



Getting free pass holders back on buses

Transport User Panel

July 2023

Introduction

Data suggests that since the end of the pandemic, a little more than a year ago, older and disabled free bus pass holders have not gone back to using buses in significant numbers. Transport Focus is keen to know more about why this is.

In July 2022 Transport Focus published the report *Getting free bus pass holders back on board*. This report presented findings from research completed between March and April 2022 with 5000 members of Transport Focus's Transport User Panel who held, or who were eligible for, a disabled persons' or older persons' pass allowing concessionary travel on buses.

To explore this issue further, we have undertaken a new online survey among our Transport User Panel who hold, or eligible to hold, a free pass to use buses. This report provides the findings from this research and explores what might encourage people to use the bus more.

Summary of findings

- 68 per cent of bus users holding (or eligible for) a concessionary pass reduced the frequency with which they used buses during the pandemic. Of these 66 per cent have increased the frequency with which they use bus over the last year (in other words since the pandemic) while 33 per cent have not increased the frequency with which they use bus, or their use of bus has decreased in frequency further.
- Among those whose used buses less frequently during the pandemic 69 per cent say that this is because they made fewer journeys for days out or for leisure trips. 49 per cent say that they felt less safe using bus than using other forms of transport, while 44 per cent made fewer shopping trips.
- 41 per cent of those whose use of bus reduced during the pandemic, but then has not increased over the last year say that this is because they are still making few, or making fewer, trips for days out for leisure reasons, while 27 per cent say that they are still making few, or are making fewer, shopping trips. 32 per cent and 31 per cent respectively say that their use of bus has not increased in the last year because bus services in their local area has been reduced in the last year, or that the reliability of buses in their local area has worsened in the last year.
- 30 per cent of those who say that their use of bus has not returned to pre-pandemic levels due to still making few, or making fewer trips for days out of for leisure reasons say that they have less money to spend, while 16 per cent say that the places that they would want to visit are closed. Many give various other reasons for not making leisure trips which includes simply not feeling inclined to make these trips any more or feeling less happy to do so due to the pandemic.
- 56 per cent of those who say that their use of bus has not returned to pre-pandemic levels due to still making few, or making fewer shopping trips say that this is because they are getting shopping delivered or shopping online. 24 per cent say that they have less money to spend, while 20 per cent say that the shops that they would want to visit are closed.

Summary of findings

- 55 per cent of those who, over the last year, have not returned to using buses as often as they did prior to the pandemic say that they would increase their use of buses if they ran more frequently. 48 per cent of these same bus users say that they would increase their use of bus if they went to more destinations, while 44 per cent say that they would use buses more if they were more reliable. These findings very much reflect those from the similar survey undertaken in March/April 2022 when these aspects were, again, the things that similar bus users told us would encourage them to use buses more often.
- Among those whose use of bus has increased over the last year after falling in frequency during the pandemic, 41 per cent say this is because they are making more shopping trips, while 20 per cent say that the increase is due to their making more journeys to visit the GP, hospitals or the dentist. 20 per cent of these bus users say that they have used buses more frequently in the last year because buses in their local area have become more reliable and/or convenient.
- 7 per cent of those whose use of bus has increased over the last year after falling during the pandemic, say that this is due to their using the £2 flat rate fare scheme in England (outside of London) to make journeys before 9.30am. Considering those who hold a concessionary pass to use buses overall, 24 per cent say that they have used the scheme for this purpose.
- 91 per cent of those holding a concessionary pass to use buses say that they know at least a fair amount about their local bus service, while 34 per cent say that they know a great deal. Accordingly, most of these bus users know at least a fair amount about many of the specific aspects related to their local bus service.

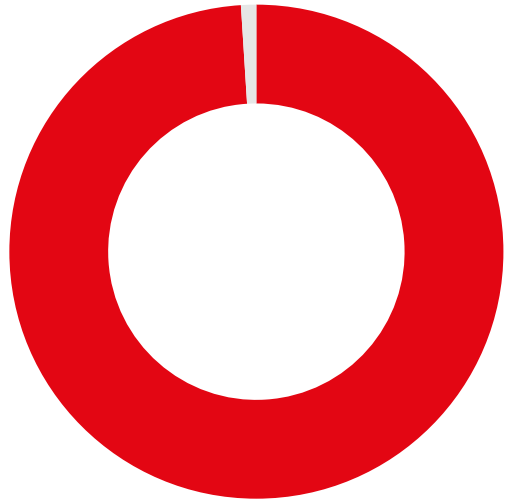
Summary of findings

- 93 per cent say that in terms of Covid they feel safe using buses. This compares to 82 per cent who said the same in March/April 2022. 44 per cent agree that enough is being done to ensure coronavirus safety on buses, a finding which exactly reflects that from the March/April 2022 survey.
- 28 per cent agree that Covid is a major concern for them, this represents a significant decrease in this result compared to that from March/April 2022 when 54 per cent agreed that coronavirus was a major concern.
- 11 per cent agree that, due to coronavirus, they will never again feel comfortable using buses. Again, this is a decrease compared to the previous survey when 18 per cent agreed that they would never again feel comfortable using a bus.

Research findings



Profile of respondents



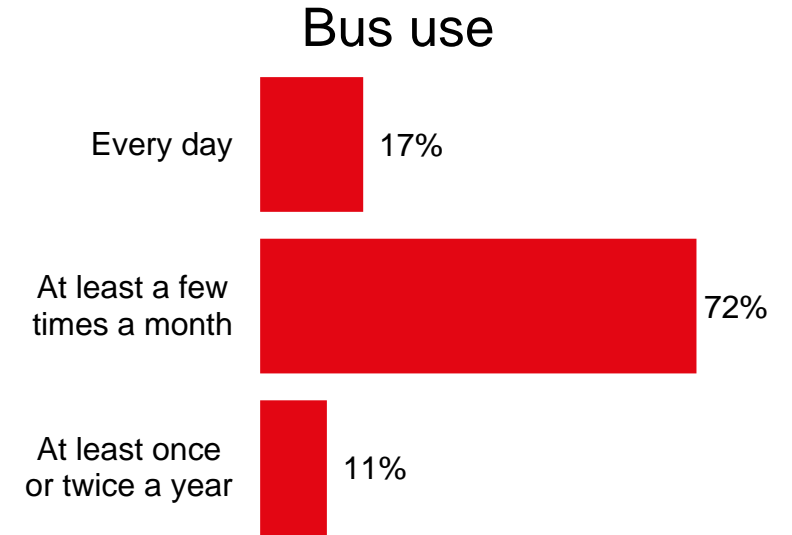
99%

Hold a free bus pass



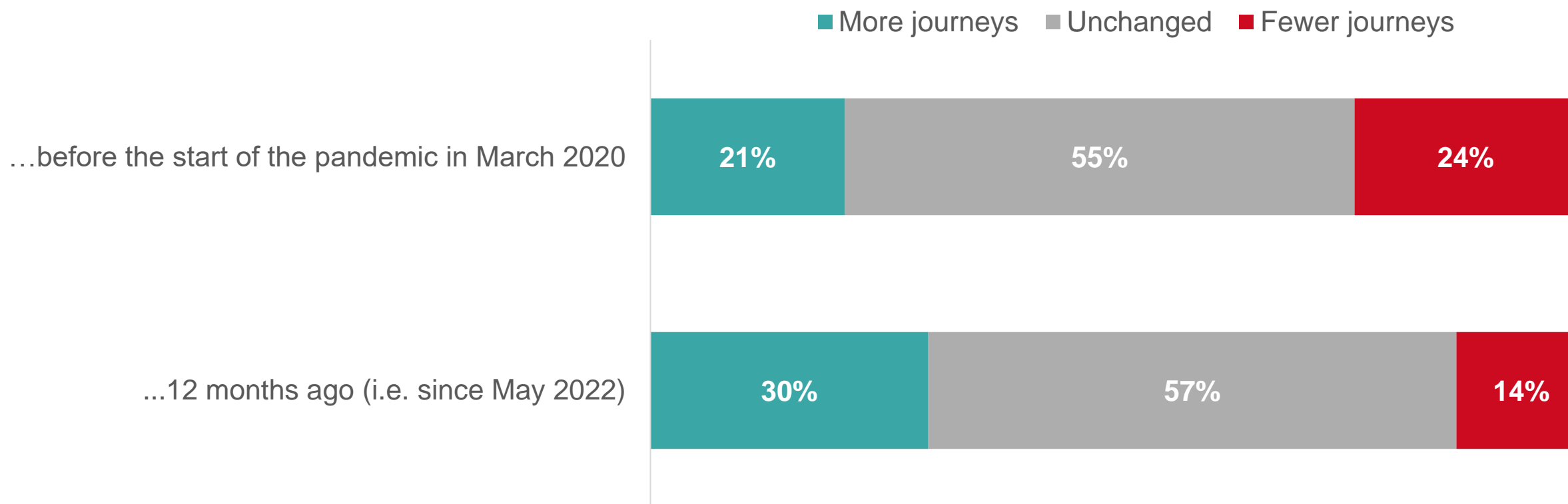
93%

Hold (or would be eligible for) an 'older persons' pass



Has the number of journeys that those with concessionary passes are making changed since before the start of the pandemic or in the last year?

