

NO JOURNEY LEFT BEHIND

Making public transport accessible
for people with a learning disability



Written by

mencap

Funded by



**Motability
Foundation**

Making all journeys accessible

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Thank you to...

...all the people with a learning disability and their supporters who took part in this research by sharing their experiences of using public transport. We would also like to thank the five people who formed our research group and worked with us to make sure the research was led by people with a learning disability at every stage.

Further thanks go out to the following groups for their significant contribution to the research and its recommendations:

- Carrickfergus & District Senior Gateway Club
- Eastleigh Borough and Romsey Mencap Society
- Leek Gateway Club
- Mencap Strule Buzz Group
- Northallerton and The Dales Mencap Society
- Way Ahead Support Services

We would also like to express our thanks to Mencap's Network Partners, other learning disability organisations and stakeholders across the UK for their promotion of our national survey.

This research was made possible through the funding and support by the Motability Foundation. We sincerely thank the Motability Foundation for their commitment to this project.

Foreword

This is important research which lays bare one of the major barriers people with a learning disability face to inclusion. Public transport is important for everyone, but especially for people with a learning disability who are less likely to own a car or be able to drive. Buses, in particular, are vital for people to be able to work, see family and complete daily activities like shopping and socialising – so a good transport network is absolutely essential to quality of life.

At Mencap, we have long known that the state of public transport is letting people with a learning disability down, but this report sets out the evidence to demonstrate this to others and makes some important recommendations.

Less than half of the survey respondents said they feel safe on public transport and two-thirds said it makes them stressed. Over half say that there is not enough public transport and that it is over-crowded. Many don't have the travel pass they are entitled to because the process of applying is inaccessible. There are recommendations in this report to address all of these issues. Some require modest additional investment, but many are low or no cost. Consulting people to make the application process for a travel pass more accessible and getting rid of annual renewals could actually save money. And there is absolutely no excuse for staff being rude, shouting or using bullying behaviours.

There is also lots of evidence that people with a learning disability want to help make the change they want to see. There are examples of people coming up with great suggestions which are not listened to. We hope that the Government, policymakers and transport operators read this and think about how they can base their systems around the needs of people with a learning disability by involving them in their plans. If they do, then they will make our public transport system better for everyone.

This research has been led by people with a learning disability and I sincerely hope that gives it the extra weight it deserves so that people are listened to, and its findings are acted upon. We are grateful to the generosity of the Motability Foundation's funding and to every single one of the more than a thousand people who gave up their time to participate.

Jon Sparkes
Chief Executive, Mencap

Foreword

Being given the opportunity to work on this project was a valuable experience. Without public transport, people with a learning disability might not be able to work, see family and complete daily activities. Public transport helps me when I need to get to work from the station to my house. Without it, I wouldn't be able to travel into the office.

It was very interesting to look at the results from the survey and hear real life experiences from adults with a learning disability about using public transport. My role in the project was to work on creating the questions for the national survey, as well as making sure that we are being led by our co-researchers with a learning disability. I also worked on analysing the data and interviewed some people about their journeys on public transport.

I feel that with what we have learnt during the last 15 months, we can make a big difference and improve public transport for adults with a learning disability.

Dan Newton
Research and Impact Assistant

Executive summary

Public transport connects people to their communities, work, education and healthcare. But existing research shows that people with a disability travel less than people without a disability – and people with a learning disability in particular travel less than they want and need to. Despite this, there has been little research that looks at the barriers to using public transport faced by people with a learning disability across the UK. Crucially, very little research has been led by people with a learning disability themselves.

This project aimed to:

- Research public transport barriers experienced by people with a learning disability in the UK.
- Understand the impact on people's wellbeing, social connections and ability to gain and maintain employment.
- Provide recommendations on how to make public transport more accessible

We heard from over 1000 people with a learning disability. Ten people filmed their journeys on public transport and shared their experiences of travelling. We also ran a national survey that received 1,107 responses and held seven focus groups with a total of 34 participants.

People with a learning disability and their supporters were involved every step of the way. A group of co-researchers with a learning disability worked to design the research, collect and analyse data, build recommendations and share findings. We were also supported by people with a learning disability, their families, carers and supporters from six local Mencap groups.

