

Getting free bus pass holders back on board

July 2022



Survey background

Older and disabled people in England, Wales and Scotland qualify for a free bus pass. However, we have found that following the relaxation of coronavirus related restrictions, fewer free pass holders than fare payers have returned to using the bus. We did this survey to explore the reasons why.

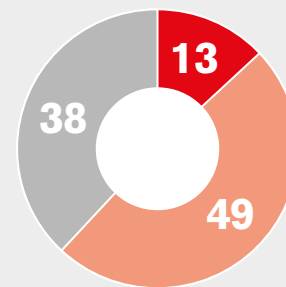
This research took place in late March and early April 2022 using those of our Transport User Panel who hold concessionary passes or are entitled to them. Full details of the methodology are available in the full report.

Summary of key findings

Half of current bus users on our panel who hold a concessionary pass or who are eligible to do so say that the way they use buses has changed since the start of the pandemic. 38 per cent say that they are using buses less frequently now in comparison to just 13 per cent who say they are using buses more frequently. 49 per cent say that the frequency of their bus use has not changed.

Almost two in five bus users are using buses less frequently than they were since the start of the pandemic.

Are you now using buses more or less frequently than you did before the start of the pandemic (in March 2020), or has this not changed?



- I am using the bus more often than I did previously
- The frequency with which I am using this bus has not changed
- I am using the bus less often than I did previously

Base: all those who are currently using buses (4387).

"Using buses less because I am walking more to avoid being in close contact with people."

Female, 61-64, older person's pass holder, currently using buses once or twice a week

"The pandemic has changed my travel patterns: some things I used to do in central London I now do locally (such as giving blood or going to the optician). I have retired and therefore no longer make any trips which are directly work-related. I am under less time pressure and sometimes catch buses on a whim to visit a different area or go for a walk."

Male, 65-70, older person's pass holder, currently using bus three or four days a week

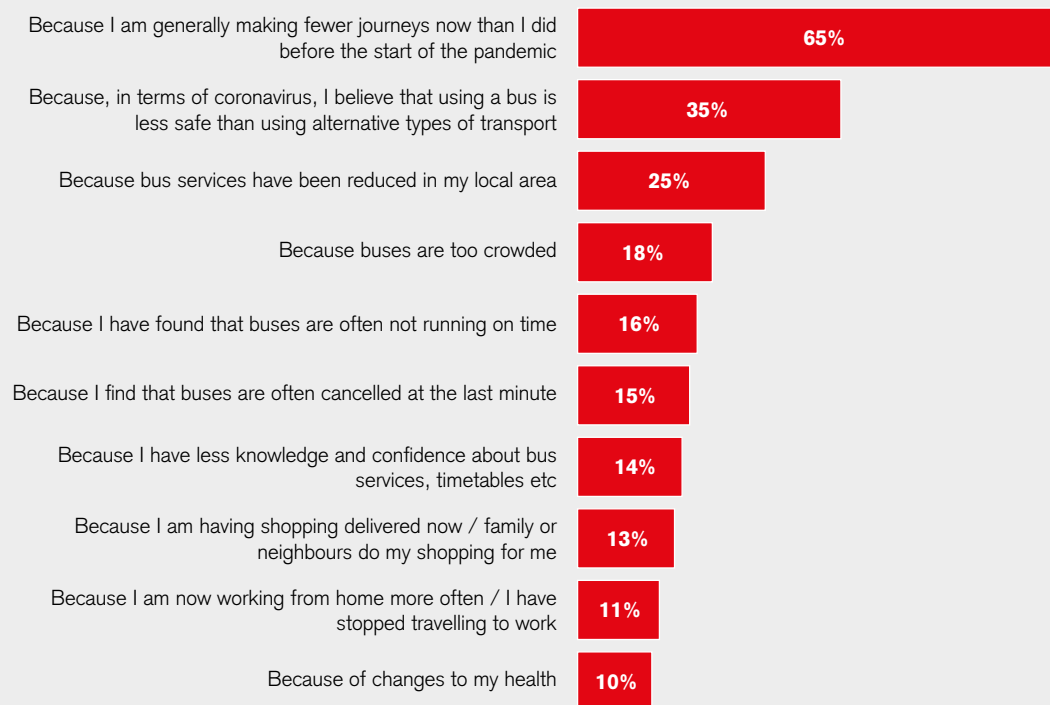
Summary of key findings

Among those who are using buses less frequently, 65 per cent say that they are generally making fewer journeys now than they did before the start of the pandemic. Meanwhile 35 per cent say that they are using buses less frequently because, in terms of coronavirus, they believe that using a bus is less safe than using other modes of transport.