Thinking in general (i.e. using any type of transport), are you making more journeys, the same number of journeys or fewer journeys than you made...

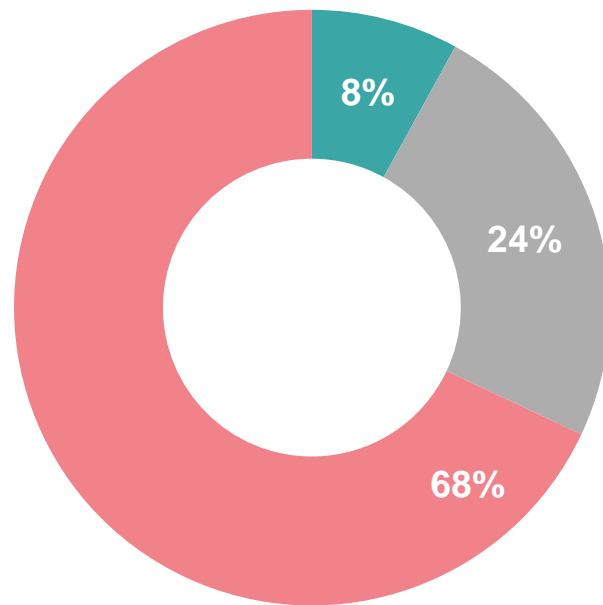


Has the frequency with which those with concessionary passes use bus changed since the pandemic or in the last year?

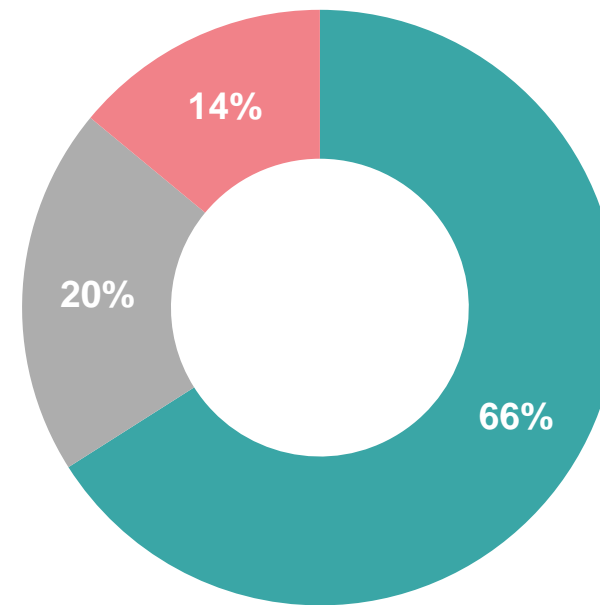
Thinking specifically about the frequency with which you used buses, during the pandemic/over the last year, did the frequency with which you use buses increase, decrease, or did it not change?

- More frequently
- Less frequently
- Remained the same

During the pandemic



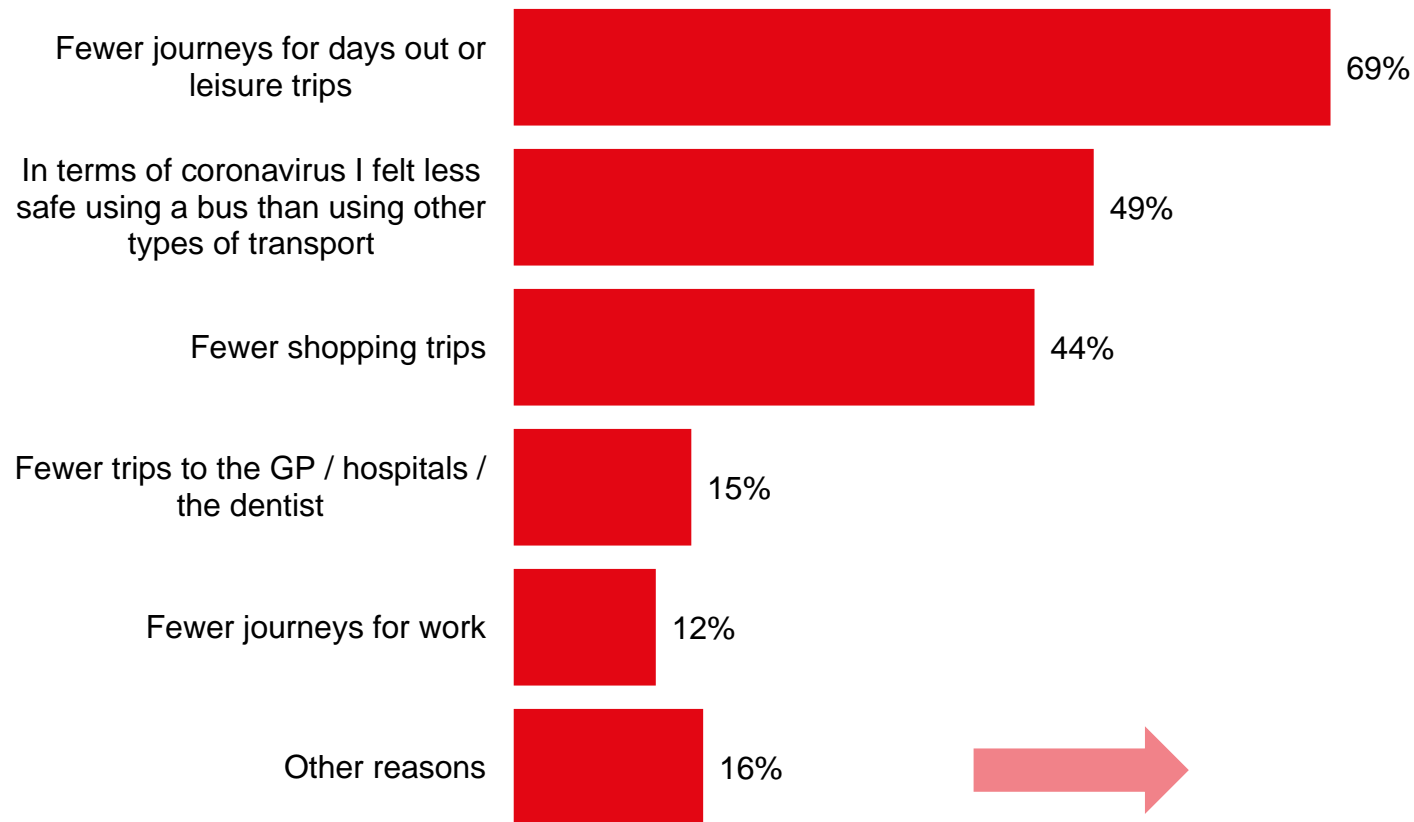
Over the last year



Transport User Panellists who use bus and hold (or are eligible for) a free pass (2577).
Those whose use of bus decreased during the pandemic (1755)

What caused those with concessionary passes to reduce the amount they used buses during the pandemic?

Which, if any, of the following factors played a part in causing you to reduce the amount that you used buses during the pandemic (between March 2020 and April 2022)?