Our research found that public transport simply does not meet the needs of many people with a learning disability, restricting their independence, increasing isolation and negatively affecting their wellbeing. People with a learning disability rely on public transport, as the majority do not drive, but 39% of respondents said there was a time they did not go out in the last month because they were worried about using public transport and almost two thirds (62%) said public transport makes them feel stressed.

Over half (57%) of respondents said there is not enough public transport near them or it does not come often enough and this stops them from using public transport. Nearly a third (29%) said the cost of public transport stops them or sometimes stops them from using it, yet only 43% of survey respondents said they have a disability travel pass - reasons for this included being ruled ineligible for a pass, not receiving a necessary companion pass or because they found the process of applying for a pass too inaccessible.

Less than half (42%) of respondents agreed they feel safe when using public transport, with a majority linking their concerns to witnessing antisocial behaviour, experiencing disability hate crime or feeling especially vulnerable to abuse. **We identified six key barriers** to using public transport for people with a learning disability:

- 1. Public transport is confusing**
- 2. Travel passes and tickets are not fit for purpose**
- 3. Travel spaces are not accessible**
- 4. Public transport is unreliable**
- 5. Public transport staff do not understand learning disability**
- 6. Public transport is unsafe.**

These barriers were reported by participants across all geographies, however, for people with a learning disability living in rural areas, limited transport services exacerbated many of these issues.

We identified nine ways to make public transport more accessible for people with a learning disability:

- 1. Make travel feel familiar no matter where you go.** When systems look and work the same, it is easier for people with a learning disability to learn and remember how to use them in a way that works for them.
- 2. Co-produce accessible travel information.** People with a learning disability need clear, simple and accessible information to travel confidently on public transport. Information should be co-produced and available both online and in physical forms.
- 3. Create lifetime travel passes without time restrictions.** People with a learning disability should be able to use public transport any time of the day or week, without restriction. As a learning disability is a lifelong condition, a lifetime travel pass would prevent the need for unnecessary re-applications which can be particularly challenging.
- 4. Provide companion passes.** As public transport is hard to understand and spaces are often inaccessible, many people with a learning disability need supporters to travel with them. Companion passes ensure people with a learning disability and their families can use public transport without facing additional financial barriers.
- 5. Build quiet and calm zones.** Many people with a learning disability struggle with sensory overwhelm or may need a peaceful space away from crowds where they can access additional support.
- 6. Support people when things change.** Delays and cancellations can happen to anyone, but for a lot of people with a learning disability this can cause heightened stress and anxiety. Putting systems in place to support people with a learning disability to navigate these situations is key.

- 7. Involve more people with a learning disability.** People with a learning disability and the people that support them should be involved in future conversations and decisions about how public transport is run.
- 8. Have more passenger awareness campaigns.** This should help improve staff and public understanding of learning disability and hidden disabilities, promoting patience, acceptance of differences and respect for priority seats and spaces.
- 9. Promote 'Safe Place' locations.** A 'Safe Place' is a registered location that will provide help and support to anyone feeling anxious or frightened. We recommend that more cafes, libraries and shops sign up to be a Safe Place for people with a learning disability to go for support.

Information

To get support you can contact Mencap's Learning Disability Helpline. It offers free advice and support for people with a learning disability, their families and carers.

Phone: 0808 808 1111

Email: helpline@mencap.org.uk

Northern Ireland

Phone: 0808 808 1111 (Option 2)

Email: helpline.ni@mencap.org.uk

Wales Phone: 0808 8000 300

Email: helpline.wales@mencap.org.uk

1 Background

A learning disability is a reduced intellectual ability and difficulty with everyday activities that lasts for the whole of someone's life. Some people with a learning disability may find household tasks, socialising and managing money challenging. They may need additional support to learn and develop new skills. Others may need to be fully supported in all areas of their life, including with communication, personal care and staying safe. Although a learning disability is lifelong, many people can develop new skills. With the right support and an inclusive community, people with a learning disability can thrive.

