towards risk

Zero tolerable risk

For a minority of respondents, **there is no tolerable risk threshold for COVID-19 transmission**. Even the more optimistic statements of a very low personal risk of transmission do not have an impact, and these respondents will continue to avoid rail until there is a vaccine. Conversely, some respondents accept the risk 'as is' and do not need this level of precision to inform their travel – many, indeed, do not feel they have a choice.

The problem with 'models'

Several respondents took issue with 'modelling' the COVID risk as opposed to reporting it based on prior observation and tracing. They recognise that the figures presented were an estimate, rather than an observed value, and this can undermine confidence in the report.

'My train is different'

There is a strong sense, particularly among respondents living in the North, that the situation will not be uniform across the country. **Areas under local lockdown** are assumed to have a significantly higher risk of transmission on rail, and even a scientific report cannot counter the lived experience of seeing a crowded train, a busy platform or lapses in mask wearing.

Unobserved variables

Several point out that issues like waiting time at the station and the impact of delays are not covered by the report. Respondents tended to focus on the risk of a 'worst case scenario' journey, rather than a more typical one. Any scientific information should aim to reassure passengers about the **risk of a journey gone wrong**, rather than an average one.

For some, the most credible source of information would be a health body, not a transport one

The community is accustomed to, and almost universally trusts, health information from the NHS. Even when the information comes from an independent industry body, the community is not used to accepting health-related advice from sources of this nature. The endorsement of Public Health England or the NHS would help build trust.

At present, the report does not represent a call to action – it has not changed the mind of any respondents already predisposed against travelling, whether in the rail or bus community. It helps those who are travelling do so with a little more confidence, however. Endorsement from named medical professionals would go some way towards a more reliable and reassuring set of conclusions.

“I think the RSSB is a credible source but it might be more credible or reassuring if it had come from a health background instead. I’d imagine there’s a different rate for buses so I’d want to see information specifically for buses – there’s more contact, even indirect, on bus journeys.”

Female, 22, South West

“I don’t really trust a word of it – it reminds me of the old adage ‘lies, damned lies and statistics.’ I’ve had so much guff spouted at me over the last six months and the risk to me is a value that can’t be calculated.”

Male, 65, North West

“The risk of infection is good odds if you’re betting with money. But I’m not betting with money. Travelling by rail exposes me to a virus that could kill me and my family.”

Male, 57, South East

“I thought the analysis was very interesting but not practical as it doesn’t consider the waiting time within a station and therefore the risk of catching Covid. But I’m sure they did the necessary due diligence.”

Male, 53, South East

The bus community responded positively to the report and want to see similar information applied to the bus

Generally, the community feels that the conclusions of the report are likely to be broadly similar for bus travel

- A few argued that the bus is likely to be less COVID-secure than rail, given their experiences of smaller space and preconceptions of the bus being less clean than the train.
- As with the rail community, there was a strong sense that such a report needs to be based on 'what's actually happening' – i.e. a more realistic picture of crowded buses, delays and some sense of explicitly accounting for the worst-case scenario.

“First impressions are good- it’s nice to see some documented action being taken for safety on trains during the pandemic. It makes me feel like it’s being taken seriously. I do think buses are different because they’re smaller and have more people packed into a smaller space.”

Female, 24, York and Humber