

Park and ride for Highways England's roads:

a solution to congestion? November 2020



Foreword



This study, undertaken before the spring 2020 coronavirus lockdown, explored user and non-user views about how park and ride could help to reduce the number of car journeys on the motorways and 'A' roads managed by Highways England – the strategic road network (SRN). In essence it asked the question 'could park and ride offer an alternative to driving all the way on the SRN for longer distance trips?'

The findings mirror other research by
Transport Focus. Passengers on scheduled
buses want punctual services; so do users of
park and ride buses. Potential users highlighted
that park and ride sites should be signed well,
easy to access and free from congestion. A key
barrier to use is awareness that park and ride
offers a viable alternative for some journeys.
Stakeholders said that sites must be in the right
place to intercept journeys that would otherwise
be made by car.

This research has highlighted the potential for park and ride to offer alternatives for those using Highways England's roads, which could help alleviate congestion. However, to be successful it

must offer an advantage, as judged by the user, over driving the whole way. Advantages include faster journey time, comfort, relieving 'hassle' and avoiding paying expensive parking charges. Clearly, social distancing requirements and people's current appetite to travel will both have implications for the attractiveness of park and ride, as for all public transport.

We have made a number of recommendations in light of this study, set out later in the report. It is worth noting that, although the primary focus of this work was about relieving pressure on Highways England's roads, many of the findings are equally applicable to park and ride as an alternative to town and city centre parking.

Transport Focus will use this insight to inform its policy in relation to development of the third Road Investment Strategy (2025-30), highlighting how Highways England might better offer its customers the choice not to drive the whole way on the SRN for some journeys.

Guy Dangerfield

Head of strategy, Transport Focus



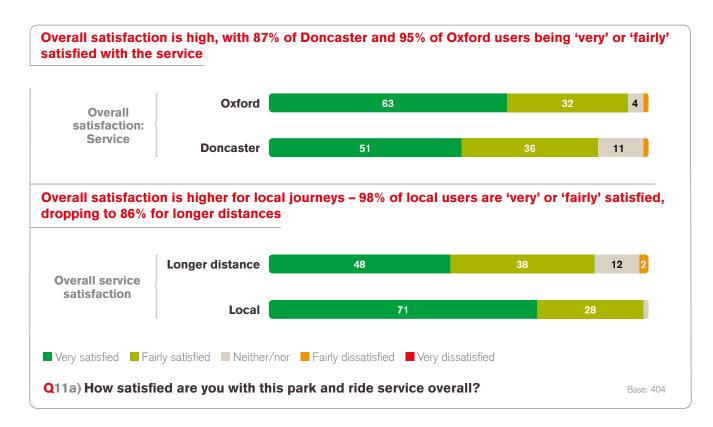
Background – research locations

Two locations with established park and ride facilities were identified for research: Oxford Thornhill and Doncaster South (Parrot's Corner). They were selected as of interest in their own right, but also as proxies for potential park and ride locations elsewhere. They were both served by buses/ coaches offering longer distance journey opportunities as well as traditional 'into town' options. Qualitative research used focus groups to explore user and non-user views and also involved non-users trying out services. Quantitative research involved a survey of over 400 users.

Key Findings

User experience and satisfaction with park and ride

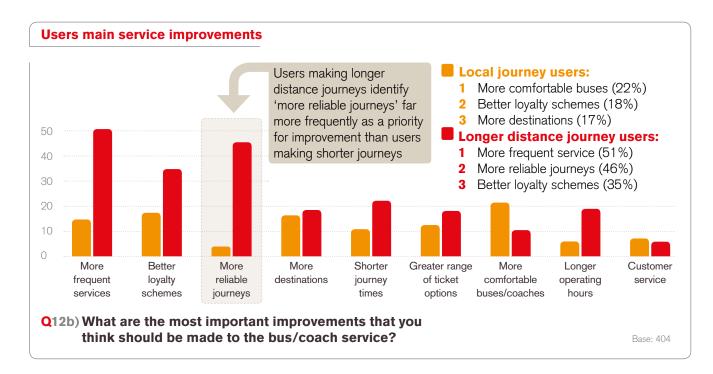
Satisfaction is high among those who use park and ride, whether for short trips into town or longer distance journeys. It is also high among those current non-users of park and ride who tried it out for this project. Around nine in 10 existing users were 'very' or 'fairly' satisfied with the park and ride experience overall.



