



Transport User Community

Bus and rail priorities

November 2020

What did we ask our community?

Priorities for the future

Both the bus and rail communities were shown previous research by Transport Focus indicating the (pre-Covid) priorities that transport users felt were important:

- [Rail passengers' priorities for improvement](#)
- [Bus passengers' priorities for improvement](#)

Does the community feel that these priorities have changed in light of Covid-19? Has the pandemic created new priorities among rail and bus users?

And, how can bus and rail companies demonstrate that these priorities, new or old, are being met?

Executive summary



Safety is now a central priority for the bus community as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic

- Safety has emerged as a new and vital priority for bus. The community see this being supported by regular cleaning, enforcement of face-coverings and greater prevalence of the government guidelines on buses and at the bus stop
- Information and the quality of bus apps have increased in importance. Forward-planning has become more important for this community.



As with bus, safety has emerged as a central priority for rail passengers, with pre-Covid priorities supporting this

- While punctuality, reliability, seating and frequency remain the 'core' of what rail users want, the community has realised that these metrics now serve a different purpose. In addition to a smooth journey, these priorities are now understood as helping to deliver a safe and COVID-secure one.
- Regular cleaning of the trains is an additional priority that supports to overall feeling of 'safety'. Its importance has surged, relative to other priorities. This is likely to persist beyond the pandemic – doubts over whether or not the pandemic will ever truly 'end', and a cultural shift towards greater care over hygiene and health are likely to keep cleanliness high on the list.

Who is in our rail and bus communities?

60|60

60 people using rail to commute and 60 using bus prior to Covid-19



Across England, Scotland and Wales



Mix of payment methods



Mix of those currently using public transport and those not



A spread of age, gender and ethnicity



Some have disabilities

Covid-19 safety has emerged as a new and highly important priority for bus

The community see this as being 'controllable' on the bus

- Having the physical presence of the driver more apparent on the bus strikes many as a wasted opportunity to proactively encourage and enforce social distancing on the bus.
- The bus community mentioned police and marshal enforcement playing a role in maintaining a safe environment
- It should be noted that the community would rate safety higher than other, more conventional priorities for the duration of the pandemic and not just during the second wave.
- The bus stop emerged as a valuable (and missed) opportunity to reinforce social distancing guidelines before passengers board. The community does not feel as though the guidelines are prominent enough at this stage of the journey.
- Some argued that ventilation is its own priority in a pandemic context. Whether this is achieved through a more consistent 'open window' policy on the bus, or demonstrably enhanced air conditioning system is unclear.

“I think the priorities are more or less the same – perhaps more buses should be in operation to spread the amount of people on the bus at any one time. A further priority would be cleanliness and ventilation.”

Female, 28, North West

“I think the pandemic will have long-lasting effects on the population – I will definitely be more cautious in the future about my health than I was before – and I think friends and family will be too!”

Female, 21, South East

“I agree with the priorities and they haven’t changed since COVID – my top priorities are having accurate us times on the app, having them turn up on time and having an ETA as well.”

Female, 40, Midlands



Passenger information emerged as a major priority for the bus community

Concerns about the quality and clarity of scheduling information were mentioned over the course of the bus community

- The community feels that they have experienced errors and hiccups in apps for a long time. Passengers would like to see timetabling information, journey planning and ticketing information integrated more seamlessly into bus providers' apps.
 - Others point out that information on how much space is expected on the bus should be included on the apps, better reinforcing social distancing guidance and helping passengers plan their journeys effectively.

“I think the priorities have changed dramatically now. My top three would be social distancing, masks and the bus being safe – free of germs on hand rails and seats, and onboard sanitiser.”

Female, 22, South East

“I would want clear signage on the buses and around bus stops to inform users about what steps are being taken to make the buses COVID-safe”

Male, 25, North West

“I think one of the things bus companies could do is put more hand sanitiser by the entrance and people would see then that they are doing something. They could add more buses and add new routes.”