Of those who are using the bus currently, 71 per cent say that they would consider using a bus more frequently in the future and 54 per cent say that they would consider using buses to make journeys that they currently make using other forms of transport. Half of those who would consider using buses more often say that increased frequency of buses and a greater range of direct routes would encourage them to do so.

Two thirds of those who are using buses less frequently than they were before the start of the pandemic say that this is because they are generally making fewer journeys now.

Why are you using buses less frequently than you did prior to the start of the pandemic? (Top 10)



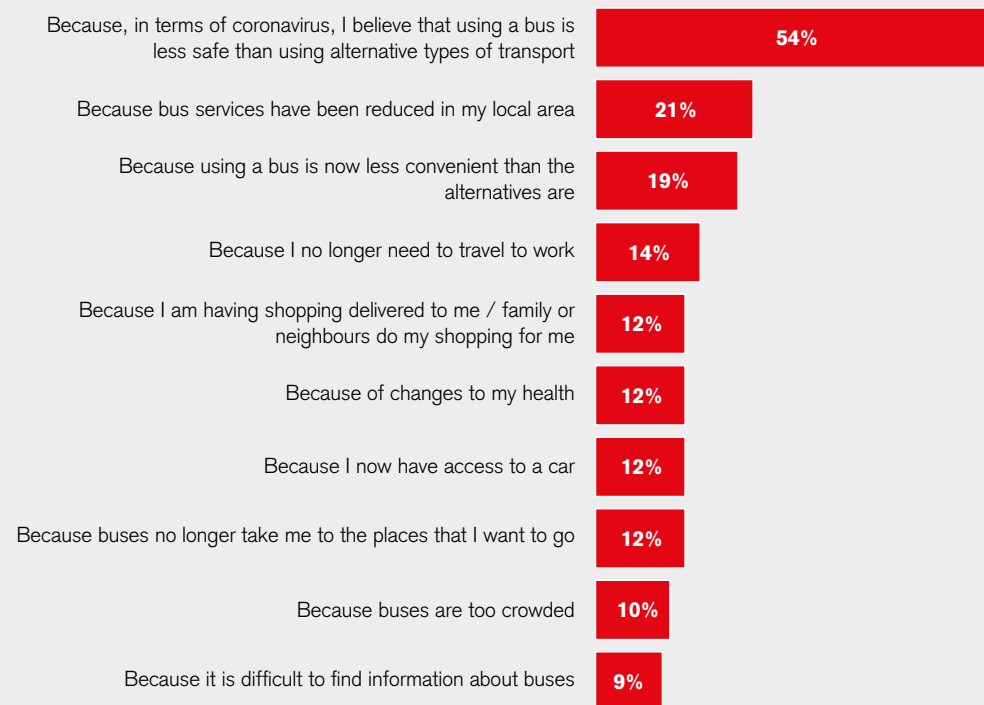
Base: all those who are currently using buses less frequently than they did since before the start of the pandemic (1665).

Summary of key findings

54 per cent of panellists who are eligible for or hold a concessionary pass **who do not use buses now but used to** say this is because they feel buses are less safe than the alternatives in terms of coronavirus.

The majority who have stopped using buses say that this is because, in terms of coronavirus, they believe that using a bus is less safe than alternative types of transport.

Which of the following reasons best describes why you have stopped using the bus? (Top 10)



Base: all those who are not currently using buses, but used to (521).