Nine out of 10 existing users were 'very' or 'fairly' satisfied with the park and ride. Given the high levels of satisfaction among those using it, a key consideration for growing park and ride use is promoting it more effectively.

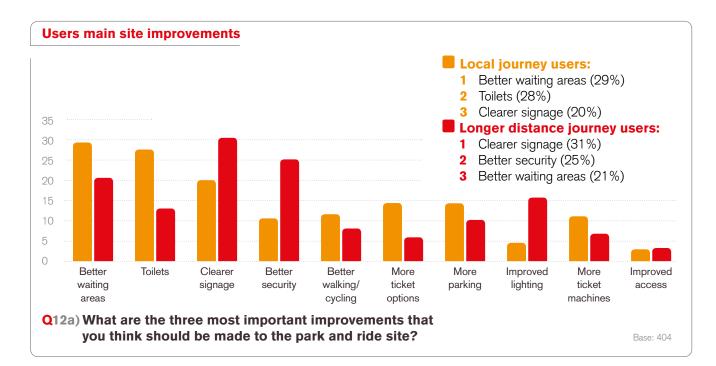
Users of longer distance services highlight higher frequency (51 per cent) and better reliability (46 per cent) as their top two priorities for improvement to the 'ride'

element. Options for loyalty schemes were highlighted by 35 per cent of longer distance users.



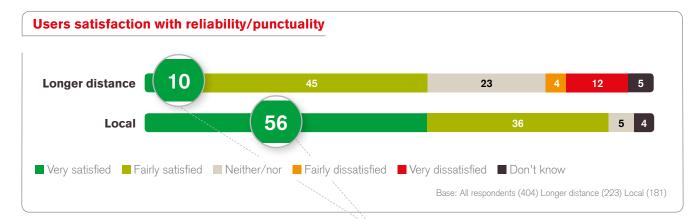
Differences emerged between the two locations and between types of user when we asked about improvements to the 'park' element. Doncaster users most commonly identify waiting areas (34 per cent) and toilets (33 per cent) as among their top three priorities

for improvement, whereas Oxford users most commonly identify signage (33 per cent) and security (23 per cent). Longer distance users highlight clearer signage (30 per cent) and better security (25 per cent) as key areas for improvement.



The survey highlights that there is room for improvement in frequency and reliability of the 'ride' element, particularly for longer journeys. The table below shows

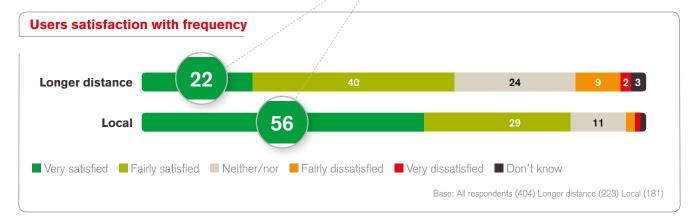
lower satisfaction with the reliability and punctuality of longer distance services with 55 per cent being 'very' or 'fairly' satisfied.



Our research shows higher satisfaction with frequency on local journeys, with 85 per cent being 'very' or 'fairly' satisfied. This drops to 62 per cent for longer distance journeys.

Users of longer distance services at both locations highlight higher frequency and better reliability as their top two preferences for improvements.

The satisfaction scores highlight that there is room for improvement on longer distance journeys.



Park and ride users often said that journeys were slower than they would have liked, particularly for longer journeys. Non-users who tried the service also highlighted this.

"Incredibly slow. Yes, there was traffic, but not a huge amount."

Give Park and Ride a Go, Oxford

Longer journey time is potentially a critical barrier to park and ride reducing car trips on the SRN, particularly when factoring in the time taken to get to the park and ride site. However, if the journey time is good, and known to be good, it could be a powerful motivator to consider park and ride instead of driving all the way.

Usage and awareness of park and ride

The research found that an overarching reason for nonuse of park and ride, for both short and longer distance journeys is lack of knowledge about it and of the benefits that it could bring (such as cost, ease of use, reliability, comfort, environmental).