Here, and on subsequent slides, 'comments provided as 'other reasons' cover various issues, some of which are indicated in respondent's comments which have been included.

"I felt safer walking than using bus for relatively short journeys (under 2 miles) and some of my voluntary work was closed."

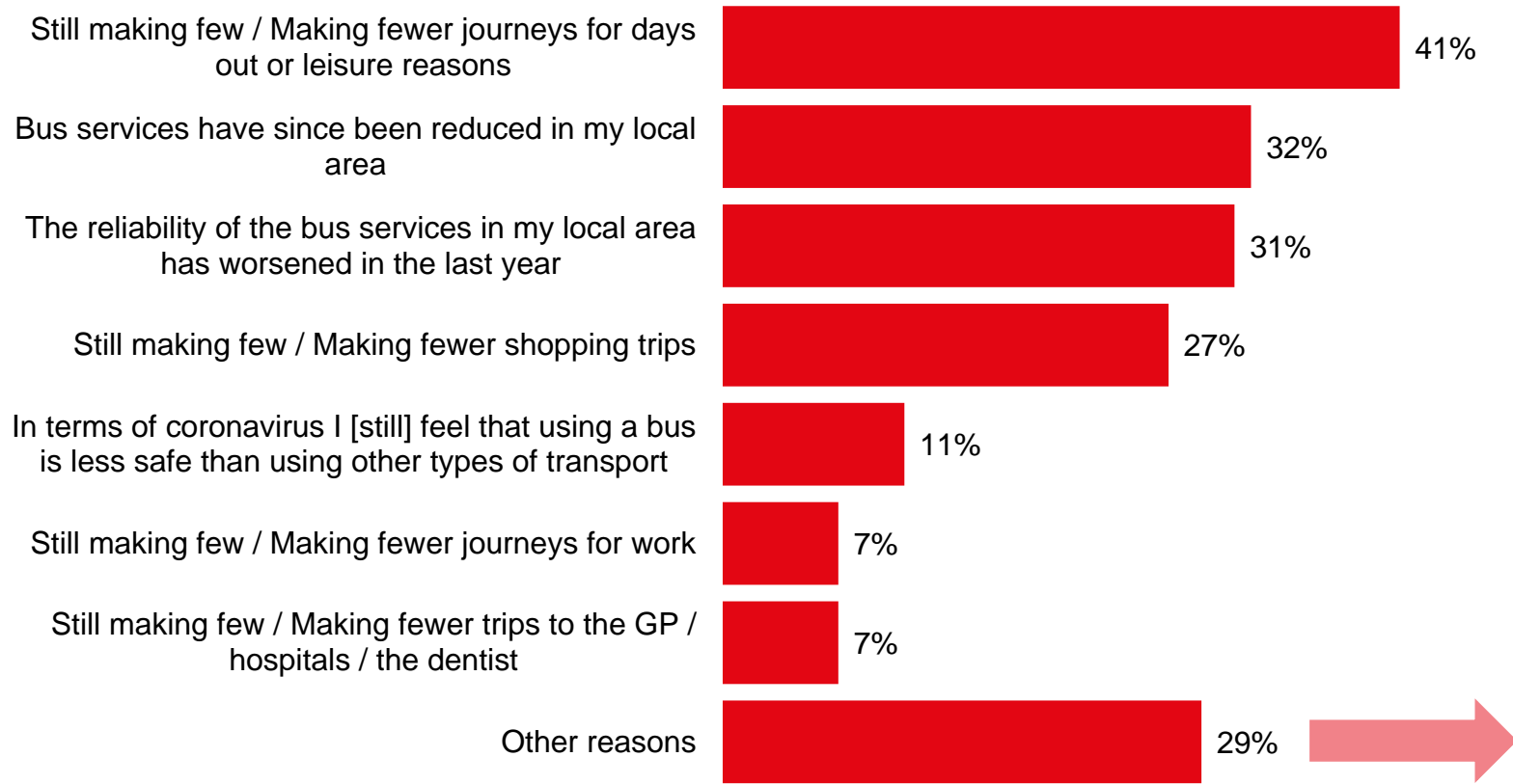
Using buses a few times a month, female, 71-74

"I didn't feel that buses were less safe than other forms of transport; I was avoiding them all!"

Using buses a few times a month, female, 71-74

Why have those whose use of bus reduced during covid not returned to making bus journeys in the last year?

Which, if any, of the following factors have played a part in meaning that your use of bus has not increased/decreased over the last year?



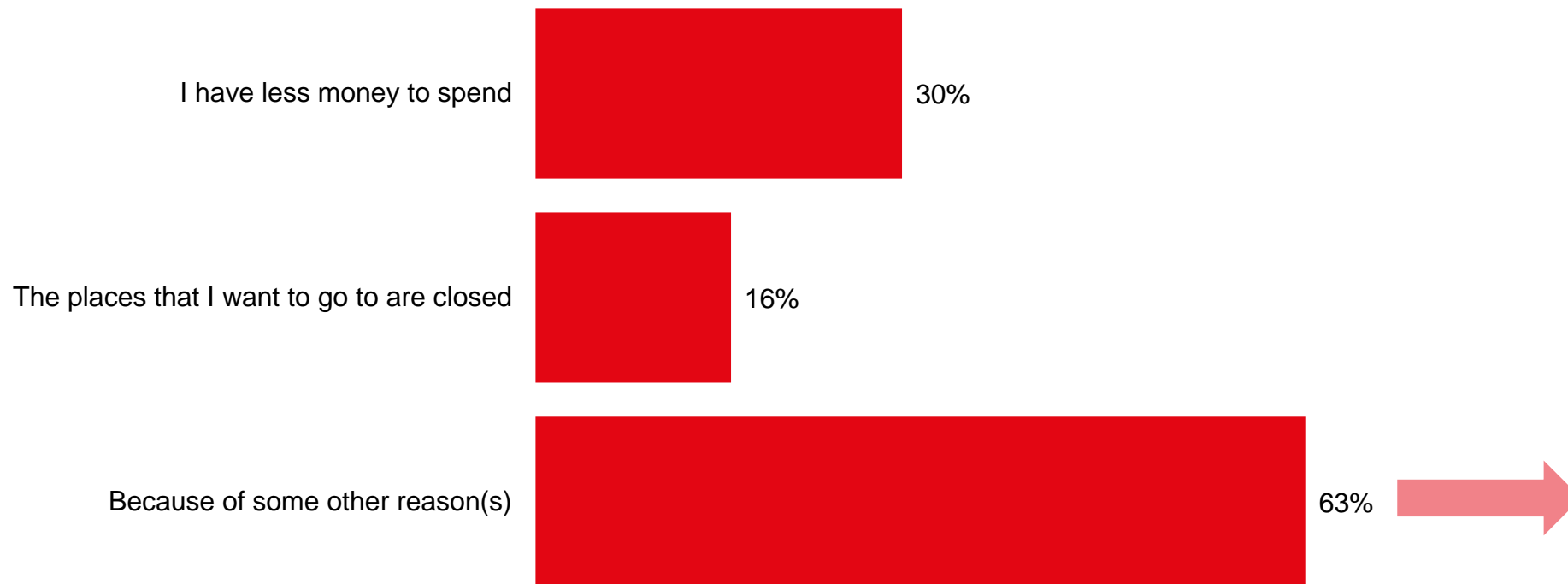
“I have become accustomed to walking rather than use the bus.”
Using buses a few times a month, female, 65-70

“I got very used to walking during the pandemic so now often have a walk rather than catch the bus.”
Using buses a few times a month, male, 61-64

Transport User Panellists who hold (or are eligible for) a free pass who used a bus less frequently during the pandemic, and whose use of bus has remained the same or decreased in the last year (603).

Why are those whose use of bus has not returned to pre-pandemic levels still making few or making fewer journeys for leisure reasons?

Which, if any, of the following describes why you are still making few / making fewer journeys for days out / other leisure reasons over the last year?



“...because I don't feel so inclined to do outings.”