Summary of key findings

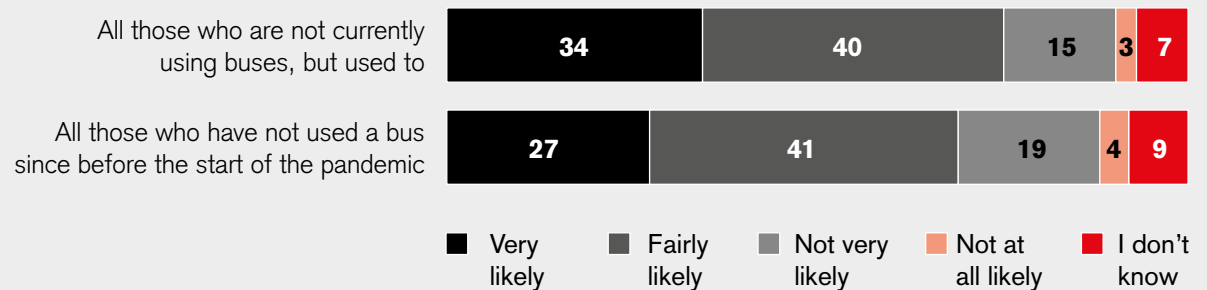
74 per cent of those who are not currently using buses but used to say that it is likely that they will use buses again in the future. Among these 'lapsed' bus users 65 per cent have not used a bus since before the start of the coronavirus pandemic. If only these lapsed bus users are taken into account, the proportion of those who say that they will use buses again in the future decreases to 68 per cent.

39 per cent of those who are not currently using buses but used to say, that they would be most likely to use buses again if more was done to ensure protection against coronavirus. Slightly fewer say that they would be most likely to use buses again if buses went directly to more destinations, or if buses were more frequent.

15 per cent of those **who do not use buses but used to**, and 28 per cent of those who do not use buses say that they could be encouraged to do so if they knew more about their local bus service. Among these people 80

Three quarters of those who are not currently using buses say that it is likely that they will use buses again in the future. This decreases to 68 per cent if we consider only those who have not used a bus since before the pandemic.

How likely or unlikely is it that you will use buses again in the future?



Base: all those who are not currently using buses, bus used to (521).
Those who have not used buses since before the start of the pandemic (340).

per cent say that it would be useful to know about the frequency of their local buses and 76 per cent say that it would be useful to know about local bus routes/where buses go.

Summary of key findings

87 per cent of those currently using buses say that they know at least a fair amount about their local bus service. 23 per cent of those who do not use buses say the same.

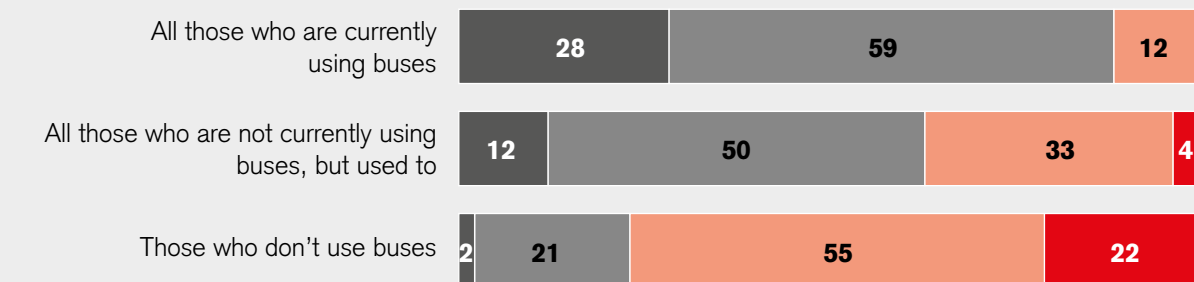
Among those who say that they know at least something about their local bus service, 89 per cent say that they know all or most of what they need to know concerning the times that a free pass can, or cannot, be used. Conversely, only 45 per cent of these respondents say that they know all or most of what they need to know regarding whether the cost of the free pass covers that of travelling with a carer.

Among those who say that they know nothing about their local bus service 71 per cent would like to know more about what times the buses run. 68 per cent would like to know more about which buses to catch to get to the places that they want to go.

