



Unbanked and digitally excluded

Rail passenger research
September 2025

Background

In their 2023 'Financial Lives' report, the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) estimate that around 1.3 per cent of all adults in the U.K. have no bank account and that 6 per cent rely on cash for most, or all, purchases¹. Similarly, research by Ofcom indicates that 6 per cent of the population don't have internet access at home, while a half of these people will get someone they know to go online for them when necessary².

Transport Focus and the Fares, Ticketing and Retail Programme (FTR)* have both previously explored the issues of digital exclusion and a preference for using cash as they relate to buying tickets to travel by rail. Work undertaken by Transport Focus in 2024 identified that at stations in deprived areas, one-in-three transactions were made in cash³. With innovations in 'tech-led' solutions, it will be important to consider the types of passengers, alluded to above, who may be less able to engage with developments that will benefit the majority.

Transport Focus and the FTR Programme* commissioned research to explore those who are digitally disengaged and those who prefer to use cash in the context of fares, ticketing and retail in rail. This research was undertaken at the start of 2025 and findings are available on the Transport Focus website. This report provides a summary of these findings.

The objectives of the research

The research aimed to understand more about people who are rarely online and those who prefer to use cash to make purchases, to help inform the FTR transformation of the railway. Specifically:

- The general life experiences of these groups. How do they operate in general within a world which is increasingly geared towards online and non-cash payment?
- How the digitally disengaged and cash preferring act within the context of making journeys by rail. What are the perceived challenges for this group in terms of planning and making train journeys?
- What might assist these groups to engage with digital / non-cash modes when using the railway?

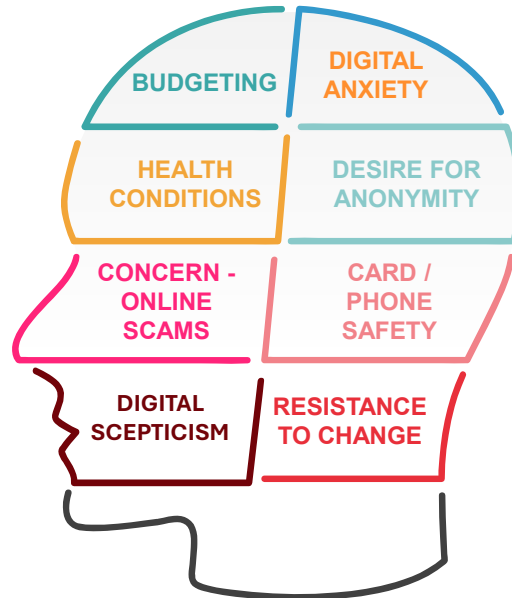
¹ <https://www.fca.org.uk/financial-lives/financial-lives-2023>

² <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/media-use-and-attitudes/media-habits-adults/adults-media-use-and-attitudes>

³ <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/publication/is-cash-still-important-on-todays-railway/>

Research findings

Cash preference and digital disengagement are closely aligned and result from a complex interplay of factors.



The research identifies eight overarching themes which interact to determine the different reasons why some people prefer to limit the extent to which they are online and/or prefer to make purchases using cash.

The themes which were identified are:

- A need to budget carefully**
 Cash is often preferred by those who are trying to restrict spending. Those who prefer to use cash for this reason will need to feel more comfortable managing their finances online. While some people feel that it is easier to see what you have spent your money on when using online banking rather than cash, those who prefer to use cash for budgeting reasons often feel that using a card or app is unnecessarily complicated.
- The presence of underlying health conditions**
 A variety of health conditions can impact people's use of digital devices in different ways. Mental health or physically limiting conditions can intensify feelings of anxiety and vulnerability which reduces trust and confidence in digital systems. For example, the elderly or others with health conditions such as failing eyesight will find it more complicated than others to use interactive screens with smaller boxes or text. In such situations those with health conditions may opt for the easiest and less stressful option which will often include some form of human interaction for reassurance.

- **Concern over online scams**

Anxieties around digital payments are a common concern for those who have been victims of any fraudulent activity in the past. Regardless of digital confidence, all passengers are aware of scams and the potential to be a victim of scammers. Others are concerned simply by the rise of technology and how invasive that this can be – for example the experience of targeted and personalised advertising. These concerns are relevant when people think about purchasing train tickets online, however some also believe that ticket / card-reading machines can be tampered with and are therefore susceptible in the same way.

