

UNDERSTANDING ATTITUDES TO SOCIAL DISTANCING AND FACE COVERINGS ON PUBLIC TRANSPORT

Phase 1 topline findings

2 July 2021



THE RESEARCH OUTLINE



OBJECTIVES

- What has their experience been during Covid when travelling generally? What about experiences of social distancing and face coverings?
- Would people still want/expect to wear face coverings even after restrictions are lifted?
- How would people feel if social distancing was removed and whether this would affect their willingness to travel?
- What would they expect the timeline to be if social distancing was removed?
- How would people feel if they had to sit next to someone on public transport?
- Does journey length and purpose change these attitudes?
- Attitudes towards 'vaccine passports' on public transport
- If face coverings are still mandatory, would it be okay to reduce social distancing?
- If passengers are not comfortable removing rules, what might be necessary conditions for doing so?
- How important is ventilation if social distancing and/or face covering rule are not in place?
- What is the impact of relaxing the rules on how people feel about other passenger behaviour, and how would people respond to this?
- Are attitudes towards public transport are different to other public places such as restaurants, gyms, shops and pubs? Why?
- What is the impact of statistics showing the level of risk of catching Covid (e.g. this model from RSSB)? If such a message was welcome, who should deliver it?

WHO WE HAVE SPOKEN TO

	Lockdown travel habits	Life stage	Usual mode of travel	Reason for travel	Demography
Group 1	Not travelled	Younger	Mix of bus and train	Mix of commuters (min 3 per group), business and leisure travel (min 2 per group)	Mix of gender, location (urban/rural), home ownership Min 1-2 black, Asian and minority ethnic individuals per group Minimum 6 disabled across all groups
Group 2	Not travelled	Older	Mix of bus and train		
Group 3	Some travel	Younger	Mostly bus		
Group 4	Some travel	Older	Mostly bus		
Group 5	Some travel	Mix	Mostly train		
Group 6	Regular travel	Younger	Mostly bus		
Group 7	Regular travel	Older	Mostly bus		
Group 8	Regular travel	Mix	Mostly train		

People are instinctively conducting their own personal risk assessments about use of public spaces – including public transport – this would continue if restrictions are lifted but most will travel if they need to (even if changes in lifestyle e.g. increased working from home means this is less necessary). However, they also expect some restrictions to remain in place for some time, such as the use of face masks.

1. **The wide spectrum of behaviours and attitudes towards the pandemic** are often based on personality alongside demographics

2. **People are starting to take control** - making judgements on the risks/importance of social norms and making-up their own minds as to how to behave

3. **Behaviours are primarily associated with self-preservation or social norms rather than social conscience**

4. **Guidance is valued where it is clear but data should be local** and relevant to their specific journey/area

5. **There is a desire for some restrictions to remain in place**, with an expectation that masks are here to stay for some time

6. **But there is also a sense of realism** around the ability to social distance on public transport in the future

THIS IS A *HIGHLY* EMOTIVE SUBJECT

Before exploring some of the key themes from this early stage of the research, we need to illustrate the highly emotive nature of this topic, with very divergent views.

"Very few people have actually died and you've got a 95% chance of getting over this, so we're at the back end of it. As long as we're vigilant with ourselves we haven't got to be too paranoid about being around other people."

Female/Older

"I'm just nervous about being locked down again... I had loads of stuff booked for last year, 5 concerts, 3 holidays... I just want things to get back to normal, but not just for a week and then another lockdown."

Male/Younger

"I sat on a train where there were people standing in the aisles, I've had a jab but I still felt anxious about it... and people were not wearing their masks properly."

Male/Younger

"I haven't been on a train because I'm too nervous but I have been on a bus... I'm going on one tomorrow and I hope it is not going to be too crowded."

Female/Older

Few, if any concerns

Highly anxious

"Now that the majority of people who would have suffered are vaccinated, I'd be a lot more comfortable to cracking on and getting on with life... it's time to get back to normal now."

Male/Younger

"I think [the relaxation of rules] is welcome to be honest, where we are with vaccinations, as a nation we are at the point where we could get back to normality... isn't that the whole point of getting vaccinated? So why do we still need social distancing?"