Using buses at least a few times a month, female, 75-80

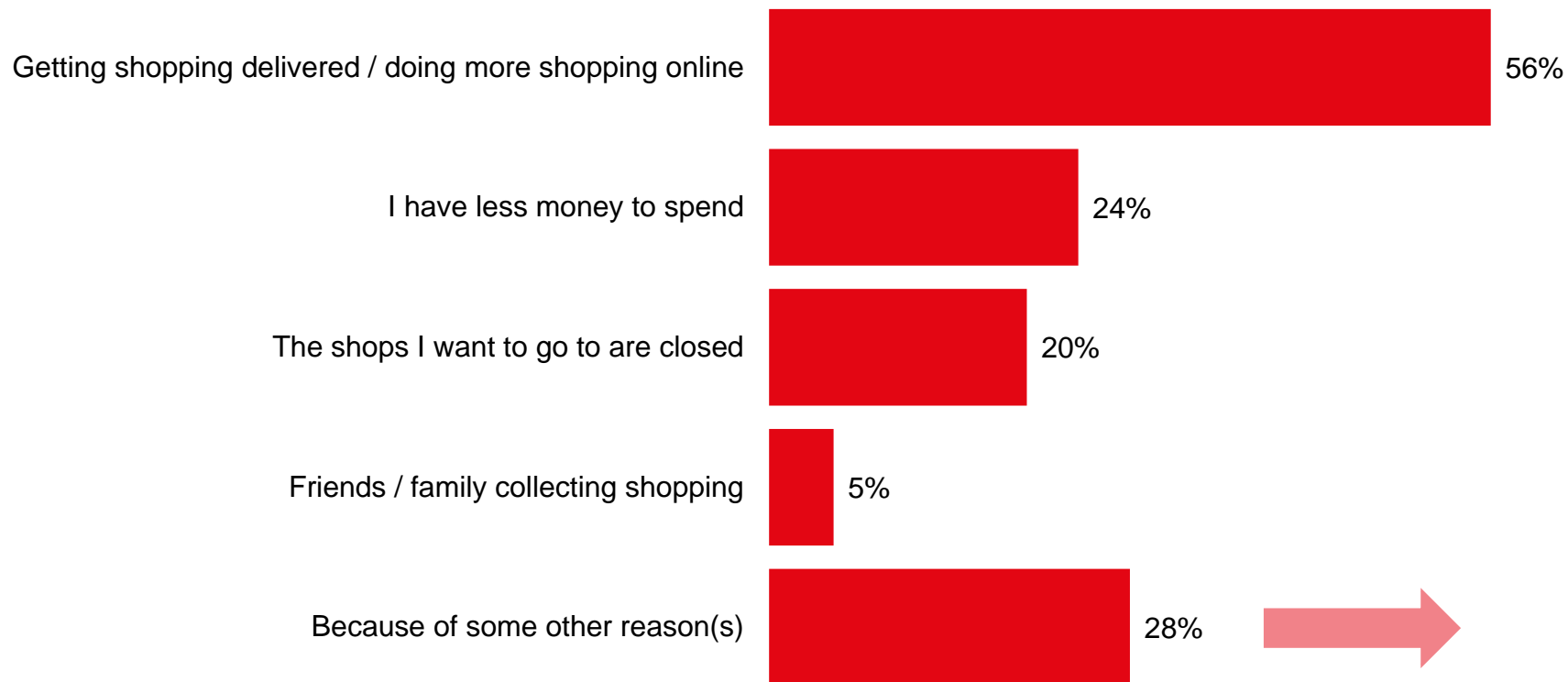
“I lost confidence in going places during the pandemic and haven't completely recovered.”

Using buses at least a few times a month, female, 65-70

Transport User Panellists who hold (or are eligible for) a free pass who used buses less frequently during the pandemic and whose use of bus has remained the same or decreased in the last year because they are making fewer journeys for days out / other leisure reasons (248).

Why are those whose use of bus has not returned to pre-pandemic levels still making few or making fewer shopping trips?

Which, if any, of the following describes why you are still making few / making fewer shopping trips over the last year?



'I tend to shop more "in passing" while on way to/from some other venue.'

Using buses every day, female, 75-80

'Because I now go more to local shops than big supermarkets.'

Using buses at least a few times a month, male, 65-70

Transport User Panellists who hold (or are eligible for) a free pass whose used buses less frequently during the pandemic and whose use of bus has remained the same or decreased in the last year because they are still making few / making fewer shopping trips (160).

Why are those whose use of bus has not returned to pre-pandemic levels still making few or making fewer journeys to work?

Which, if any, of the following describes why you are still making few / making fewer journeys to work over the last year?



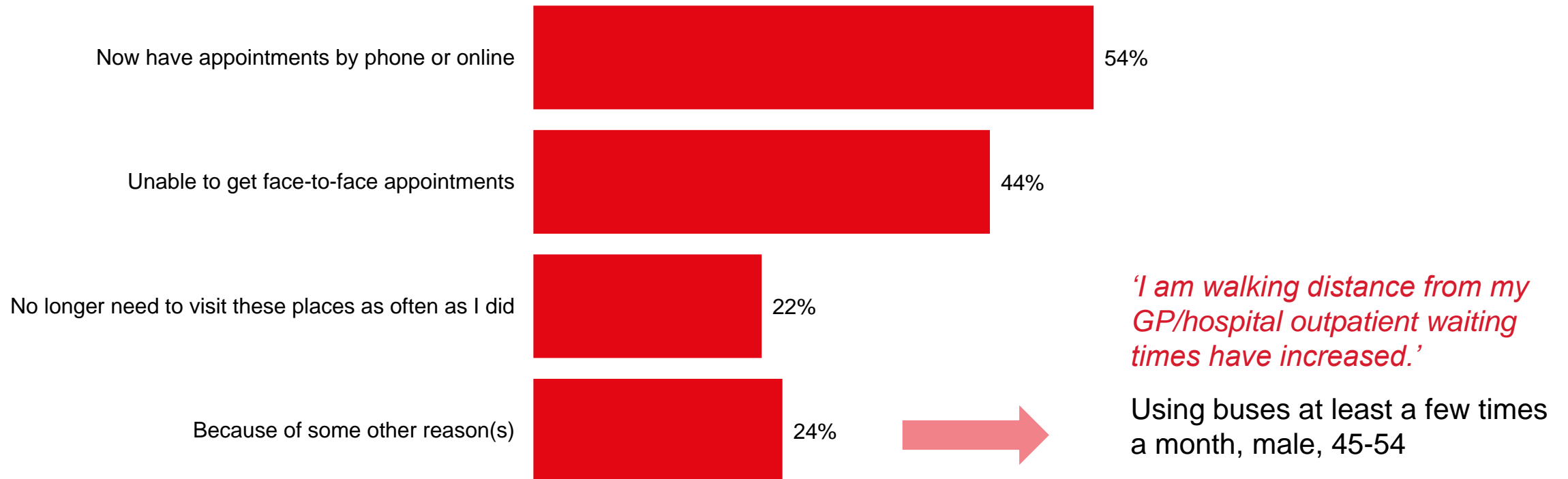
'I changed jobs and it's nearer home, I walk to work and bus home (on quieter bus) when it turns up.'

Using buses at least a few times a month, female, 45-54

Transport User Panellists who hold (or are eligible for) a free pass who used buses less frequently during the pandemic and whose use of bus has remained the same or decreased in the last year because they are making fewer journeys to work (44).

Why are those whose use of bus has not returned to pre-pandemic levels still making few or making fewer journeys to attend medical appointments?

Which, if any, of the following describes why you are still making few / making fewer journeys to visit the GP / hospitals / the dentist over the last year?



Transport User Panellists who hold (or are eligible for) a free pass who used a bus less frequently during the pandemic and whose use of bus has remained the same or decreased in the last year because they are making fewer journeys to visit the GP/hospitals/the dentist (41).

Comments from those who use buses less that say this is because buses are less reliable than they used to be



Buses are regularly cancelled. They have inaccurate real time info, display as 'due' and don't turn up and are not shown as cancelled when they are not operating. They cannot be relied upon to turn up and get me somewhere on time and walking or alternative modes of transport are more reliable.