Specifically in terms of coronavirus, 82 per cent of those who are currently using buses at least once a month feel safe doing so. 58 per cent of those not using buses as regularly, or not at all, say that they would feel safe using a

Almost nine in ten of those currently using buses say that they know at least a fair amount about their local bus service. This falls to less than a quarter of those who don't use buses

How much would you say that you know about your local bus service?



Base: all those currently using buses (4,387).

Those who are not currently using buses, bus used to (521).

Those who don't use buses (189).

■ A great deal ■ A fair amount ■ Not very much ■ Nothing at all

bus if they had to do so.

54 per cent agree that coronavirus is a major concern for them while 44 per cent agree that enough is being done to ensure coronavirus safety on public transport. Almost one in five agree that they will never again feel completely comfortable travelling on buses.

While 36 per cent say that the coronavirus

pandemic is not having an impact on their decision to use buses or otherwise, 44 per cent say that new variants of coronavirus would need to have increasingly mild symptoms for them to be unconcerned about using a bus. 43 per cent say that the number of hospitalisations and deaths due to coronavirus would need to fall to near zero to have the same impact.

Conclusions

With more than half of concessionary pass holders saying coronavirus is still a major concern, the number of bus trips they make is unlikely to return to anything approaching pre-pandemic levels until their anxiety subsides.

Transport Focus also runs a regular Great Britain wide Bus User Survey to better understand the general experience and views of both current bus users along with those who are not using the bus. As part of this work we also ask about attitudes to feeling safe on buses in relation to coronavirus.

Recent results from our Bus User Survey indicate that 43 per cent of those who are over 65 and/or have a disability agree that coronavirus is a major concern for them. This compares with 54 per cent of panellists who are similarly over 65 and/or disabled who said the same at the time of fieldwork at the end

of March/beginning of April this year. Bus User Survey results show a slight decline in agreement with this statement, particularly among those who are not using buses between April and now. Since the sample for this work is largely made up of bus users, among whom the data shows little decline in concern about coronavirus, the level of concern among the panellists is likely not to have fallen to any significant extent.

Many concessionary pass holders are either making fewer bus trips or have stopped using the bus altogether since the start of the pandemic. Two thirds of those using the bus less frequently than before the pandemic say they are making fewer journeys overall because, for example, they are working from home or have shopping delivered. Some of the reasons for not needing to travel are likely to persist. With more than half of concessionary pass holders saying coronavirus is still a major concern, the number of bus trips they make is unlikely to return to anything approaching pre-

pandemic levels.

Current users would be most likely to travel more if bus services improved. This includes if the network was extended, if buses were made more frequent and if services were more punctual. They would also make more bus trips if time restrictions on the use of their pass were removed.

A majority of lapsed users have stopped using the bus because they feel buses are less safe in relation to coronavirus than other modes of transport. They agree with current users about the need for an extended network, more frequent and reliable services and a removal of time restrictions on the use of their pass. However, the thing most likely to encourage them to return to the bus would be if more were done to ensure protection against coronavirus.

Among non-users, an extended network and more frequent buses are top of their list of improvements but knowing more about local

Conclusions

bus services (especially frequency, routes and reliability) also scored highly.

With the exception of simpler ticketing and lower fares, concessionary pass holders appear to want the same things that fare paying passengers want – frequent and reliable buses, taking them to where they want to go.

They also want to be able to use their passes whenever they want to travel without the current timing restrictions.

While most pass holders feel reasonably well informed, better publicity and explanation of services could encourage some users to make more bus trips and some non-users to give buses a go.



Recommendations and questions

To better meet the needs of these users and non-users, Transport Focus has the following recommendations and questions for the bus industry:

- Use Bus Service Improvement Plans* or other funding to enhance the network, improve frequency and introduce bus priority measures to make buses more reliable.
- While recognising reasons for the current restrictions, are there local opportunities to allow users to travel on their concessionary pass in the morning? Or to charge a reduced fare at these times to stimulate demand?
- Work with passengers and their representatives to target communication and so build confidence about matters on which pass holders feel least well-informed. This includes the reliability of services, the busyness of the bus, wheelchair access and travelling with a carer.

- While it may still be important to continue to communicate the efforts being made to make bus travel feel safe, what more, if anything, could operators realistically do to reassure passengers?



* in England (outside of London).