Male/Younger

"Now that restrictions are lifting it's hard to socially distance, if you're trying to avoid people it's hard because they're not in the same frame of mind."

Male/Older

"I am a bit apprehensive about it, so when I do go I'll make sure I don't travel in peak times to give me peace of mind... I'm just a bit nervous at the moment, but I have had my two jabs which gives you a bit of confidence."

Female/Older

"I'll stick with public transport, it's so much quicker... I'll happily travel on public transport."

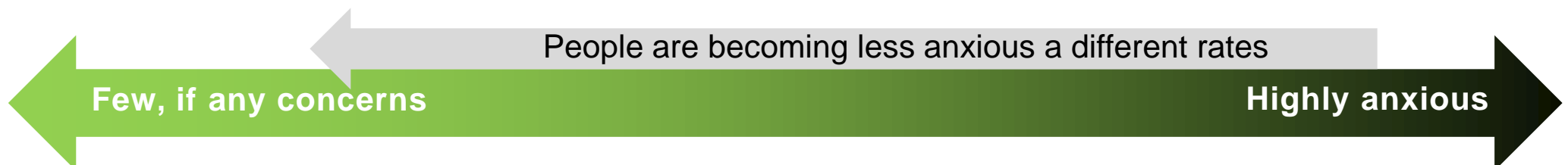
Female/Younger

"I catch four buses a day, it has been OK some days but I feel a bit more anxious on others."

Male/Older

1. THE WIDE SPECTRUM OF BEHAVIOURS AND ATTITUDES

- While people gravitated towards the middle, both ends of the spectrum were clearly evident in the groups (leading to occasional disagreements).
- In general, there was a sense that levels of nervousness have started to decrease alongside the gradual lifting of restrictions.
- People's levels of comfort about the UK opening up appeared in a large part to be related to their general personality i.e. whether they were generally more anxious individuals, regardless of the pandemic.
- From a demographic perspective, women appeared to be more anxious than men, and while those who were most nervous came from across all age groups, those who were most unperturbed by the virus tended to be younger people.
- People's experience of the pandemic obviously had an impact (e.g. if a family member is vulnerable) but actually having had Covid-19 or losing an elderly relative did not appear to fundamentally impact on their likelihood to use public transport.
- The next stage of the research will explore whether people become less anxious, and the rate at which this happens, which we predict will be linked to:
 - the underlying narrative from government around 19 July
 - whether they are (or live with) vulnerable individuals
 - whether they have been double vaccinated
 - their underlying levels of anxiety/stress
 - their specific levels of anxiety about using busy buses and trains *pre-pandemic*.