Using bus a few times a month, male, 45-54

Bus timetables reduced, or completely removed bus services. Buses have become very unreliable on running to timetable, and often cancelled at last minute.

Using bus a few times a month, male, 75-80



The shortage of bus drivers means that random buses are cancelled, with no notification. Especially the early afternoon ones back from the city centre. This particularly affects the service that takes me almost to my door as it is not one of the high frequency routes.

Using bus a few times a month, female, 61-64

Driver shortages have resulted in buses frequently not running.

Using bus a few times a month, male, 75-80



In what ways are buses now less reliable than they used to be?

Comments on the impact of less reliable or reduced bus services



[It] makes me feel even more trapped in my own house. We have gone from a 30 min service to an hourly one that stops at 6pm - meaning I can no longer go into town on a Friday night to the pub.

Using bus a few times a month, male, 71-74

Whereas previously there were direct routes, now it involves changing services with the total journey time doubled because of the indirect route. Also, there's the uncertainty about whether the next bus is running and the prospect of being marooned somewhere and having to wait an hour.

Using bus a few times a month, male, 65-70



I have been deeply affected by the reduction in my local bus service. It is also very unreliable, and the bus company stops the service whenever they feel like it. This affects my mental and physical health when I let people down or when I cannot get to see my friends.

Using bus every day, female, 61-64

Some services have been reduced in frequency especially on Sundays, so I am not happy standing for an hour or so waiting for a bus. Other services have been axed completely in Sheffield leaving areas completely without services. One to Bradfield in Derbyshire from Sheffield greatly used by older people who hike has been completely abolished on Sundays.

Using bus every day, male, 75-80



Please tell us more about how a less reliable bus service and/or the reduction in bus services in your local area has affected you.

Comments from those who use buses less because they are worried about covid



Not being able to use public transport, including buses, due to a lack of coronavirus safety measures has greatly diminished my ability to live the kind of life I enjoyed before the pandemic. At present, with the majority of people choosing not wear masks and infected people most likely not even testing or keeping themselves away, I don't feel confident. I would use public transport more (wearing my own good protection mask) if I could more safely use more indoor spaces such as restaurants, conference venues, theatres and cinemas, museums and galleries, etc.

Using bus at least once or twice a year, female, 71-74



I avoid using buses during the busy period when children are travelling to and from schools and the bus services are very crowded. I try to keep any bus usage between 11am and 2.30pm when there are fewer travellers. It has not affected my health but I am very wary of crowded spaces.

Using bus a few times a month, male, 65-70

I always wear a mask on buses if I am obliged to use them, seems like no-one else does. ... I am terrified of catching a virus which would lead to a chest infection/breathing problems which is not a pleasant experience for me as I suffer from asthma and bronchiectasis.

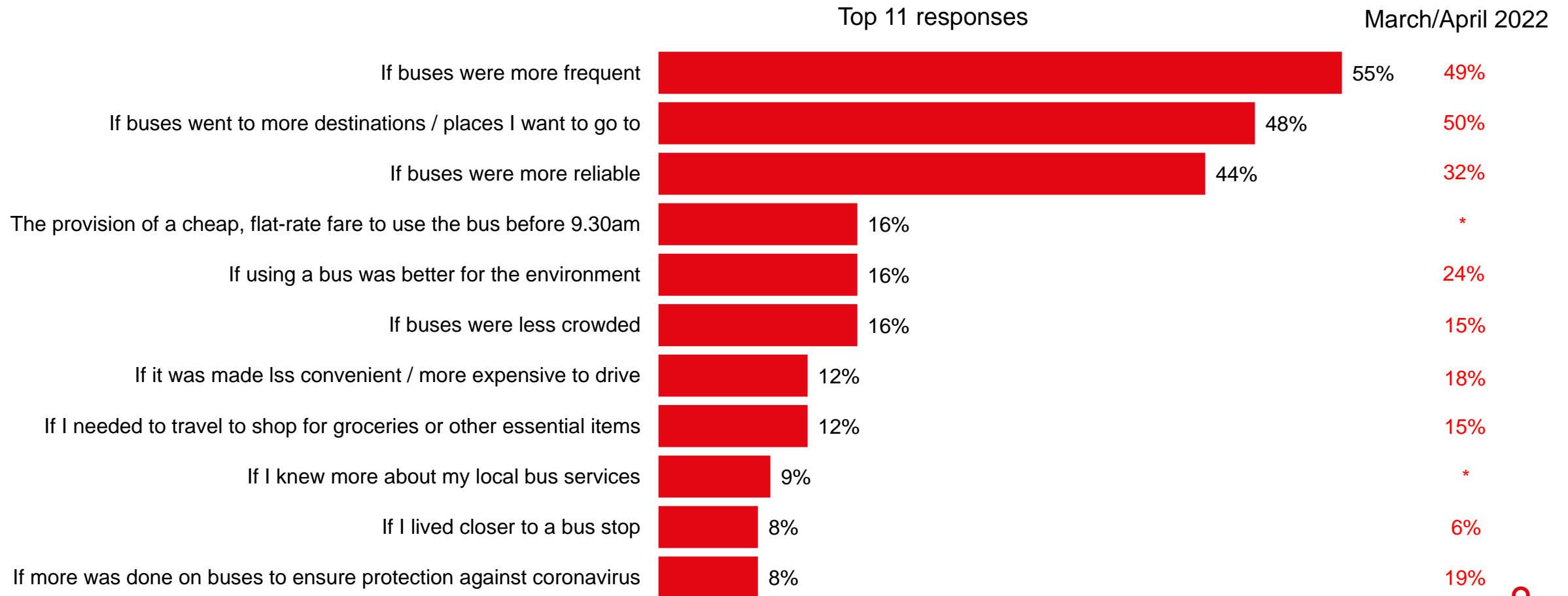
Using bus a few times a month, male, 65-70



Please tell us more about how not being able to use buses because of concerns over your health has affected you.

What would be most likely to encourage those whose use of bus has not returned to pre-pandemic levels, to go back to using bus as often as they did previously?

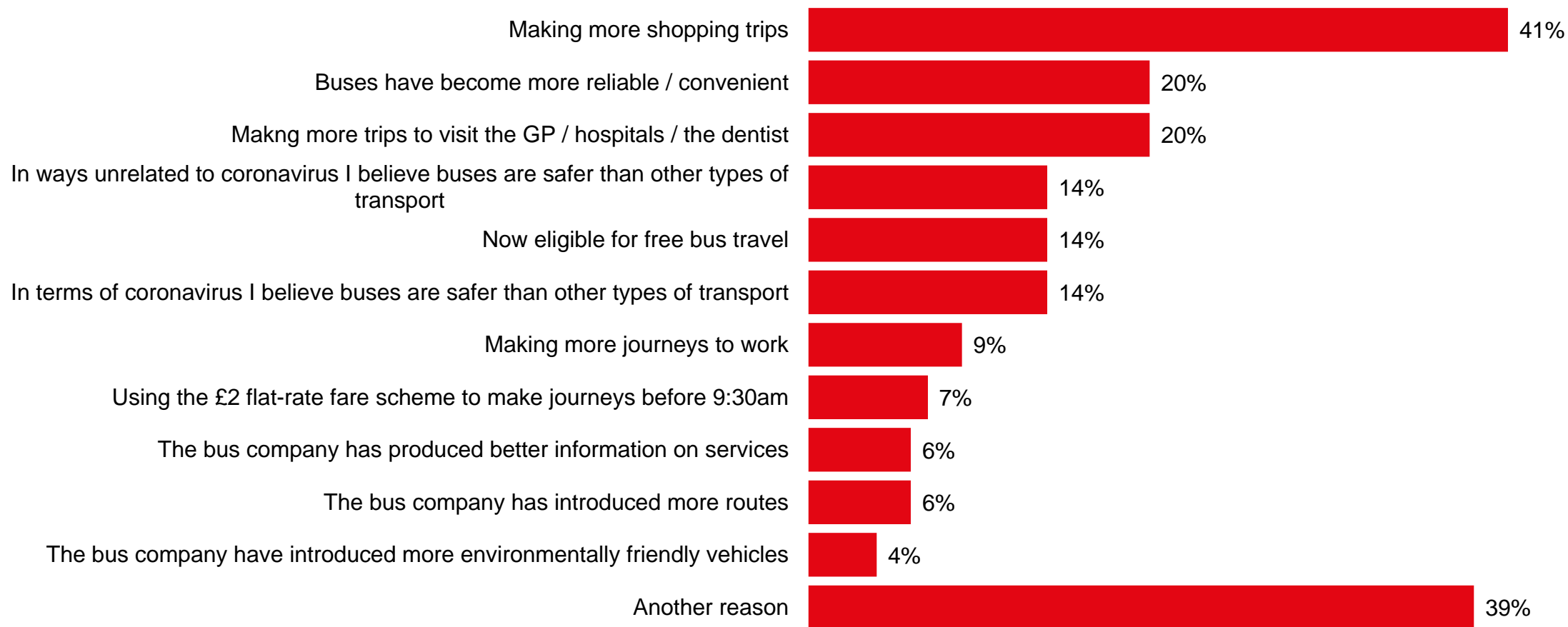
Which five or fewer of the following reasons would be most likely to encourage you to use buses more frequently in the future?