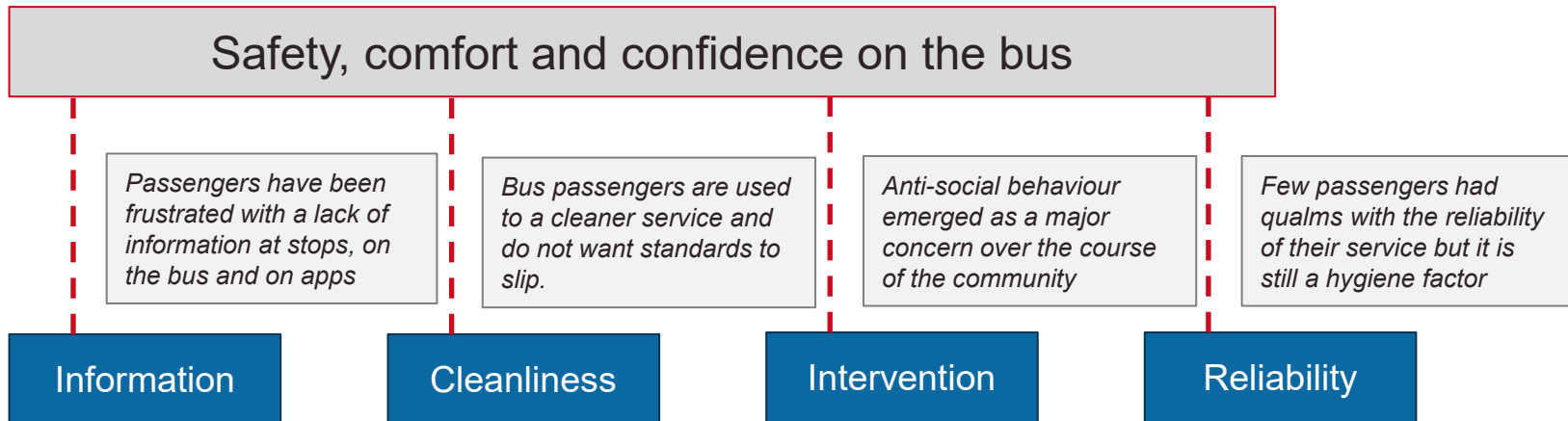
Female, 48, Midlands



Bus travellers see new priorities emerging

Bus passengers are seeing a watershed moment, causing them to re-evaluate what they value on public transport

As such, lots of smaller frustrations came to the forefront, beyond the core of punctuality, reliability and value for money. Behavioural interventions go beyond simply face-mask enforcement – passengers have always been frustrated with the degree of antisocial behaviour on their routes and more authority conferred on bus drivers would be valuable. These new priorities are likely to persist after the pandemic, re-framed into priorities around comfort and confidence in the service as a whole.



“I think these things need to be implemented sooner rather than later and having easily read information on TV or board advertising to communicate that the correct steps are being taken – otherwise what’s the point?”

Male, 29, Scotland

“I think the priorities stay the same with the pandemic but maybe the order changes a bit. More buses during peak times, better value for money and ‘next bus’ displays at the bus stop. I find it very annoying when that information isn’t easily viewable.”

Female, 24, York and Humber

“My top three priorities are: cleaner buses, more seating space, and stricter rules, especially for schoolchildren. I’d like to see more buses on time, and cheaper – who wouldn’t!”

Male, 20, North West



Bus passengers want to experience improvements to their journeys when it comes to cleanliness and safety, rather than see them measured on paper

Bus passengers are not accustomed to seeing performance measures on their local routes

- Developments and enhancements to bus providers' apps are readily demonstrable and concrete:
 - Live timetables
 - 'Best ticket' suggestions
 - Congestion and 'how busy is my bus' information
 - Journey planners
- Cleanliness and safety are 'experienced' rather than measured. Social media activity can demonstrate that regular cleaning is taking place.
- Punctuality and performance were rarely criticised, but universally recognised as important.
 - As one respondent put it, passengers are well-accustomed to a 'fuzzy' approach to bus timings, and 'to-the-minute' punctuality did not emerge as a major concern.