There are around

1.5 million people with a learning disability in the UK.¹

Public transport connects us to other people, leisure activities, work, healthcare and education services. However, people with a learning disability say that public transport does not meet their needs. Existing research has identified irregular and infrequent services, crowded vehicles and physical inaccessibility as key barriers for people with a learning disability when accessing public transport.² Navigating transport systems has also been shown to be challenging for people with a learning disability. Routes and schedules can be complex and confusing, with travel often demanding on-the-spot problem solving.³

Barriers to accessing public transport for people with a learning disability identified in existing research.^a

crowded confusing
unfamiliar unclear hard to problem solve
physical inaccessibility
rushed lost hate crime stressful
unsafe limited difficult
time expensive unreliable
disorienting tiring unhelpful staff unpredictable
noisy tickets hard to plan irregular
anxious no respect overwhelming
no support
poor connections

A fragmented transport system has furthermore created a postcode lottery of varying complexities and levels of service. In rural areas, people have to travel significantly further to reach a stop or station which will run significantly fewer services compared to those living in urban areas and average minimum travel times in rural areas are almost double that in urban areas.⁴ It is acknowledged that people with a learning disability are less likely to drive than people without a learning disability, therefore, local variations in service have a greater impact on their mobility. Lifts from family carers and private taxis are commonly relied upon to bridge the gap, but these options can be expensive and are not open to all.⁵

Without accessible public transport, the 1.5 million people with a learning disability in the UK face significant limitations to their independence, health and wellbeing, employment prospects and social inclusion.^{6,7} On average, people with a disability take 25% fewer trips than people without a disability.⁸ People with a learning disability want to travel twice as often, but poor transport holds them back.

Existing research tends to aggregate data on all disabilities, making it difficult to understand clearly the experiences of people with a learning disability. Moreover, most studies have small sample sizes and do not focus on providing targeted recommendations as to how public transport can be improved.

In the absence of UK-based participatory research that focuses on the experiences and needs of people with a learning disability, this research aimed to:

- Research and provide recommendations on public transport barriers experienced by people with a learning disability in the UK.
- Understand how this impacts their wellbeing, social connections and ability to gain and maintain employment.

2 Methods

2.1. Community involvement

Co-producing research with people with a learning disability and the people who support them is essential to ensure that knowledge creation and future decision making is led by those with lived experience.

A group of three people with and without a learning disability formed the core research team, working with a research group of five other people with a learning disability on the design, data collection, data analysis and dissemination of this research. These five individuals were supported to develop new or existing research skills, including facilitating interviews and engaging with thematic analysis.

We created further opportunities to hear from people with a learning disability, family carers and support workers across the UK by collaborating with six local Mencap groups:

- Carrickfergus & District Senior Gateway Club
- Eastleigh Borough and Romsey Mencap Society
- Leek Gateway Club
- Mencap Strule Buzz Group
- Northallerton and The Dales Mencap Society
- Way Ahead Support Services.

These groups shared crucial insights into transport accessibility within their communities, contributed towards the writing of focus group questions, supported with participant recruitment, hosted focus groups and identified key recommendations for policy makers and transport companies.

2.2. Data collection

Data collection took place in three stages, with each stage informing the questions and focus of the one that followed.

In stage one, ten people with a learning disability across the UK took a journey on public transport, wearing a mounted camera that recorded the journey from their point of view. Two journeys were conducted in Northern Ireland (one in the East and another in the West), one in South Wales, two in Scotland, one in North East England, one in the Midlands and three in London. Participants had a range of support needs: six travelled

with a supporter and four travelled independently. Only two participants chose to take an unfamiliar journey, with the other eight going somewhere they had been before. After their journey, each participant completed an interview with a co-researcher with a learning disability where they shared their story. This included talking about the journey they had just taken, as well as their experiences of using public transport more broadly.

1. June

We carried out a literature review to understand what research had already been done in this area.

2. July

We worked with our research group, internal stakeholders and six local Mencap groups to co-design the research questions.

3. August

Ten people with a learning disability did a 'video journey' on public transport. Afterwards, they shared their story with a researcher with a learning disability.

6. October

The Big Public Transport Survey opened. It was completed by 1107 people.