The research showed gaps in understanding of key aspects of park and ride, but particularly among less frequent and potential users. Potential users said they were not always sure how to purchase a ticket and some were unsure whether they would need cash to do so. There was almost no awareness of the variety of ticket options, and there was low awareness of the frequency of buses and operating times. In Doncaster, potential users were largely unaware that park and ride buses went to Sheffield. However, in Oxford there was general awareness that coaches ran to London.

"I didn't know you could park up there and get a bus into Sheffield."

User, Commuter, Doncaster

"We used that bus to go up to town (London) last year."

Potential, Leisure, Oxford

"I think in the Oxford Mail they might have the odd advert now and again."

User, Commuter, Oxford

"The only thing I can remember is on the bus itself. It says on them park and ride."

Potential, Commuter, Doncaster

What's stopping people from using park and ride?

In the quantitative survey, the focus groups and feedback from those we asked to 'give park and ride a go' all highlight the same triggers and barriers, whether someone is an existing or potential user.



A key overarching reason for current non-use of park and ride by potential users – for both short and longer distance journeys – is lack of awareness that it exists, of how to use it and of the benefits it could bring. Negative assumptions about it as a travel option, such as the perceived 'hassle' compared to a journey by car or train, and fears around punctuality and reliability are also key reasons for non-use.

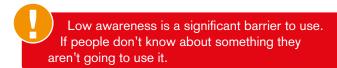
"I'm so confused about what tickets you can buy and where... It's too confusing!"

Potential, Commuter, Oxford

A range of barriers to using park and ride were evident among potential users, with a key differentiator being whether or not journeys are time-critical.

Time-critical and non time-critical barriers stopping people from using park and ride

Time critical journeys		Non time-critical journeys	
1	Fears about reliability/ punctuality	1	Perceived convenience/ 'hassle' versus car/train
2	Perceived convenience/ 'hassle' versus car/train	2	Cost/value for money (especially if multiple people travelling)
3	Control over own journey	3	Personal safety on site
4	Personal safety on site	4	Safety of vehicle on site
5	Safety of vehicle on site	5	Comfort of car over bus
6	Longer journey times versus car	6	Fears around practical issues – luggage/buggy storage/seating
7	Accessibility (mobility impaired)	7	Fears about reliability/punctuality
8	Relative cost (car versus park and ride)	8	Site facilities
9	Comfort and privacy of car over bus	9	On-board facilities
10	On-board facilities	10	Disturbance on bus



Transport Focus research on 'Getting to and from the airport. Is coach an option?" also found people are not always aware of all the options and there is a tendency to revert to a mode used in the past.

"I don't know where they go, I don't know what the speed is. But if I had information, then I'd know!"

Potential, Commuter, Doncaster

¹ https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/getting-airport-coach-option/

The relative importance of other barriers varies depending on journey type and time of day. Congestion on the roads is less important for non time-critical journeys, but it can be a problem for longer journeys as the knock on effect on journey time can be greater. Use of dedicated bus lanes by park and ride vehicles helps as they are associated with reliability, important for time-critical commuting.

"I'd say timing out of anything.
Because if there isn't bus lanes you're going to be in the same traffic."

Potential, Commuter, Doncaster

When a journey is longer distance the on-board facilities and comfort of the bus or coach are more important. Punctuality is more of a barrier to time-critical commuting than non time-critical leisure travel and access to/congestion around the park and ride site is more of a barrier for time-critical peak journeys.

"The problem is that site is right on a junction, so you get stuck in the traffic trying to get into the site.

And the people using the park and ride are making the traffic worse."

Potential, Commuter, Oxford

Perceived convenience of the car over park and ride is a strong barrier across different respondents/journey types. Potential users and some current users at both locations contrast the convenience of going by car with the apparent inconvenience of using park and ride.

"It's the convenience. I don't want to add another 20 minutes to the commute each way."

Potential, Commuter, Oxford

The convenience of a car is magnified for longer distance journeys, particularly if priority measures such as bus lanes are not in place.