2. PEOPLE ARE STARTING TO TAKE CONTROL

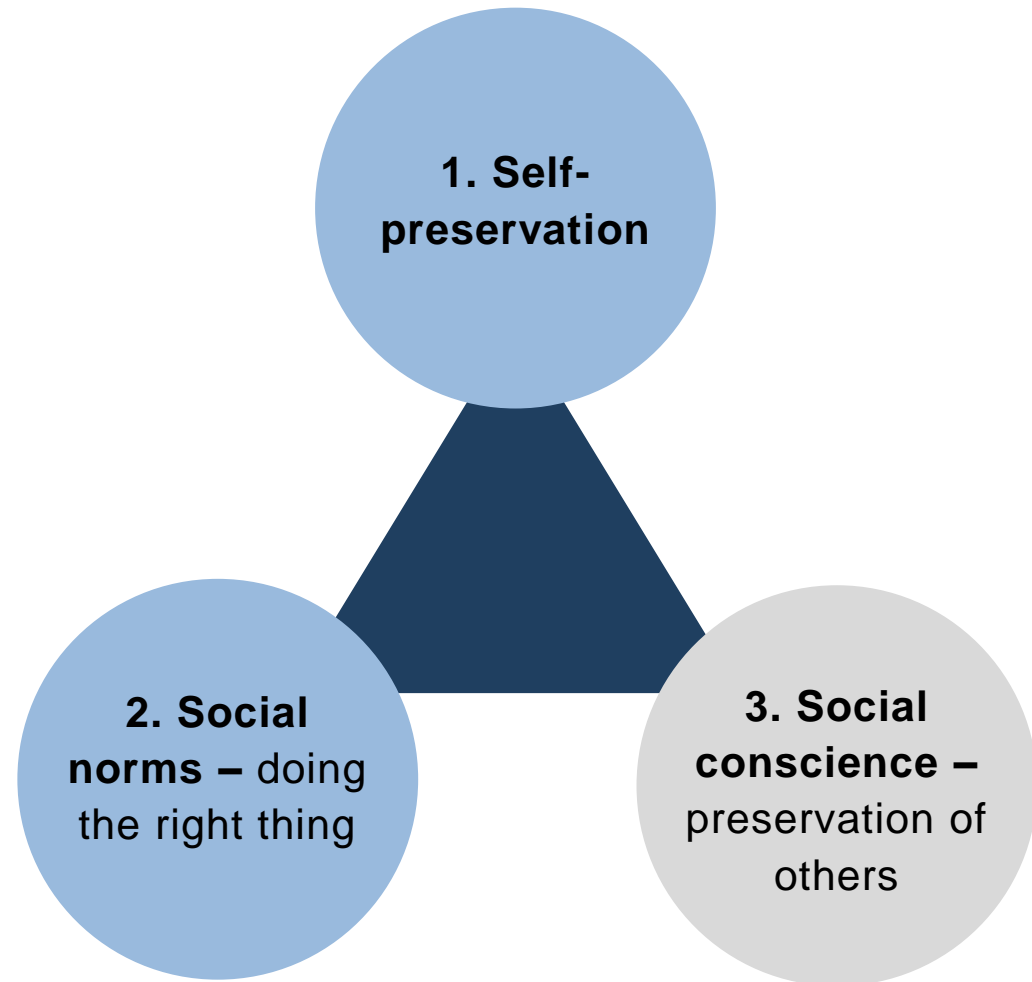
- They have lived through the past 15 months – experienced the highs and lows.
- While the country hasn't got fully back to normal, there is a sense that we are well on our way, and some feel a weight being lifted off their shoulders – there was a sense of confidence about the future.
- This is a large part because of the lifting of restrictions (ie the ability to mix with friends, go shopping, to the cinema etc.) but the degree to which people are comfortable with the heightened levels of human interaction does vary.
- Regardless, there is a sense that most people are comfortable with their own interpretation of the level of risk that they should be taking - the sense of relief for many is partly because they are being given increasing control over what they can and cannot do.
- And, as we know, this is hugely varied when it comes to use of public transport – from the minority who have used it consistently through the pandemic to those who haven't been on a train or a bus for well over a year.
- Those who have had to travel, or opted to use public transport out of choice, have generally been comfortable with the situation that has confronted them. In some instances they may have been uneasy with regards to social distancing or people not wearing masks, but with generally less busy trains and buses, it has been tolerable.
- The highest levels of anxiety are generally felt by those who have not travelled on public transport for some time, and who are apprehensive about starting again. It will be interesting to see how this changes across the life of this study.

3. BEHAVIOURS ARE PRIMARILY ASSOCIATED WITH SELF-PRESERVATION OR SOCIAL NORMS RATHER THAN SOCIAL CONSCIENCE

People's attitudes towards social distancing and mask wearing are often self-centred; a need to protect themselves (and very close family) against infection.

However, as concerns about catching Covid decrease, for others it has become simply about being polite and being a good citizen to avoid being criticised through stares and tutting of passengers! (Only a small minority have confronted those who don't comply with the guidelines/regulations but a much larger number admitted being angry or upset by the behaviour of others).

As we transition out of lockdown, what appears to be of lesser importance is the genuine belief that by not socially distancing or wearing a mask, you could be seriously endangering the health of others.