5. September

We worked with our research group and internal stakeholders to co-design a national survey. We were guided by the lived experience of the research group and the findings of the literature review and video journey analysis.

4. September

The research group analysed video journey footage and transcripts.

7. December

The Big Public Transport Survey data were analysed by research group.

8. February

We worked with our research group and six local Mencap groups to co-design focus groups. We could now also be guided by data from the national survey findings.

9. March

We held seven focus groups. 34 people with a learning disability took part overall.

12 August

We published our report.

11. July

We presented the results of our analysis to the research group, internal stakeholders and six local Mencap groups. Together, we co-developed recommendations.

10. April

All remaining data were analysed by the research group.

Stage two was a national survey of people with a learning disability across the UK. The Big Public Transport Survey opened on the 7th October 2024 and was open for twelve weeks, closing on 30th December. 1107 people completed the survey, which included both closed and open text questions, allowing respondents to share their thoughts and experiences of accessing public transport as someone with a learning disability. There was a total of 35 questions, some which focused solely on access to transport and others that looked to understand the impact of transport access on wellbeing, access to community and access to employment.

The Big Public Transport Survey was delivered via Alchemer, an online survey platform. Paper copies were also available upon request. The survey was available in English and Welsh and was in an Easy Read format. Both English and Welsh versions featured audio clips. Face-to-face or telephone support was also available upon request for anyone completing the survey.

In stage three, 34 people with a learning disability shared their experience of transport barriers as part of seven focus groups. Focus groups took place in Carrickfergus, Eastleigh, Leamington Spa, Leek, Llanfyllin, Northallerton and Omagh. Questions focused on key topics identified within the video journey and national survey data, including the impact of navigating life without accessible transport, planning journeys, travel passes and ticketing, transport staff support, unexpected changes and on-the-spot problem solving when travelling.

Across all three stages of data collection, all participants were asked how public transport could be improved to better meet the needs of people with a learning disability.

2.3. Data analysis

Quantitative analysis (numbers):

Quantitative data from the survey were first anonymised and cleaned to remove invalid responses.^b Demographic variables (disability, age, gender, transgender identity, sexuality, ethnicity, region, urban/rural classification, living arrangement and driving status) were included as covariates in the analysis. This means they were considered factors that might influence or explain patterns in how people with a learning disability use and experience public transport. Data on public transport usage were also considered alongside thematic variables (relating to participants' employment status, their wellbeing, access to community and ability to afford essentials).^c

Qualitative analysis (words):

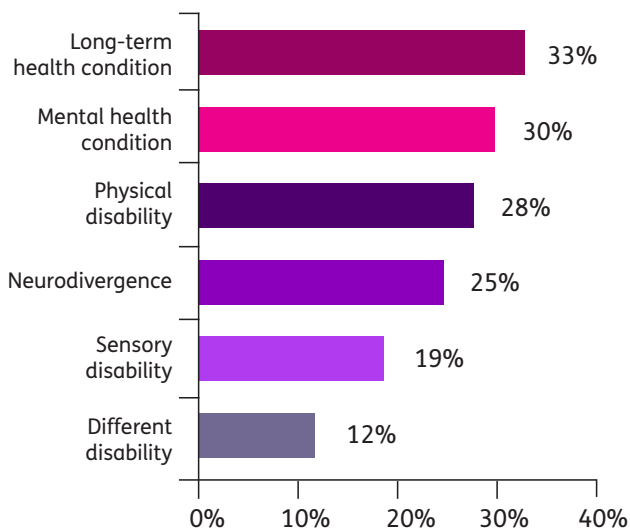
Data from the ten video journey interviews, three Big Public Transport Survey open text questions and the seven focus groups were analysed using thematic analysis. This means we coded and categorised the words people said to find patterns and themes. Codes were inductive, meaning they were developed from the data itself.^d

Co-researchers with a learning disability worked with the research team to analyse data and make sense of it using their own experiences and knowledge. They also shaped how the findings were explained, making sure they were clear and easy to understand. Together with internal stakeholders and six local Mencap groups, they developed recommendations based on the data and their lived experience.