Fears about reliability are a significant barrier for time-critical journeys, particularly when commuting. Concerns about reliability are, among potential users, often based on perception, although some current users had experienced unreliability. Main reliability issues mentioned are late buses and variable journey times, which can cause commuters to be late for work and meetings. Despite a strong tendency towards perceiving park and ride as less reliable than a car journey, actual experiences of reliability by users vary across services and locations. Doncaster users rated reliability higher than Oxford users overall (82 per cent to 66 per cent), but local journeys were rated higher than longer distance journeys at both locations (87 per cent in comparison to 57 per cent in Oxford, 96 per cent in comparison to 53 per cent in Doncaster).

"It's got to be reliable. Something you can put trust in that you're not going to be late. And it's got to arrive on time. That's important for everybody."

Potential, Leisure, Mobility Impairment, Doncaster



Good reliability is also important when considering longer distance journeys, especially when the journey is time-critical.

This echoes our research 'Getting to and from the airport. Is coach an option?' which highlighted 'being confident you will arrive on time' as the second most important consideration overall when travelling to the airport.

The comfort and privacy of the car often makes it a more appealing choice than park and ride. The effect is magnified for longer journeys; the longer the time spent in a vehicle, the more important comfort becomes.

"Well, you've got the privacy of your own car, haven't you! You're not in with the rest of the public."

User, Leisure, Mobility Impairment, Oxford

Other low-level barriers to using of park and ride included the potential that a particular bus is full (more of an issue for longer journeys where the bus/coach frequency may be lower), inadequate luggage or buggy space, and occasionally lack of parking spaces (specific to a minority using the Oxford Thornhill, exacerbated by Christmas shopping).

Accessibility can pose a problem for certain mobility impaired passengers and parents with young children. Although most respondents tend to find the park and ride site and bus itself relatively easy to access, some with disabilities and mobility impairments voiced concerns.

"Sometimes I need a wheelchair so if you're getting on and off the bus it's complicated."

Potential, Commuter, Doncaster

Motivating more park and ride use

The quantitative data highlights easy, stress-free journeys, value for money and reliability as key benefits of using park and ride. Comfort was perceived as a bigger benefit for longer distance users.

People use park and ride as it offers:

✓ ease of travel

✓ less stress

good value for money

Top three benefits of park and ride Local journey users Longer distance journey users 60 Top three benefits remain the same, but more longer distance users select 'less 50 stress', 'reliable service' and 'comfort' in their top three benefits 40 30 20 Fase of Less Good value Reliable Comfortable Shorter Environmentally Flexibility Safe way Other stressful friendly to travel for money iourneys Q11) What are the three most important benefits of park and ride buses for you? Rase: 404

If a park and ride journey is faster than driving, this is a strong motivator for use. As noted, bus lanes in cities make journeys quicker, particularly at times of congestion. A faster journey can therefore overcome the 'hassle' of travelling to a park and ride site, parking then waiting for a bus.

"If you could claim that it was quicker, and the claims would need to be true of course, that's a good selling point"

Potential, Leisure, Oxford

Factors around stress reduction are often key triggers to using park and ride such as the ability to avoid driving in congested traffic, driving in city centres and having to find a parking space.

"I don't always get the laptop out but it's nice to know I can. It's a bit of flexibility, extra time if I've got a lot on

User, Commuter, Oxford



How people view cost/value is complex, and so whether it is a trigger or barrier to use of park and ride varies considerably between individuals. Those making non timecritical journeys typically prioritise cost/value for money more highly than those with time-critical journeys. Cost and value for money, while not unimportant for commuters making time-critical journeys, emerged as secondary to other factors such as reliability and punctuality. Although some acknowledged that park and ride can be cheaper than car, some still see its cost as too high, particularly in light of the reduced flexibility, reliability and convenience they associate with travel by bus.

Environmental considerations can motivate some. A minority of respondents in both Oxford and Doncaster identified environmental concerns as a good reason to use public transport, including park and ride. Some felt that, in future, greater advertising/communications emphasis on the environmental benefits of park and ride could encourage them to use it more often.

"Yeah you can't escape how big [environmental concerns are] becoming, it's going to be the decade of the environment this one. And the bus companies could be ahead of the game; our fleet is half electric or whatever."