4. GUIDANCE IS VALUED WHERE IT IS CLEAR, BUT DATA SHOULD BE LOCAL

- There is a general sense of an understanding about how you should behave in public spaces, and broad belief that – with the odd exception – most people are following the guidelines.
- Most people are taking their advice from government briefings, media reports and other national guidance (e.g. NHS).
- The understanding of current guidelines on buses and trains reflects the reality – i.e. that people should try and socially distance where possible, and that transport companies are trying to support this (e.g. only allowing people to sit in window seats to avoid contact with passengers walking down the aisles, taping-off seats on buses).
- But there is also a sense of inconsistency, which could lead to confusion and confrontation if people are travelling on different routes with a variety of measures being deployed (e.g. the number of passengers allowed on a bus).
- Reference to data, such as the RSSB work on infection risk on trains, is welcomed but only if it is local enough to be relevant (like the infection rates in local authority areas). National research of this kind would not provide the reassurance about the true picture on their specific bus or train route.
- Anything that could help people make less risky journeys in the future would be welcomed e.g. busyness updates for routes at certain times using a traffic light system.

5. A DESIRE FOR SOME RESTRICTIONS TO REMAIN IN PLACE FOR SOME TIME

- Significantly, even if the Prime Minister were to announce that, as of tomorrow (w/c 24 May at the time of asking) all restrictions are being lifted (because it is safe) some said that they would not rush to change their cautious behaviours – they would wait and see.
- Many expect some efforts around social distancing to remain on public transport – where possible.
- But regardless of what happens to social distancing there was acceptance from many, and desire from others, that the wearing of face masks could be around for some time.
- **Vaccine passports** received a mixed reception. While many were not opposed to having them, they were looking for answers about how they could be used on public transport: who would enforce their use/check them? What about those who haven't had the vaccine? What about those who left theirs at home or their phone was out of charge? On the whole there was a sense that they might be more trouble than a solution.



Masks have become the norm:

- Visible sign of someone 'doing their bit'
- Something the individual can do without the help of others
- Perceived to help prevent other illnesses.

Social distancing has inherent challenges, especially on public transport

- More subjective – what is the right distance?
- Needs others to comply
- Almost impossible to achieve in some instances and this inconsistency makes general non-compliance more acceptable.

6. A SENSE OF REALISM AROUND THE ABILITY TO SOCIAL DISTANCE ON PUBLIC TRANSPORT IN THE FUTURE

- When pressed there was a general acceptance that social distancing will become increasingly difficult as more people want to travel by public transport because:
 - trains and buses will have to be busier – there are only so many buses/trains and drivers and the companies need to make money
- Commuters – will travel less often, but when they have to, they expect it to be busy, and they are generally prepared to live with it
- Leisure travel, was thought to be less of an issue because transport is less crowded and they are often in less of a hurry – although the bank holiday issue on East Midlands Railway highlights a challenge i.e. the blurred line between general frustrations about delays and overcrowding, and concerns about Covid.

East Midlands Railway passengers upset by lack of social distancing

1 day ago



Will Loxley said the situation in Nottingham "felt a bit of a mess"

Rail passengers say they have been travelling on "very full" trains with "no social distancing" over the weekend.

East Midlands Railway (EMR) users said passengers were standing in the aisles, with too few carriages available to accommodate them to spread out.

Some regional services were also cancelled, causing others to be busier.

EMR apologised for "the discomfort and inconvenience that some of our customers have experienced".

Current **government guidance** says although close contact with friends and family is now a personal choice, it advises people to "maintain social distancing" on public transport, as well as in the workplace, in businesses and at public venues.