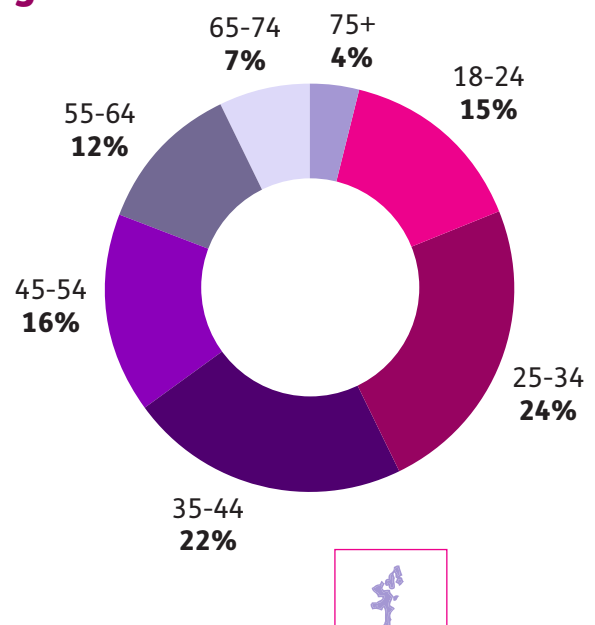
2.4. Sample

In total, 1107 adults (aged 18+) with a learning disability from the UK responded to the national survey. Most people (61% of respondents) filled out the survey independently, 20% received some support and 19% had someone else complete it on their behalf (n=971). 34 adults with a learning disability took part in a focus group and 10 completed a video journey.

Co-occurring disabilities



Age



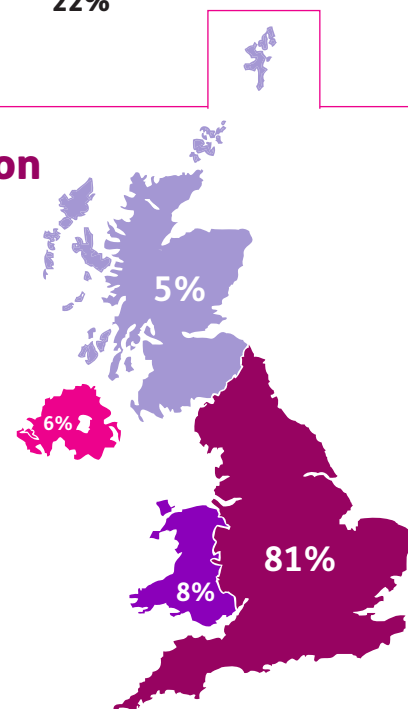
Gender

- 53% Female
- 46% Male
- 3% Transgender
- 1% Non-binary

Ethnic Background

- 83% White
- 8% Black, Black British, Caribbean or African
- 5% Asian or Asian British
- 2% Mixed or Multiple
- 2% Other

Location



In total, 1107 adults (aged 18+) with a learning disability from the UK responded to the national survey. Most people (61% of respondents) filled out the survey independently, 20% received some support and 19% had someone else complete it on their behalf (n=971). 34 adults with a learning disability took part in a focus group and 10 completed a video journey.

A series of demographic questions were asked at the start of the Big Public Transport Survey to understand the demography of the 1107 respondents in greater detail. These questions were developed and tested by the research group, Mencap's Equity, Diversity and Inclusion team, the Data team and a number of inclusion groups made up of Mencap colleagues with a learning disability. Easy Read definitions were included for any questions containing jargon.

Support level: Most respondents reported having a mild learning disability (39%). 19% identified as having a moderate learning disability, 11% said they have a severe learning disability and 2% a profound learning disability. Almost a third of respondents (29%) used a different term to talk about how much support they need, with 150 respondents providing a write-in comment. Most commonly, people spoke about the specific conditions and disabilities that co-occur with their learning disability or described specific support needs. For example, some respondents explained that they have difficulty processing information quickly, or that they use Makaton to communicate.

Age: The majority of people who took part (89%) were aged 18-64. 11% were aged 65 and over.

Gender: 53% of respondents were female, 46% were male and 1% were non-binary. 3% said they were transgender (n=880).