User, Commuter, Oxford

Motivations are varied, but it is clear that for some there are sufficient benefits for park and ride to be seen as a viable alternative to using a car for the whole journey.

Most potential users who trialled park and ride for us reported back generally positive experiences indicating that park and ride can meet the needs of a range of new users if it is a competitive offer in the location.

The research suggests that making information about park and ride available is likely to encourage new users for both short and longer distance journeys. Park and ride won't always provide a better option than the car (for example for those who need space or a high level of perceived control over their journey). However, the many for whom it could be a good option are generally not considering it as there is no compelling information influencing them to try it.

'Give Park and Ride a Go'

In the research, 13 potential users gave park and ride a go, with a good mix of short and longer distance journeys. Despite initial fears/wariness, those who took part reported generally positive experiences of sites and services.

"They had nice clean loos and a good coffee shop, which I hadn't associated with park and ride."

Give Park and Ride a Go, Oxford

Good facilitues

"I'll admit I was wary, basically of the bus not coming. Heft enough time that I could have got back in the car and driven if I'd had to."

Give Park and Ride a Go, Oxford

Control over own journey

Fears about reliability/ punctuality

"There were loads of people milling around and waiting at the bus quenes, so we felt very very safe. We spotted the cameras too, and that reassured us about our car being safe to leave."

Give Park and Ride a Go. Doncaster

Personal safety on site

Safety of vehicle on site

"I was surprised at how much cheaper it was than the train. Food for thought there."

Give Park and Ride a Go, Oxford

Cost/Value for money

A theme running through the 'Give Park and Ride a Go' responses was surprise at how positive/easy the experience was.

"On the outward journey to Sheffield, I only had to wait 5 minutes for a bus, that was a nice surprise. The journey itself was pleasant too, it was nice to just sit back and relax."

Give Park and Ride a Go, Doncaster

On-board facilities

Fears about reliability/ punctuality

"Overall, I expected there to be plenty of buses and there were, and I expected the parking to be an issue but it wasn't."

Give Park and Ride a Go. Oxford

Perceived convenience/ 'hassle' versus car/train

When issues arose, they typically centred on slow journey speed, particularly for those travelling to Sheffield (unfavourable comparisons with both train and car).

"The journey overall on the way to Sheffield was very pleasant, no traffic and the bus wasn't full however it took roughly 50 minutes compared to 20 minutes on the train."

Give Park and ride a Go, Doncaster

Longer journey times versus car

> Perceived convenience/ 'hassle' versus car/train

Stakeholder engagement

Transport Focus spoke to a number of local authorities who operate park and ride sites to understand best practice. This highlighted wide variation in what is offered to customers impacting on the user experience when using park and ride, which helps to explain some of the barriers to use.

Differences between sites are apparent, both within a local area as well as across the country. Responsibility for the operation of park and ride sites varies, some are local authority led, others operator led; some offer free parking, others charge. At some locations users have to pay for parking and the bus separately; elsewhere, it is integrated and you pay once either at the site or on the bus.

Some sites have good passenger facilities, others are limited or constrained in terms of opening hours. Service provision can vary greatly, with frequent buses to central locations but fewer to longer distance destinations. First and last bus times to/from sites vary widely, as does when sites close or whether you can leave your car overnight.

Publicity and marketing of park and ride is often limited; a customer needs to know where to start when considering using of park and ride. Some information is found on operator sites, some on local authority sites or a mix of both. It can be harder to find than is desirable.

Wider policies to support park and ride, such as reducing the supply of cheap central area car parking and providing bus priority to offer competitive journey times, are recognised as important but are subject to patchy implementation.

Locating the park and ride site in the right place to intercept traffic can also be challenging for local authorities. Conflicts can arise in terms of priorities for land use. Using land for local travel may be acceptable as the benefit accrues locally whereas using local land to facilitate travel elsewhere can be problematic.

