


Domestic Covid-19 Resilience Division
Department for Transport
Via email

14 April 2021

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Dear 

Social Distancing Review

Thank you for your email inviting our input into the Social Distancing Review. We have set out below our existing body of work and our plans for the coming months.

Over the course of the pandemic we've been asking passengers about their current experience and concerns with travel and trying to get a sense of their future intentions. We are now in the 40th wave of our Covid-19 tracking research – over 80,000 responses to date. Each report is published on our website, but we also make the full data series available on our data hub (<https://transportfocusdatahub.org.uk/>) which you may find useful in cutting and analysing the data in different ways.

We have used this research to create a segmentation that identifies five different groups with varying degrees of concern about Covid-19, and varying propensities to return to public transport. This segmentation could provide a powerful way of understanding how different types of transport user might respond to different messaging and other proposals. Our initial report on this will be published shortly.

Earlier this year we summarised our insight in a report: [Travel during Covid-19: key lessons for 2021 and beyond](#). We have also just produced a new report looking at the attitudes of passengers and non-users towards bus services since the start of the pandemic: [The route ahead: getting passengers back on buses](#).

You'll see that social distancing, face coverings and cleanliness are key elements in these reports – both for existing travel and in terms of confidence for the future. Perception is also important here – the research shows that those actually travelling feel safer/have a better perception of public transport than those not, even among those who used to be regular travellers pre-Covid. Social distancing, face coverings and cleanliness are an important driver of these perceptions. Indeed,

our [Perceptions of safety on public transport – key drivers analysis](#) report identified that the ability to keep a safe distance from other passengers was the most important driver of passengers' perceptions of safety in relation to Covid-19.

While restrictions remain and the numbers travelling are low then existing capacity on public transport can cope, but clearly the ability to social distance will be increasingly squeezed as/when demand returns. There will be a delicate trade-off between confidence that you'll be able to social distance and the desire to stimulate demand. This tension is heightened by the limited tools that public transport operators have for managing demand.

Transport Focus feels that all parties need to be open with passengers that social distancing may not always be possible. To help build public confidence, operators need to provide reliable information on how busy services are so passengers can make informed decisions, maintain enhanced cleaning regimes already in place, and make clear how things like opening windows/air-con systems and wearing face coverings can help lower risks. To this end we have two reports currently in production: one looking at the value of providing information on how busy services are, highlighting examples of best practice, and another that takes a closer look at cleanliness.

We are also about to embark on a new piece of research to help inform the social distancing debate. It will ask people about the post-lockdown future and their concerns about travelling again. The aim would be to gather views now and to come back to the same people (around the projected Step 4 date of 21 June) to see if views had changed. We'd hope to have the first results towards the end of May.

Details are still to be finalised, but the aim is to explore things like:

- whether people would still want/expect to wear face coverings even after restrictions are lifted
- how they might feel if social distancing was removed and whether this would affect their willingness to travel
- how would people feel if they had to sit next to someone
- whether journey length and purpose would change these attitudes
- attitudes towards 'vaccine passports' on public transport
- whether attitudes towards public transport are different to other public places such as restaurants, gyms, shops and pubs.

This research will also try to explore what might help convince people that it was safe to travel. We know, for instance, that the RSSB is working on a risk model. This builds on research they published last July that said that the risk of infection per passenger journey was 1 in 11000. At the time we tested this with members of our rail community with some (but not all) finding comfort in this: [Transport User Community – scientific evidence of safety on public transport](#). It will be interesting to see if there is a desire for updated information being put into the public domain and if so, who passengers want to deliver it – i.e., who would they trust the most?

In tandem with this we will also be inserting two questions on social distancing into our weekly Covid-19 survey. These will give us some benchmarks that we can start tracking to see how attitudes may change.

One of the factors you will no doubt be considering in the review is the extent to which the commuting market will return – a subject of much debate recently. Any large-scale return to the office will result in more services where social distancing cannot be maintained. Our work on this for rail suggests that people do expect to commute less and work from home more, with a noticeable shift from working 4-5 days a week towards 1-3 days.

We would be happy to discuss any of these points or to run you through the planned research in more detail.

Yours sincerely

Anthony Smith
chief executive