

Return to Public Transport Webinar

Summary report



Introduction

With COVID-19 restrictions beginning to ease, we wanted to create a better understanding of how confident disabled people feel about using public transport. There is guidance in place to ensure that passengers remain safe, although some restrictions such as physical distancing have been removed. Face coverings remain mandatory (unless exempt) when travelling on public transport, or in a taxi or private hire vehicle, or when in a bus or railway station, enclosed ferry terminal or airport.

Disability Equality Scotland worked in collaboration with Transport Scotland to present this discussion. The event took place digitally using the Zoom platform on 19 August 2021 in line with physical distancing guidelines for COVID-19.

There were 43 people in attendance. This report summarises the discussions at this event.

Background

In July 2021, Disability Equality Scotland asked its members whether they felt confident to use public transport now that restrictions begin to ease.

The findings highlighted that 72% of respondents said that they did not feel confident to travel and had some specific concerns around face coverings and physical distancing.

Disability Equality Scotland then brought together its members with transport operators in a webinar discussion to hear what measures remain in place to ensure passenger safety, and what to expect from each mode when planning a journey on their service.

This paper summarises the discussions from five break-out groups on the day.

Panel discussion

Emma Scott, from Disability Equality Scotland set the context of the day and introduced the panelists:

- Robert Burns –FirstBus
- Paul White – Confederation of Passenger Transport
- Mark O'Mailley –ScotRail
- Billy Robb –NorthLink Ferries

Transport updates:

Bus

- Physical distancing no longer required.
- Windows remain open for ventilation with window blocks to prevent full closure
- Face coverings still required
 - Audio and visual announcements reminding customers about wearing face coverings
 - Drivers issue discreet ticket to enforce messaging
- Three-step cleaning process; buses cleaned daily, enhanced cleaning each night and every 28 days buses are fogged.
- FirstBus app – seat availability checker, including wheelchair space checker.

Train

- Physical distancing no longer required
- Face coverings still required – but not enforced by staff
 - Announcements and on screen on train
- Enhanced cleaning regime at stations and on trains
 - Cleaning train while in motion
- All ticket gates at stations now in operation
- From 23 August First Class carriages reopen
- From 25 August allocated seat reservations return.

Ferry

- NorthLink open at full capacity now
- Cleaning regimes still in force
 - Daily, including all cabins
- Face coverings still required
- New Changing Places toilet available on-board
- Google maps facility to look round the boat before making a journey
- Booking website also upgraded
 - Includes text size change, colour change and audio software

Key discussion points

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 participants were concerned about the numbers of passengers traveling on public transport without a face covering (whether exempt or otherwise).

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. In addition, there was a concern that during the summer months, the influx of tourists, who may not be aware of face covering rules, don't abide by the current restrictions, causing increased anxiety to passengers.

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. However, it was also acknowledged that enforcement is not an easy task for transport staff, who might also be putting themselves at risk of abuse by challenging people.

It was suggested therefore that exemptions and the different cards that people might show on entry to public transport, such as the [Thistle Assistance Card](#) or the [National Face Covering Exemption Card](#) are promoted more widely to transport staff.

“I don’t think public messaging is sympathetic towards disabled people in the exemption category. Posters either don’t reference exemptions or if it is mentioned, it’s in smaller print, which will be missed by passers-by.”

Physical distancing

Physical distancing rules have been in place throughout the pandemic, however as of 09 August 2021, all physical distancing rules were relaxed. Some participants indicated they were not comfortable traveling in close proximity to others.

There tended to be more apprehension about making a longer journey on public transport. This was where people were traveling to meet with family or friends for the first time in a while. These journeys were more likely to be described as ‘stressful’ as people were anxious of the time spent in proximity to other passengers.

There was also a suggestion that there needs to be a judgement call from transport staff to monitor passenger levels to maintain a safe number. Some participants stated that their recent experience was stressful as buses and trains were very busy, with people standing in the aisles and blocking doors.

“If left to personal responsibility then people are likely going to travel regardless as they won’t want to prolong their journey time by waiting on a less busy service.”

One suggestion included having an app, similar to that used on some bus services which allows passengers to check seat availability in advance of a journey.

Cleaning

Regular cleaning was a requirement which made passengers feel more comfortable to travel. The transport providers' presentations indicated the levels of cleaning that are being undertaken, but some passengers fed-back that their experience on the ground was sometimes different, with early morning services not being as clean as they might have expected.

Information about journeys

Participants discussed that some journeys had changed, in terms of timetable changes or location of stops and stations. Many transport providers had audio and visual announcements to alert passengers to the next stop, or perhaps reminding them of face-covering restrictions. In some cases, the audio and visual announcements didn't quite match up with the location of the transport. There was considerable anxiety about coping with service disruptions and when things go wrong.

"Sometimes on trains the audio and visual info isn't quite right. These faults need to be righted as soon as possible. It can make or break a journey."

Participants also raised their concerns about transport providers using technology more and more to relay service information. Many disabled people do not have access to technology nor live in areas where broadband services can support the use of apps or technology and so there also has to be alternative formats employed in order to be inclusive.

Attitude and Behaviours of Transport Staff

Some participants recalled previous negative experiences with transport staff. There were examples of this manifesting where transport staff did not wait till passengers were seated before moving off, where ramps were not lowered for wheelchair users, or where face-covering exemptions were challenged. These incidents made disabled people feel uncomfortable and negatively impacted their likelihood to travel.

Passenger assistance

In addition, participants noted that accessing passenger assistance had been an issue during the pandemic, as there was reduced staff capacity,

but also a perceived reluctance by some passengers that staff did not want to support passenger assistance to maintain physical distancing.

Disability Awareness Training

Although the transport providers indicated that transport staff undertake disability awareness training, there was a call for this to be ongoing, rather than a token one-off. It should also be timely and include information for transport staff about face covering exemptions, and the associated cards that people may show to indicate they are exempt from face coverings or information on support that is required whilst traveling. It was vital that the training covers all disabilities and that it focuses on the disabled person; the challenges they face and the impact that attitude and behaviours can make to the individual and their overall satisfaction with the journey, as well as their likelihood to travel again. In this respect, training should be designed and delivered with and by disabled people themselves.

Participants did recognise that there should be extra support in place to support transport staff taking on an extra level of responsibility during this time in keeping everyone safe.

It was also identified that meetings and events, such as those facilitated by Disability Equality Scotland should continue, to ensure engagement between providers and their service users. This allows providers to hear firsthand some of the concerns and perceptions of passengers.

Preferred travel in a pandemic

There was a counterview from some participants who had been traveling during the pandemic. They indicated that in some cases travel during restrictions had been less problematic for them than the norm. There were reports of some unexpected benefits such as more space on public transport which resulted in increased mobility. They reported there was more support available and with fewer passengers; this made access easier.

“It was easier and less stressful to move around stations and on board. Getting access to support with travel and accessible travel support was easier.”

These points were countenanced by the anxieties of moving ‘back to breaking point’ with a return to full capacity on public transport. Participants reflected on just how stressed the transport network had felt before restrictions had come into force. There would be less space, less availability of support and the absorptive capacity of the system for disabled people would decrease.

“Back to standing room only.”

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