Many in the rail community felt that trains have not lived up to the pre-Covid priorities for some time

- Those respondents who are not currently using rail will continue to work from home and let their usage of rail lapse – they do not feel a vested interest in whether rail ‘gets it right’ with regards to these priorities.
 - A handful argue that priorities for rail should focus on the people who *need* to use the train: key workers, those who cannot work from home, or elderly and vulnerable people.
 - In the community’s view, more and more rail travel is discretionary, and some argue that priorities should favour those whose journeys are not.
- For most, however, the pandemic represents a watershed moment and a chance for rail to meet its *pre-existing* commitments in terms of the standard priorities: Punctuality, reliability, capacity and seating. In this sense, little has changed, but with cleanliness added high up the list.

“I do agree with the priorities – trains arriving on time is very important, especially for disabled passengers. Reasonable prices and comfort, especially on longer journeys...A safe, clean, reasonably priced and punctual train.”

Female, 64, South East

“Cleaning was still important, prior to COVID-19, but the emphasis now on cleaning is of greater importance than ever. Have a poster on the train stating when it was last cleaned – date and time.”

Male, 45, North West

“I think we all want a reliable and punctual service – and if you are paying for a full ticket you want a seat! Actions speak louder than words and for far too long the travelling public have had to put up with a dire service.”

Male, 65, North West



Covid-19 safety has surged to become the most important priority on rail, at least for the next year

Passengers have always felt that they deserved a clean and comfortable train, but have not always had one, and some in the community feel that the pandemic will be with us for years to come – intensifying the need to feel ‘safe’ on the train.

- Seeing that trains can indeed be held to a much higher standard of cleanliness than they have been in the past, questions emerge about why this standard wasn’t upheld all along, pre-COVID.
- The community has seen scientific information about the (relatively low) risk of infection on rail. However, they still feel that cleaning needs to be more frequent, more thorough, and face-covering wearing more rigorously enforced.
 - Cleanliness has become a signifier of comfort and reliability as much as safety
 - When passengers talk about cleanliness, they often argue that COVID has ‘revealed’ the need for a clean train, rather than ‘created it’ afresh. There is something more fundamental here: passengers do not want to see the standard of cleanliness slip for the foreseeable future.
- Having the ability to socially distance on the train will continue to be a priority for some.
- The community does not have a concrete view on how social distancing can be achieved, but more carriages and more frequent trains were felt to be intuitive ways of enabling social distancing.

“I was using the train two months ago, going into the office twice a week. At the start, if it was clean, I felt safe, but as this didn’t keep up, I went back to using my car and I haven’t been on the train for over a month now.”

Female, 40, Scotland

“All of these priorities are valid and remain valid once the crisis comes to an end. Reliability and punctuality will always be of paramount importance.”

Male, 53, South East

“It’s impossible for rail companies to demonstrate that they’re doing this because anything they say is going to be completely overshadowed by the threat to people’s health. No one who can work from home is going to travel, including me.”

Male, 57, South East



“I think a new category of ‘social distancing’ on the train may have come high in the top ten if the survey had been done again now.”

Male, 57, South East

“I would consider cleanliness as a very important feature now and going forward – it doesn’t end if the pandemic is over. They should continually evidence that they are providing a safe and clean environment.”