Transport User Panellists who hold (or are eligible for) a free pass who used buses less frequently during the pandemic and whose use of bus has remained the same or decreased in the last year (603). *Not asked in March/April 2022.

What has prompted those whose use of bus has returned to pre-pandemic levels to go back to using buses?

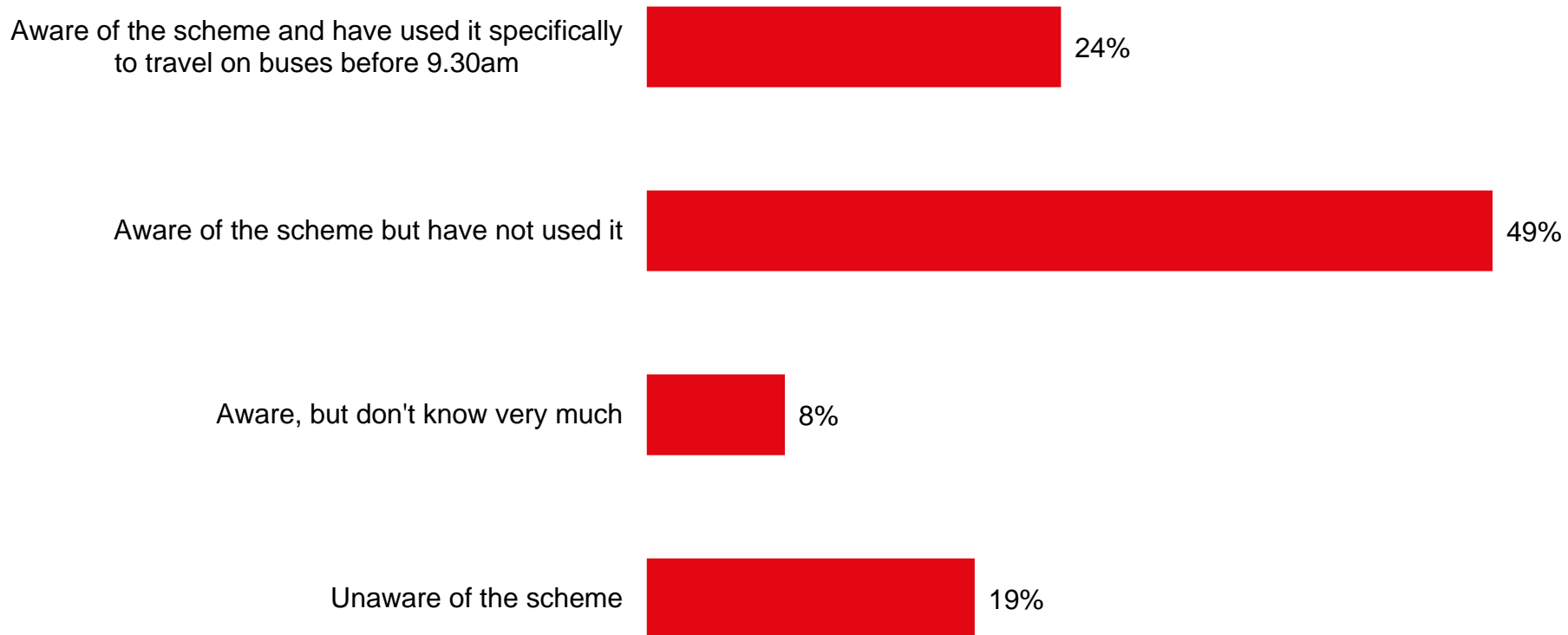
Why has your use of bus increased in the last year?



Transport User Panellists who hold (or are eligible for) a free pass who used buses less frequently during the pandemic and whose use of bus has increased in the last year (1,152).

Use of the £2 flat-rate fare scheme in England (outside of London) to use buses before 9.30am

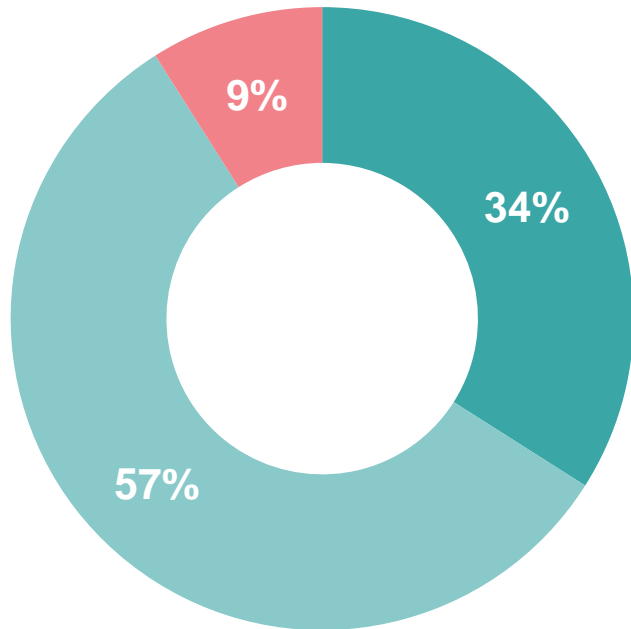
Which of the following statements best describes how aware you are of the £2 bus fare which was introduced recently?



Transport User Panellists who hold (or are eligible for) a free pass to use buses (excludes 'the £2 fare scheme is not applicable to me' – 1818).

