

Weekly Poll – Return to Public Transport

Each week Disability Equality Scotland send out a poll question to our members on a topical issue. For the week beginning 26 July 2021, we asked a question about confidence in returning to using public transport.

Results

Question 1. Do you feel confident to use public transport as COVID-19 restrictions begin to ease?

- YES – 28% (41 respondents)
- NO – 72% (104 respondents)

Comments

We provide verbatim comments where appropriate to illustrate strength of feeling or personal experience. Overall, disabled people had reservations about returning to using public transport. These were in relation to the increased numbers of people using public transport and subsequent ability to maintain physical distancing as well as the continued wearing of face coverings. These issues will be discussed in more detail below.

Physical distancing

There were concerns that as more people return to using the transport network, physical distancing would become harder to maintain. The current guidance suggests that there is a 1 metre distance between passengers and not all seats are in operation, although from 09 August 2021 all physical distancing rules will be relaxed. Some respondents indicated they were not comfortable traveling in close proximity to others.

“I think that social distancing will be problematic, and people will get too relaxed about this. As a result, travelling with public transport will have risks of spreading the virus. I won’t be using it for some time and until I feel more confident.”

“Passengers are far too close, and it is not safe. It also does make me feel uncomfortable too on public transport.”

“Already too many people are not wearing their face coverings or distancing 1m, especially on buses and in train stations.”

The removal of physical distancing restrictions from 09 August 2021 will undoubtedly cause some disabled people concern about traveling on public transport.

Face coverings

Face coverings remain mandatory on public transport unless you are medically exempt and this will be the case for some time, in accordance with Scottish Government legislation beyond restrictions lifting on 09 August 2021. Some respondents felt uncomfortable to travel while other passengers were not wearing face coverings (whether exempt or otherwise).

“I feel confident to travel as long as mask wearing is still in place. There are still passengers getting on buses and simply saying ‘I’m exempt’. I don’t feel comfortable with this.”

There was a perception that the wearing of face coverings on public transport was not being monitored by transport staff and therefore some passengers do not wear their masks correctly or remove them during the journey.

“I travelled by train recently and saw few people not wearing masks for the whole journey.”

“Although there are still rules regarding the wearing of facemasks and social distancing on public transport, this isn’t always possible and the rules are not enforced. For people who are still at risk of COVID-19 due to disability or inability to be vaccinated, this still means there is a risk of infection – given the increase in people using public transport this risk will only increase.”

While the wearing of face coverings is likely to remain a mandatory requirement on public transport for some time to come; some respondents felt that unless there is stricter monitoring and enforcement; some passengers will not abide by the rules and chose not to wear a covering.

Hate Crime

While some respondents indicated their concerns about using transport while others are not wearing face coverings; those exempt from wearing a face covering often faced discrimination, harassment or abuse for not wearing a face covering. This impacted on their confidence to travel.

“I have been subjected to abuse for not wearing my face covering. I am exempt, but this has affected my confidence to use public transport.”

“I get a bit uncomfortable sometimes as some passengers get a bit aggressive with people who are exempt from wearing face coverings.”

Disabled people also faced abuse in relation to physical distancing. For example, one respondent faced abuse for refusing to enter an already crowded bus. There were similar examples from those with visual impairments who found it difficult to physically distance and who faced abuse for not maintaining their distance.

“I refused to get on a bus recently as there were passengers standing as all seats were full. I did get some verbal abuse for this, but feel it was the bus company at fault for permitting this.”

“My visual impairment makes it difficult to maintain social distancing on public transport and generates hostility from other passengers.”

Attitude of transport staff

Disabled people often look to the transport staff for support in these situations of abuse and harassment. Respondents reported that often it can depend on the attitude of the individual transport staff as to the relative satisfaction with their journey, and overall confidence to travel.

“Basically, all drivers do not share the same ethos as each other. It can be so very off putting to encounter a driver who comes across as ‘oh, here we go’ or on the other side of the scale are the considerate drivers who will go all out to help you.”

“Days for disabled people are hard enough without having to consider whether going on a journey on a bus is going to make us feel even more patronised.”