Recommendations and opportunities

This research set out to explore whether park and ride could play a part in reducing congestion on Highways England's roads through offering an alternative, for some people for some journeys, to driving all the way on the SRN. Transport Focus makes seven recommendations in light of this research. Two points before they are listed. First, to deliver attractive alternatives to driving the whole way, Highways England will need to work in partnership with the local authorities, transport operators and others, including to develop best practise, understand local issues and capitalise on opportunities to integrate with other initiatives. Second,

this research assumed that the 'ride' element would involve a bus or coach and the research was undertaken. on that basis. In making its recommendations, however, Transport Focus has included rail and other options for the 'ride' element because of a key finding in the research that longer journey time is potentially a critical barrier to park and ride reducing car trips on the SRN. In many instances a rail-based park and ride will give a faster end-to-end journey and so has potential to be an attractive alternative to driving all the way. It is also sensible in principle not to think about only bus and coach options as potential solutions.

Transport Focus recommendations:

1 Highways England, working in conjunction with transport companies and local authorities, should identify where across its whole network park and ride could offer an advantage to its customers over using the SRN to drive the whole way. This should cover bus, coach, rail and other 'ride' options.

This work should:

- focus on where people are seeking to travel from and to, guarding against looking only at where it would be easier to build a park and ride site
- consider rail and other 'ride' options as well as bus and coach, given that journey time will be a key factor in making longer distance park and ride an attractive alternative to driving all the way.

2 Highways England should use the output from recommendation 1 to bring forward proposals to implement new or expand existing park and ride options at the most promising locations, having regard to the funding available through the Road Investment Strategy and other sources.

Highways England should be open to the notion that 'pump priming' financial contributions, including in partnership with others, may be necessary before the 'ride' element is viable, particularly if services are to operate at sufficient frequency to be an advantage over driving all the way.

3 Whenever a new park and ride site is developed, a clear customer 'offer' should be determined at the outset, identifying which partner is best placed to lead on delivering each aspect of the user experience. Consideration should be given to establishing a formal partnership setting out who will do what.

Those aspects include:

- management of the park and ride site
- operation of the bus/coach service
- provision of bus/coach priority on local roads and/or the SRN to speed up journeys and increase journey time reliability
- marketing of the services offered
- information and publicity about the services
- fares, ticketing and payment arrangements.
- Highways England, in partnership with transport companies and local authorities, should raise awareness of all existing park and ride locations likely to offer an advantage to its customers over using the SRN to drive the whole way. This should cover bus, coach and rail-based park and ride.

This work should focus on:

- their very existence road users are not going to consider an option that they do not know about - through improving and simplifying availability of information
- the value, financial and otherwise, to individuals choosing park and ride over driving all the way
- the carbon dioxide emission reductions and air quality improvement that would result, potentially linked to net zero 2050 initiatives.
- Highways England, in partnership with transport companies and local authorities, should coordinate an ambitious marketing campaign - as a pilot at one or more locations - designed to increase use of park and ride for journeys that would otherwise have been made using the SRN to drive the whole way.

In addition to the bullets in recommendation 4, this work could include:

- incentives to try out the park and ride in our research those 'giving it a go' were positive about the experience
- a dramatic improvement in the information provided to potential customers - making the 'offer' easy to understand, including the price and how you go about using it
- setting out the benefits that park and ride can provide to individual users and to wider society.



- 6 Highways England should review the adequacy of signage from the SRN:
 - to all existing park and ride locations adjacent to the SRN;
 - to all railway stations close to the SRN with suitable car parking capacity and train frequency:

and make improvements where desirable.

- Highways England should, in conjunction with relevant local authorities, transport companies and others, seek to improve the experience of its customers by:
 - reviewing the flow of cars, buses and coaches to and from all park and ride sites that are adjacent to the SRN
 - making improvements that will result in park and ride being a more attractive 'offer' as an alternative to driving all the way.

This work should include seeking to:

- reduce the time taken for park and ride users to enter and leave each site, including arrival from and return to the SRN
- reduce the time taken by buses/coaches entering or leaving each site
- increase journey time reliability of the 'ride' element by protecting buses and coaches from congestion.

How this research will be used

Transport Focus has worked with Highways England to develop a comprehensive understanding of park and ride and its potential to reduce the number of car journeys on the SRN.

This research will be used to help Highways England develop its strategy to encourage those who currently make car trips all the way on the SRN to use park and ride instead, and encourage existing park and ride users to use it more often.