Knowledge about local bus services

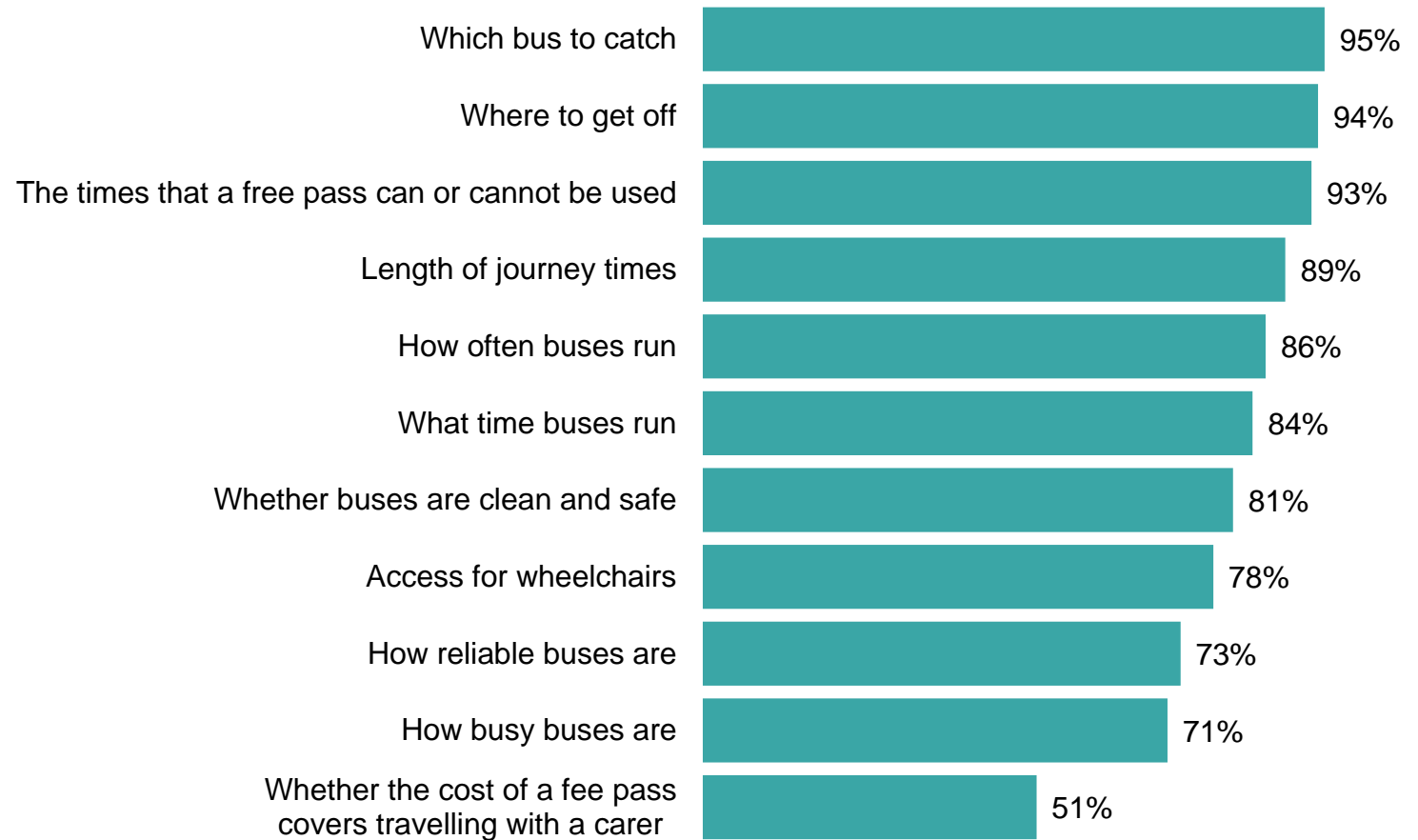
How much overall would you say that you know about your local bus service?



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

...And how much would you say that you know about the following aspects of your local bus service..?

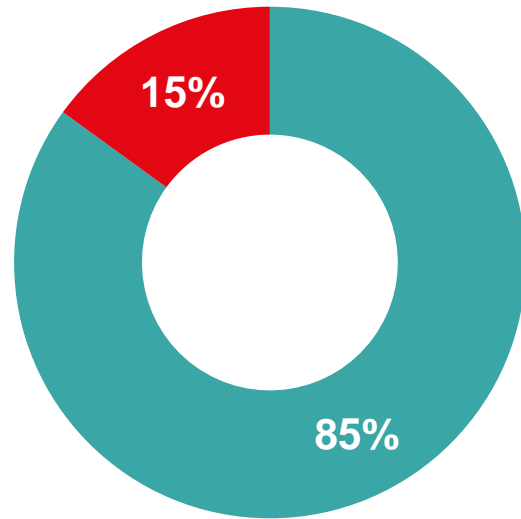
% Everything / Most of what I need to know



Transport User Panellists who hold (or are eligible for) a free pass to use buses (2577).
Those who know at least something about their local bus service (2575)

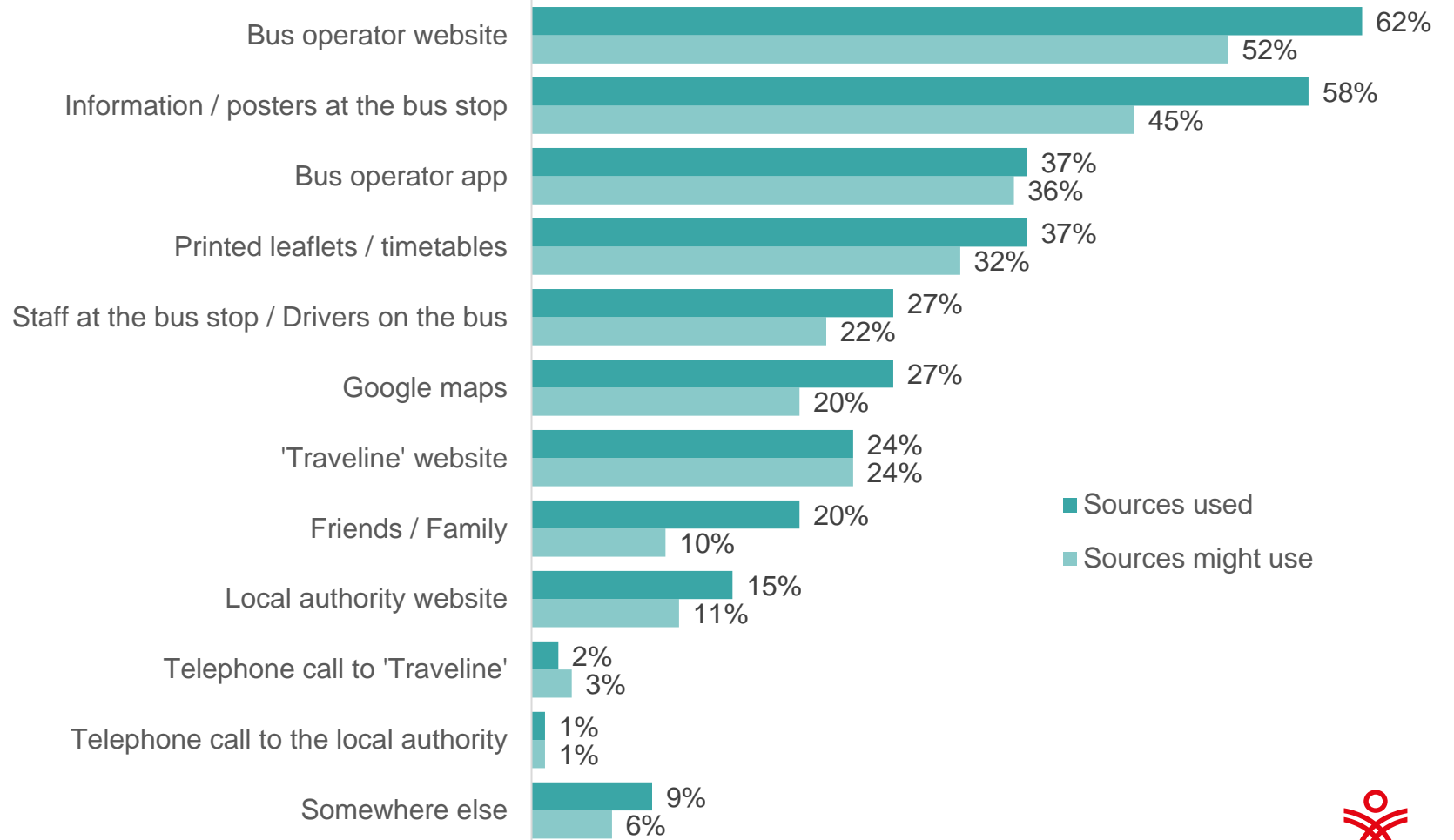
Most have looked for information on their local bus service

Have you ever talked to others or looked for information about your local bus service?



● Yes
● No

Which of the following sources of information have you used / do you think you might use to find out about your local bus service?