- **Long vs. short distance travel.** There was a sense that social distancing would be expected on long-distance journeys because it would be easier to put in place (e.g. with pre-booking). Whereas, there was greater acceptance that social distancing would be harder to impose on local commuter routes (on buses and trains) and therefore people would be more willing to put up with being closer to other travellers in these circumstances (even if they will be uncomfortable about it).
- This point also links to the **journey type** – if you *have to make* the journey, e.g. to get to work on time, then you are more likely to accept reduced social distancing
- **The consequences of catching Covid differ.** Often, those who are less worried about catching Covid and becoming seriously ill had what they perceived to be bigger priorities, in particular social and financial challenges e.g. a fourth lockdown hindering life getting back to normal and loss of income through time off work.
- Many people expect continued **use of masks in enclosed public spaces** (beyond 19 July) where there is little or no need for people to remove their masks. They are more accepting on lifting restrictions in outdoor spaces.
- **Train and bus travel vs. other public spaces** e.g. cinemas, restaurants, theatres, supermarkets etc. Most didn't see a major difference between public transport and other public areas. The specific challenges might vary but people don't tend to think of them as significantly different.
- Measures to help provide reassurance – the presence of **hand sanitiser** was referenced as an illustration that the brand you were engaging with cared about their customers.
- **Ventilation** was sometimes considered (e.g. sitting next to a window) but there was also confusion (e.g. does airplane ventilation make them very safe?)
- There is still a question around if life will go back to normal (travelling on the train like sardines) or if we will emerge out of Covid into a **new normal**.

1. **Reactions to changes in the guidelines** / messaging as we get closer to 19 July – especially among the anxious travellers – are they comfortable changing their behaviour?
2. The relationship between **general frustrations with delays/cancellations** and **the impact of increased busyness on social distancing**
3. The **role of masks** on public transport if social distancing becomes increasingly difficult
4. **First-time travellers** – those who have travelled recently after months of not doing so expressed a natural sense of anxiety, will this naturally ease as travel becomes more familiar again?
5. **Feelings towards** the potentially increasing number of **passengers who are not social distancing** or wearing masks – will there be conflict or suppressed frustration?

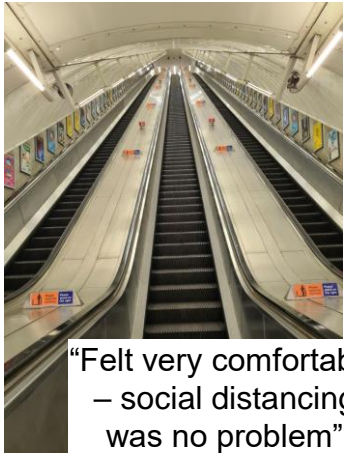
COMMUNITY TASK TRAVEL OBSERVATIONS AND RESPONSE TO DELAY TO 21 JUNE 15 JUNE – 18 JUNE

CUSTOMERS ARE EXPERIENCING A RANGE OF TRAVEL CONDITIONS AND FEELINGS, OFTEN DETERMINED BY TIME OF DAY

Off-peak: relaxed, safe



Busy: uncomfortable, stressful



"Felt very comfortable – social distancing was no problem"



"Travelling at 11am very socially distanced!"



"I felt very safe with the signs and ventilation"



"I felt so grateful that I was able to use train safely"



"I felt safe"



"I felt confident, safe and relaxed because not I was not close to people"



"Very helpful bus driver"



"Over crowding – people not social distancing"



"Busier but still distanced"



"I felt uncomfortable, no social distancing"



"Busier around school time"



"Straight for the sanitiser after touching the machine"



"I travelled at 4pm and not happy that people still refused to wear a mask"



"6:30pm people going for drinks and not wearing masks"

PEOPLE EXPECTED 'FREEDOM DAY' TO BE DELAYED, BUT STILL HAVE MIXED FEELINGS ABOUT THE END OF ALL SOCIAL DISTANCING AND MASK RESTRICTIONS

What are people's reactions to the delay?

- Most expected it – they're aware of Covid positive rates increasing, and the government drip-fed the likelihood of the delay before the full announcement
- There appears to be two groups emerging:
 1. Those who support the Government's decision, are cautious about relaxing social distancing rules for their own safety and fear going back into another lockdown if restrictions are lifted too soon.
 2. Those who 'just want life to get back to normal' and feel responsibility should be with the *individual* rather than Government guidelines. More likely to be frustrated that their plans are cancelled.
- People have been assuming that social distancing will end on 'Freedom Day' but most (especially older people but including some younger people) are happy to have a 4 week extension
- People's overall feelings towards traveling on public transport appear to be more positive, continue to mostly drive and travel for recreational travel

I was relieved that 'Freedom Day' has been postponed as with rising case numbers it would be too risky to release all restrictions before more have been vaccinated. I just like the fact that a sensible decision has been taken even though I would obviously like restrictions to be lifted completely, just not yet.