Disability Equality Scotland, together with its partners launched the National Hate Crime Charter earlier this year – a zero tolerance approach to hate crime on public transport. The project will focus on raising awareness of hate crime, abuse and harassment and ensure transport staff are trained to recognise incidents and support disabled people to make reports. Find out more at www.accessibletravel.scot/hate-crime

Shielding

Some respondents had been shielding for many months over the lockdown period. These disabled people reported they felt ‘terrified’ to return to using public transport. This was based on perceptions of how difficult it was to navigate public transport pre-COVID-19, particularly ensuring there was a wheelchair space available. There was a perception that it would be more difficult with increased passengers and physical distancing.

“I don’t feel confident enough to go outside yet, so the idea of getting on public transport is terrifying! I found it stressful before COVID with booking assistance and hoping there would be a wheelchair spot on buses, etc so with COVID in the mix, I’m avoiding public transport at all costs.”

Changes to transport provision

During lockdown, some people have found that there have been changes to the transport network in their area. For example, some bus routes have changed, or roads closed to increase physical distancing under the Spaces for People initiative. This has meant that some bus stops have relocated into locations which are difficult to navigate. To use public transport, disabled people also must navigate the ‘first and last mile’ from door to door. For some, this remains an issue, with pavement parking and the introduction of floating bus stops which create anxiety about travel.

“There have been numerous changes to routes, bus stops and road arrangements during the pandemic. This makes me very anxious because I can’t walk far and I dread going somewhere and not being able to get home again.”

“I am scared of using the new floating bus stops because I have pinned hips and struggle to get off the bus onto the kerb at the best of times. I have fallen doing so in the past and because I do not want to get off the

bus into a cycle lane. I do not find that all cyclists are considerate to people like me who move slowly.”

“Even if I wanted to use public transport locally, I still cannot safely get to a bus route due to persistent pavement parking, abandoned vehicles, much pavement clutter, blocked dropped kerbs, etc.”

Positive experiences

There were some respondents who had recent positive experiences of using public transport. They reported a system that had precautionary health and safety measures in place to support a safe return, including sufficient space to maintain distancing.

“I have used Aberdeen buses a few times and on all occasions, there was enough room to keep the recommended distance apart and everyone was prepared to adapt to help others.”

“Yes, I feel confident to use public transport; it is well managed and correct COVID rules are followed.”

“I have used train, bus and Glasgow underground. I found them all to be clean, pleasant and precautionary.”

Conclusion

Disabled people do have concerns about returning to public transport. There concerns were largely around maintaining physical distancing and face coverings; both the perspective of wanting passengers to wear them, but also to be respectful of those medically exempt and unable to wear a face covering. With restrictions to further ease from 09 August 2021 when there will be no requirement for physical distancing, disabled people may feel further concerns about returning to public transport use. Disability

Equality Scotland is hosting a webinar discussion on this topic, to hear from transport operators about the safety measures they have in place to ensure all passengers are comfortable and safe to travel.

In addition, challenges that disabled people faced pre-pandemic continue to make travel difficult for disabled passengers. This includes negotiating pavements, parked cars and the attitude and behaviour of transport staff and other passengers as incidents of hate crime, harassment and abuse continue to be reported by disabled people. Disability Equality Scotland is working with Transport Scotland and operators to address these concerns.

About Disability Equality Scotland

We are a national charity working to make life more accessible, equal and inclusive for disabled people in Scotland.

We promote access in its widest sense, including access to the built and natural environment and access to the same opportunities as are enjoyed by others in our communities thus promoting a life of dignity, respect, choice and independence. This extends beyond physical access to include access to information, access to inclusive communication and inclusion in decision-making, whether with planners over inclusive design or transport providers about accessible travel.

We represent the views of individuals with any type of impairment, as well as disability organisations and groups who share Disability Equality Scotland's values.

We are also the umbrella organisation for all disability Access Panels in Scotland and the principal provider of support and guidance to the Access Panels presently representing disabled persons at a local level throughout Scotland. Access Panels are committed to improving access and equality

in its widest form, which means access to the physical environment, Education, Housing, Health, Transport, Leisure & Recreation and Social Justice amongst other areas.

We are membership led. If you are an individual or an organisation, you can [join our membership](#) for FREE and help to further our aims. We work to influence the policies of the Scottish Government, which affect how disabled people live and we work to encourage others to be inclusive and informed in their attitudes towards disabled people.