Male, 65, South West

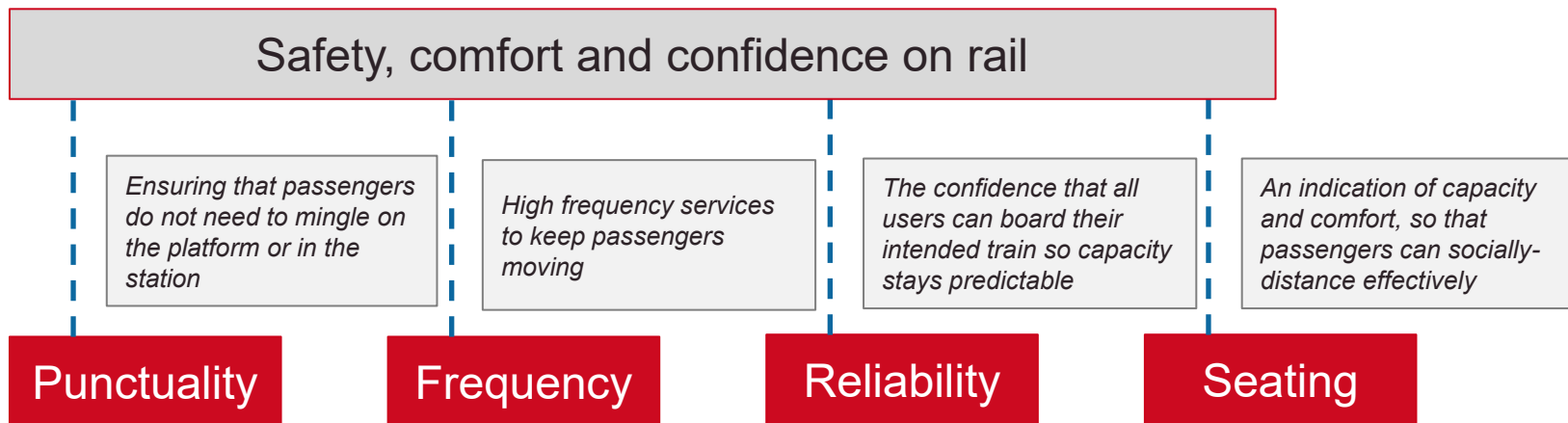
“I think that reliability is more of a priority now – there are fewer spontaneous trips and advance tickets are more numerous. The emphasis may be in getting the core of people to work that definitely need to use the train.”

Male, 42, Scotland



However, all pre-Covid priorities are recognised as feeding into the overall construct of ‘safety’

Post-pandemic, most argue that the overall sense of safety will continue to be important. It may change slightly to encompass feelings like ‘comfort’ or ‘confidence’ in public transport, but few are willing to concede that the need to feel safe will decline, even if the pandemic does. The old priorities have to some extent been *re-framed* to feed into safety, serving a dual purpose:



“I think that COVID has highlighted the need for cleanliness and an additional priority is the ability to social-distance. Rail companies need to actively show us that they are considering our safety.”

Female, 45, North West

“In my opinion passengers would cite sufficient personal space in carriages as a paramount concern. No way could I squeeze myself into an overly packed train like a sardine these days, like I was doing at the start of the year.”

Female, 53, Wales

“People will no longer stand for the rubbish service that we had prior to COVID that we put up with because there was no alternative. No more overcrowded services. Get more carriages, more trains running frequently and make everyone feel safe.”

Female, 52, Wales



The community wants rail companies to demonstrate more clearly how these priorities are being met

The community continues to argue that rail companies need to communicate their actions more loudly – using every channel available to them

- Passengers want to continue to see punctuality and performance measures quantified and published.
- More 'subjective' priorities such as cleanliness need to be demonstrated more upfront. Passengers want to see evidence of the cleaning process actually taking place – many complain that they have never seen a cleaner on the train (with the exception of staff collecting litter).
- Social media posts were recommended as a way of demonstrating cleanliness in action.

Those not currently travelling by train acknowledge that there is a slight dilemma – they will only trust that rail is safe and reliable based on their own experience, but they are unlikely to travel.

“It's always difficult for rail companies to show how they are acting on the priorities set out by customers. Data can often be misleading. Passengers would need to see for themselves that the trains run on time, are clean, safe and that prices are not rising too much. However, in the current crisis, where many people are not using public transport, this could prove difficult.”

Male, 53, South East