- **Digital scepticism**

People can be capable of using technology, and not necessarily opposed to it, but still feel that the best deals can be achieved by talking to someone. Against other sectors, the rail industry has a reputation for having complicated and opaque ticket pricing and those who are sceptical of digital means of buying tickets will turn to buying tickets from station staff in ticket offices.

- **Digital anxiety**

Many of those who are digitally disengaged lack the confidence to use digital devices. Those who feel this way are often concerned that there will be significant consequences if they 'get things wrong'. Some of the 'digitally anxious' will be performing some tasks online if they are simple or repeated but will become worried when the task is unfamiliar or when they get to the stage of making a purchase – for example when planning, and then booking, a train journey that they have not made previously. Sometimes this fear is overcome through familiarity, but overcoming the barrier of doing something for the first time is a significant challenge.

- **A desire for anonymity**

Some people have an inherent distrust of the digital world and are concerned that being online or paying by card or digital leaves a 'digital footprint' which might be tracked. Wanting to be digitally anonymous represents a form of self-preservation where a person prevents personally identifiable information being collected, shared, and used for perceived nefarious purposes. Those who feel this way pose a challenge to convert to digital payments which may require any link to them personally – for example, the linking of a digital payment to a ticket for a specific journey.

- **Concerns around card / phone safety**

Some prefer to avoid getting cards or phones out in public unless it is absolutely necessary. Those with card and phone safety concerns tend to feel more vulnerable generally, fear physical confrontation and worry about the

potential implications of losing their phone. Fears around phone safety extends to the use of digital tickets - some are unfamiliar with this technology and are wary of using it, while others are also concerned that using digital tickets relies on having a full battery and a good internet connection.

- **A resistance to change**

Some people simply don't like change – they are happy with the world as it is. Those who feel this way are resistant to changes that they feel do not improve their way of doing things, which may include talking to people, ideally face-to-face. While some of this nature agree that digitalisation has made some of these interactions quicker, they argue that digital has not made them easier or better. They are happier for things to take a little longer to reach a conclusion that they feel more confident about.

Each of the themes outlined above are likely to impact those who are digitally disengaged and those who prefer to use cash to a greater or lesser extent. The table below indicates how significantly each theme is likely to play a role in determining a person's attitude to being online or using cash.

Similarly, the research found that it is helpful to think about each of the themes in terms of whether it illustrates an inability of the person to engage digitally when travelling by rail, or if it is simply that a person feeling this way does not want to.

	Cash preferer	Digitally disengaged		Can't do	Won't do
Budgeting	✓ ✓ ✓	✓		-	✓
Digital anxiety	✓ ✓	✓ ✓ ✓		✓	✓
Health conditions	✓	✓ ✓ ✓		✓	-
Desire for anonymity	✓ ✓	✓ ✓		-	✓
Card / Phone Safety	✓ ✓	✓		-	✓
Concern – online scams	✓	✓ ✓ ✓		✓	✓
Resistance to change	✓ ✓ ✓	✓ ✓ ✓		-	✓
Digital scepticism	✓	✓		-	✓

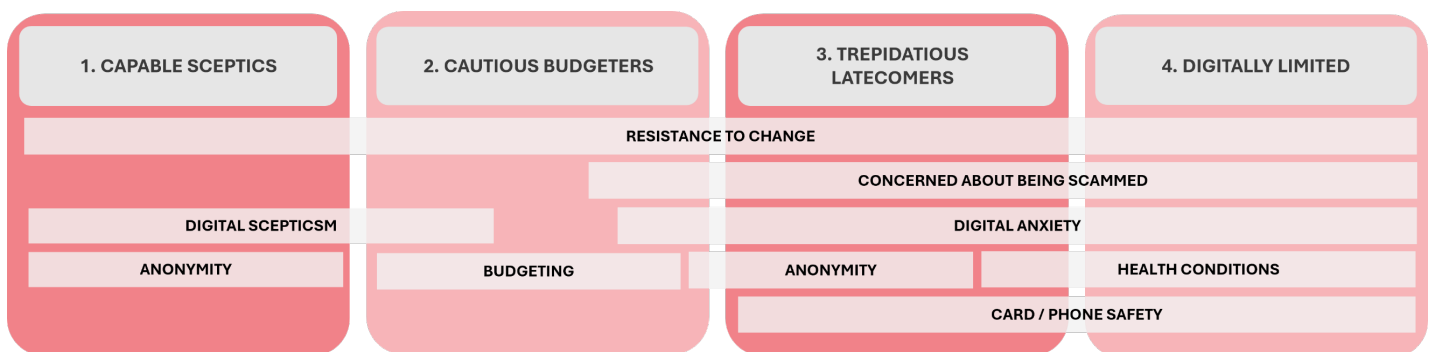
✓ ✓ ✓ High impact
 ✓ ✓ Moderate impact
 ✓ Low impact