The baseline satisfaction measures provided will offer the opportunity in future to measure the impact of any

work that Highways England undertakes.

Transport Focus will use this work to inform its policy in relation to development of the third Road Investment Strategy (2025-30). In particular regarding how Highways England could better serve its customers by offering alternatives to using the SRN for some journeys.

Transport Focus and Highways England will also share this work with local government, the bus, coach and rail industry and other relevant bodies as the insight is relevant beyond just the SRN.

How this research was completed

Qualitative research

For the qualitative aspect of the study, 55 respondents were interviewed through a mixed methodology comprising 15 trio focus groups and one paired depth interview (all 90 minutes in length) with users and potential users of park and ride services. All participants completed a pre-task journey diary. Furthermore, 13 potential users completed a 'Give Park and Ride a Go' task, which involved trying park and ride for a journey that they usually made by car and reporting back how it went. There were also eight depth interviews with disabled/ impaired respondents.

Interviews took place between 4 December 2019 and 8 January 2020.

Quantitative research

For the quantitative survey we spoke to longer distance users where possible, undertaking interviews at bus stops served by buses/coaches to London and Sheffield. While not the target audience, park and ride users making short distance trips were not excluded from the survey.

The surveys were administered face-to-face at the two locations, cards were also given to passengers so they could choose to complete the survey online if they wished.

There was a higher rate of participation at Oxford (n=243) than Doncaster (n=161), reflecting observed usage of the sites. In terms of the local and long-distance user split, for Oxford the longer distance sample was 172, local 71. For Doncaster longer distance 51, local 110.



Appendix – research locations

Oxford Thornhill

Oxford Thornhill is a busy, well established park and ride site serving the centre of Oxford along with several destinations further afield, including London and its airports. Seven in 10 users (70 per cent) were making commuter or other work-related journeys.

Nearly all users (95 per cent) reported being 'very' or 'fairly' satisfied with the 'ride' element. The top three areas for potential service improvements were identified as loyalty schemes (37 per cent), increased frequency (29 per cent) and a greater range of ticket options (24 per cent). Nine in 10 users (93 per cent) also reported being 'very' or 'fairly' satisfied with the Thornhill site itself. Better signage (33 per cent) and better security (23 per cent) were most commonly identified among the top three options for site improvements.

There was high general awareness of the existence of coach services to London across both users and potential users.

Positives

- the site was reported by some to be well signed with the number of parking spaces available advertised on
- the site was reported to be modern, clean, well-kept with great facilities (coffee shop highlighted).

- signage to and at the site was reported to be inadequate by some
- congestion around the site
- occasional lack of parking spaces.

Doncaster South (Parrot's Corner)

Lower usage was observed at Doncaster South compared with Oxford, particularly of longer distance services towards Sheffield, and outside of peak/afternoon 'school run' hours.

Nearly three in five users (58 per cent) were making commuter or other work-related journeys, a further 15 per cent were traveling for education purposes and one fifth (21 per cent) were making leisure journeys.

Nearly nine in 10 (87 per cent) users reported being 'very' or 'fairly' satisfied with the 'ride' element. The top three priorities for service improvements were identified as increased frequency (42 per cent), better reliability (35 per cent) and more comfortable buses (17 per cent).

Nine in 10 (89 per cent) users reported being 'very' or 'fairly' satisfied with the Doncaster South site itself. Waiting areas (34 per cent) and toilets (33 per cent) were most commonly identified as priorities for site improvements.

There was very low awareness of the bus service to Sheffield, except by those who used it, leading to low awareness of ticket cost, journey length, stopping points and other factors.

If using public transport to travel to Sheffield, the more usual mode was to take the park and ride bus into Doncaster town centre then catch the train to Sheffield. Some also mentioned driving to Sheffield park and ride then using the bus or tram to finish the journey into Sheffield city centre.

Positives

- well signed and easy to access
- adequate facilities, when staff are present
- good location without congestion issues
- prominent CCTV enhances sense of personal and vehicle security.

Negatives

- limited staffing hours, with facilities locked when the site is not staffed
- some confusion among occasional users about whether facilities being closed meant the site was closed and buses were not operating
- occasional initial confusion about barrier entry system.

Contact Transport Focus

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