Ethnicity: 83% of respondents identified as White, 8% as Black, Black British, Caribbean or African, 5% as Asian or Asian British, 3% as Mixed or Multiple Ethnic groups and 2% as 'A different ethnic group'.

Disability: A third of respondents (33%) reported having a long-term health condition alongside their learning disability. 30% said they also had a mental health condition, 28% also had a physical disability and 25% were neurodivergent. Over two thirds of respondents (67%) had a least one co-occurring disability.

Geography: 81% of respondents were from England, 8% from Wales, 5% from Scotland and 6% from Northern Ireland. Half of respondents lived in an urban city and town, and a third lived in an urban major conurbation. 12% of participants lived in a rural area.

2.5. Considerations and limitations

It is important to consider the limitations of this research which may impact on how the findings are understood or used.

Impact of filming on staff and public behaviour: As part of the video journeys, we obtained filming permissions from public transport companies. This meant that staff were made aware in advance that someone with a learning disability would be using their service. The camera, attached using a chest mount, whilst discrete, was also visible to anyone that the participant interacted with. Both factors may have impacted on the behaviour of staff and the public. To mitigate this limitation, we asked participants to reflect more broadly on their experiences using public transport as part of their interviews, to better understand the barriers they typically encounter.

Under-representation of people with higher support needs: Most participants engaged with this research through the national survey, a method which can be less accessible to people with severe and profound learning disabilities who may need individualised support to engage in research. To address this, we included audio recordings of questions and offered multiple ways to take part in the survey, such as over the phone and with face-to-face support. Paper surveys that could be completed with the support of others were distributed and available to be posted on request. Surveys could also be completed by family carers on behalf of a person with a learning disability. In addition, collecting data in multiple ways - through the interviews, video journeys and focus groups - ensured the research was open to a wide range of participants.

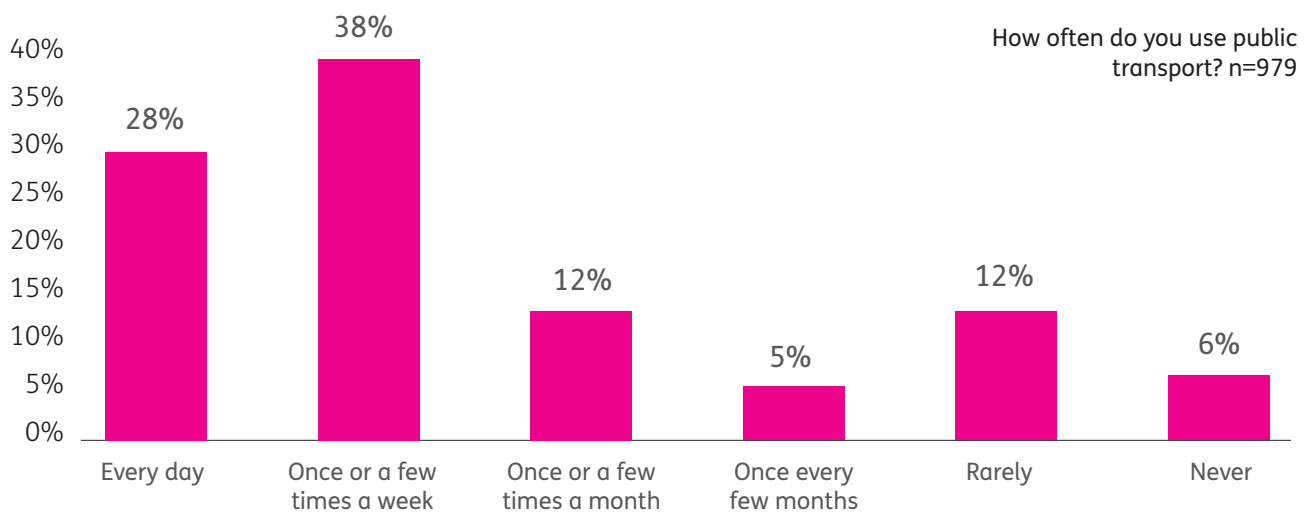
Possible selection bias: People with a learning disability who cannot access public transport may have felt that the research was not relevant to them, putting them off participating in the survey or focus group and limiting our understanding of the barriers people experience. However, we are confident that we explored the experiences of people who are unable to access public transport at all within the focus groups, ensuring that the research captured the views and experiences of people who do and don't use public transport.