Digital disengagement and cash preference tends less to be about a lack of capability and more to do with a lack of desire to engage.

Though participants in the research stated a preference for non-digital interaction with the railway, most did use online forms of purchasing behaviour in other aspects of their lives. It appears, therefore, that many of those who are digitally disengaged or who prefer to use cash will have some degree of digital capability. As indicated above, the themes around digital disengagement and a preference for cash were more to do with a lack of desire to engage with online forms of interaction than with an inability to do so.

Despite some initial resistance to change, all the participants in the research were open to one solution or another and willing to adapt, though they needed to be convinced of the benefit to them personally of making this adaptation. During the analysis of the research findings, it became clear that the themes which underlie digital disengagement and a preference for cash converge and conflict in different ways. The links between these themes were therefore re-drawn to focus on the needs and abilities of different groups.

The way that the general themes cut across this segmentation is illustrated in the table below.



- **Capable sceptics** are characterised as digitally capable yet resistant to change. Most have not fully transitioned to cashless payment because the ability to pay with cash still exists. Capable sceptics very much have a ‘what’s in it for me’ mindset.
- **Cautious budgeters** can pay using cashless methods but hold on to cash as it allows them to control their spending. This group finds clear and transparent pricing and ways to pay which allow for budget control important.

- **Trepidatious latecomers** typically are not digital natives and are therefore not adapted to using technology throughout their lives. They are digitally capable with some support, yet they lack confidence, particularly with online payments. Concerns over safety and privacy also impact on the confidence of this group.
- The **digitally limited** are not likely to ever purchase tickets online or with apps. This subgroup reflects those who do not have bank accounts at all or who have longstanding health conditions.

For some, the characteristics that lead to digital disengagement and a preference for cash are deeply engrained. There are those for whom digital disengagement and the use of cash cuts across all aspects of their lives. In some cases, the attitudes and behaviours which this research addresses originate outside of the person's experience of rail travel and therefore wider societal and infrastructural implications that extend further than the rail industry are relevant.

While it is not surprising to note, it is important to stress that the digitally disengaged and those who prefer to use cash do still rely on rail to make essential journeys.

Across all these groups (capable sceptics, cautious budgeters, trepidatious latecomers and digitally limited), it is important that in the event of any potential further adoption of cashless payment, consideration should be given to help passengers understand any potential changes or implications to access any options or assistance that may become available in the future.

How we did this research

In January 2025, Transport Focus and the FTR Programme* commissioned the independent research agency Quadrangle to undertake research to understand the attitudes and behaviour of two groups: those identified as digitally disengaged, and those who prefer to use cash / rely on the banking system as little as possible. The research comprised:

- An initial stage of desk research where previous work in this area was synthesised to help to define the audiences and to understand how they potentially overlapped.
- A round of 26 individual in-depth interviews carried out by phone or online (where possible) which helped to deepen the understanding of the audiences.
- A final stage of 8 face-to-face focus group discussions, lasting 90 minutes each, in which barriers to using online methods and possible solutions were discussed.

** The Fares, Ticketing & Retail Programme brings together the FTR teams across the Department for Transport, Rail Delivery Group, Train Operating Companies, Shadow GBR and Local Transport Authorities to deliver fares, ticketing and retail reform.*

Contact Transport Focus

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Transport Focus is the operating name of the Passengers' Council