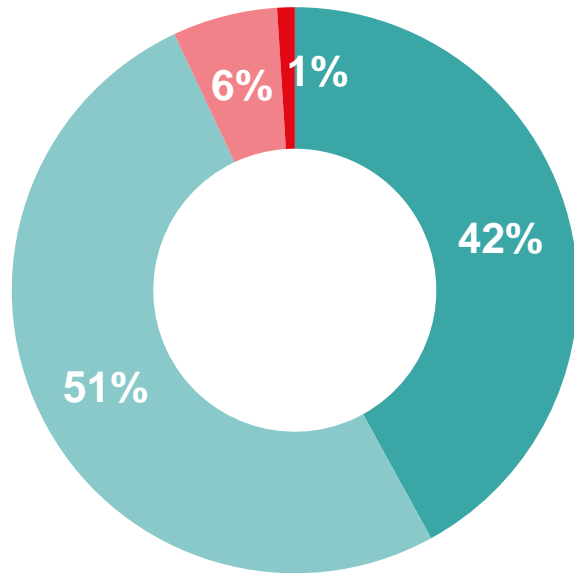


■ Sources used
■ Sources might use

Transport User Panellists who hold (or are eligible for) a free pass to use buses (2577).
 Those who have looked for information about their local bus service (2190). Those that have not (387)

Bus use and fear of Covid

Specifically in relation to coronavirus, how safe do you feel at the moment using buses?

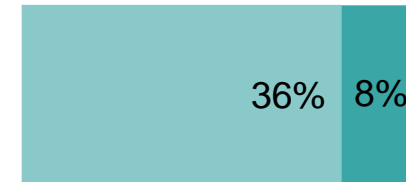


- Very safe
- Fairly safe
- Not very safe
- Not at all safe

March/April 2022:
82% 'safe'

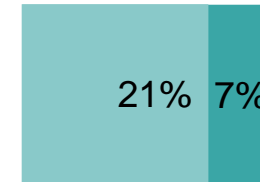
To what extent do you agree or disagree that..?

Enough is being done to ensure coronavirus safety on buses



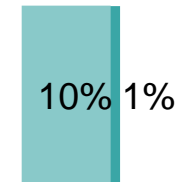
44%

Coronavirus is a major concern for me



54%

I will never again feel completely comfortable travelling on buses



18%

- Strongly agree
- Tend to agree

Conclusions and recommendations



Conclusions and recommendations

A year ago, there were two main reasons why many older and disabled people were not travelling by bus as much as they had been before the pandemic: either they were staying at home more or, when they did go out, they were avoiding public transport because they were afraid of catching Covid.

A year on from the end of the pandemic, numbers have picked up less than expected. While some have started using buses more in the last year, others have not.

There seem to be two types of explanation for this: on the one hand, many are still getting out less, particularly for days out or shopping trips, which have been hit by the cost of living crisis and high street closures; over half of those who would previously have gone out to the shops are now having shopping delivered.

On the other hand, they are travelling less by bus because services have been cut or have become less reliable, in some cases being cancelled at the last minute, with significant consequences for passengers.

A year ago, over half of older and disabled people said coronavirus was a major concern, but this has now reduced to less than three in 10. Only seven per cent are now worried about catching Covid on a bus although, for these people, it still represents a barrier to their return.

Conclusions and recommendations

The underlying economy and the cost of living crisis are likely to continue to affect the number of trips made by older and disabled people, as will the change of habits acquired during the pandemic such as shopping and (to a lesser degree working) from home and the replacement of face-to-face medical appointments with online or telephone appointments.

We heard from older and disabled people who felt trapped and isolated by the removal of services and from others who felt anxious and frustrated by their unreliability.

However, our research indicates that where improvements have been made, passengers have noticed and started using buses more. The bus industry needs to build on this by expanding their networks and improving frequency at key times and reliability, which remain the key drivers of many discretionary bus trips.

Older and disabled people have been telling us for years of their frustration at not being able to use their free passes on buses in the morning rush-hour and a year ago we recommended that the bus industry consider whether reduced fares might help. They have. One in four have used the Government's £2 flat-rate fare scheme in England (outside of London) this year to travel before 9.30am.



Methodology and sample profile



How we did this research

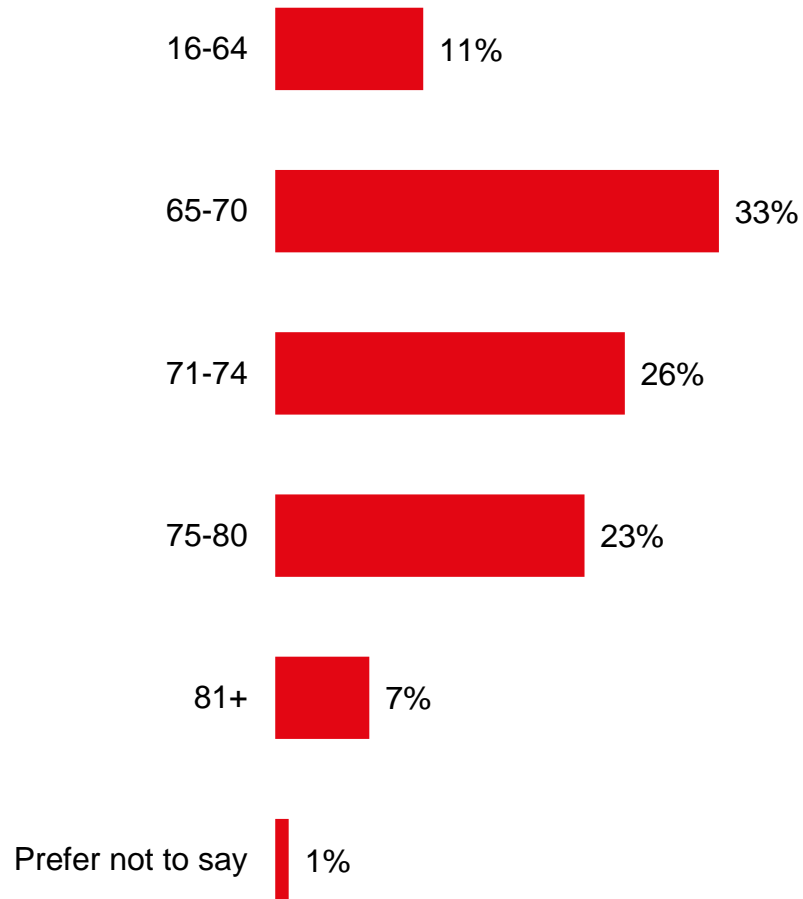
On 16 May 2023 we sent an email invite to complete an online questionnaire to 6712 Transport User Panellists who had previously told us that they use buses to make journeys.

The email made it clear that the questionnaire was targeted at those holding, or eligible to hold, a free pass to use buses. When the survey was closed on 6 June, 2577 responses had been received.

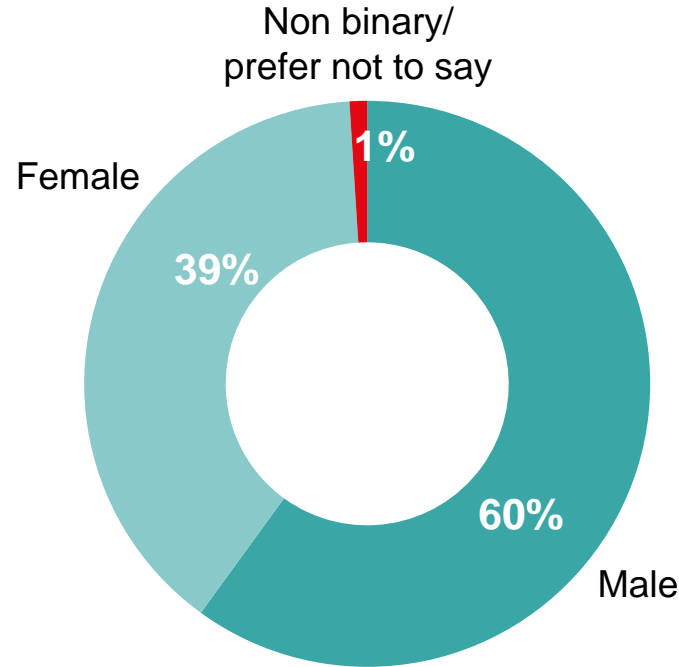
Data in this report is unweighted and should therefore be seen to provide results that are indicative, rather than a statistically representative, of the view of the population of those who travel by bus using an 'older persons' or disabled persons' concessionary bus pass.

Profile of respondents by age, gender and region

Age profile of respondents



Gender profile of respondents



Nations and regions profile of respondents



Transport User Panellists who hold (or are eligible for) a free pass to use buses (2,577)

Contact

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Transport Focus is the operating name of the
Passengers' Council