Male and older

"This is the outcome I expected, you could see the BBC teeing up the stories in the week prior, they always do it so people knew it was coming".

Male and younger

How will the announcement affect people's travel attitudes and behaviours?

- Most feel the government announcement will not affect the way they will travel – people are already travelling as much as they need to
 - But many acknowledge they are waiting to get back to their usual travel habits e.g. traveling for work, traveling to social occasions
- Most feel face masks should be mandatory on public transport and some feel masks should be still be worn after restrictions have lifted
 - People want masks to be worn until 'freedom day' or beyond – but the end of Covid is still ambiguous
 - Masks are becoming more uncomfortable in the hot weather, especially on long journeys. People have noticed other passengers not wearing masks on hot days.

"The announcement didn't really come as a surprise, it was expected given the news surrounding % of people vaccinated and the delta variant cases rising. It won't affect the way I travel particularly on public transport as I am not yet back to travelling for work (which is almost solely when I tend to use public transport) It is frustrating to hear of the delay, but I fully understand the reasons and it doesn't affect me much at all. I think facemasks being worn on public transport is probably a good idea particularly during commuter (busy) times"

Male and younger

SOME PEOPLE SUPPORT THE GRADUAL EASING OF RESTRICTIONS WHILE OTHERS ARE READY FOR NORMALITY

Back to normality, personal responsibility, feeling confident

Likely younger

"I feel like **the government are dragging it out**, and we need to get back to normality. It will not affect me taking public transport. I will enjoy the social distancing, I will not enjoy wearing a mask. My Ideal outcome would have been **going back to normal**. I don't understand how you can have live music in a pub but not in a wedding. Ideally we should be able to social distance on public transport and facemasks should be up to the individual."

Male and Younger

"So I'm **not greatly impressed** as **I have a few plans now cancelled**, including my god daughter's hen night. But I do understand it, I think it is a sensible idea so that we don't have to go backwards. It doesn't affect my attitude to public transport though, I wasn't waiting for 21st June for a change in the way I travel or what is like when I do."

Female and older

"I wasn't surprised about the PM not lifting restrictions... but what I don't like is making date to aim for as this virus is dangerous, we have waited this long. **I do feel for people whose livelihood depends on opening** and hope financial report will continue."

Female and Older

"My **ideal outcome would be that lockdown is lifted** and that social distancing and masks/face coverings would be **optional**. I feel that all young adults and adults should be aware of the impact of covid-19 and **take responsibility** of the choices they decide to make."

Female and Younger

"I feel as though it was a **necessary** change to the plan, I might feel **safer travelling** on public transport the later things get. Whilst not ideal the change to the plan was not unexpected. I would have liked a comment on the changes to international travel. **Face masks should be compulsory** going forward."

Male and younger

"I think the government are doing what they need to do to keep us **safe** and the lockdown another four weeks is great and the buses won't be a busy yet and masks should be still in place I actually **feel safer** wearing mine and keeping me and my family safe is the main thing."

Female and older

Support the government, slow and steady, feeling cautious

Likely older

"I was expecting this as the rates has significantly increased in past week. Today I felt particularly **vulnerable** as it was stated yesterday that even those vaccinated are still at risks, I think mask should continue to be used, for at least the next 3 months and we should continue to SD, whilst the numbers are still increasing."

Female and Older

"I am actually really pleased about the delay and this was my **ideal outcome**. I have had it in October last year and now have **Long Covid**. I have lung, heart and kidney issues and many other symptoms that are too long to list and I don't want to catch the damn thing again. **Easing restrictions actually worries me!** I am nervous of travelling when there are a lot of people around. I've had both jabs but still am aware I can get it again...however if am still trying to do things as normal like my London trips. We just do Oxford Street early morning when it's quiet and go to quieter places."

Female and older