Self identification: When conducting the survey, we recognised that self-identification as having a learning disability may result in responses from individuals who do not have an official diagnosis of a learning disability but instead have a learning difficulty. This is a known challenge, as the terms “learning disability” and “learning difficulty” are often confused or used interchangeably. To mitigate this, the survey included clear guidance explaining that it was intended specifically for people with a learning disability. Additionally, the survey was promoted primarily through organisations that work specifically with people with a learning disability, helping to ensure that the responses reflected the intended population.

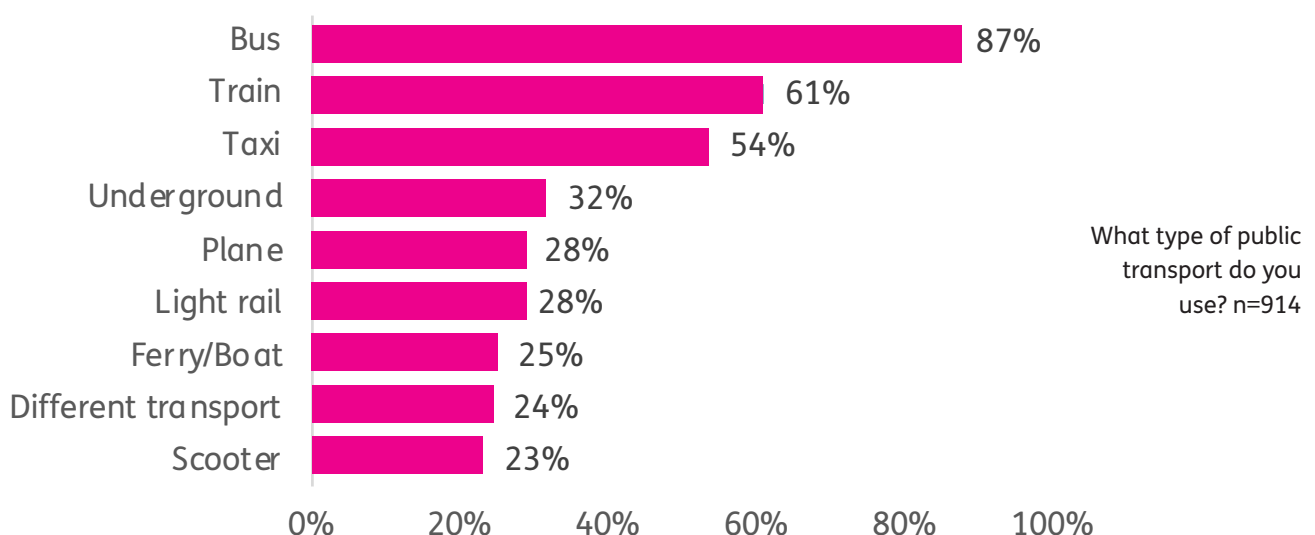
3 Findings

3.1. How people with a learning disability use public transport

The majority of people with a learning disability do not drive, meaning that they may need to rely on public transport much more than people without a learning disability. Two-thirds of survey respondents reported using public transport at least once a week. However, one third said they use public transport less often, with 18% disclosing that they rarely or never use public transport.



The most used type of public transport amongst respondents was the bus, followed by the train. This was the same no matter the region of the UK respondents were from. Most reported using up to three different types of transport (66%), although a fifth said they only use one mode.



Just over half of respondents said they need some help to use public transport, ranging from needing a bit of help to not being able to travel independently. Most people reported receiving travel support from family members or paid support workers. Travelling with a supporter enabled people with a learning disability to feel safe on public transport – many explained that they feel unsafe travelling alone, worrying about getting lost, being harassed because of their disability or not getting the support they might need whilst on journey.

Only 42% of respondents (n=779) agreed that they feel safe using public transport. Many explained further that this is dependent on the support they are getting:

“ When I’m with my support worker I feel safe.” (Male, North West)

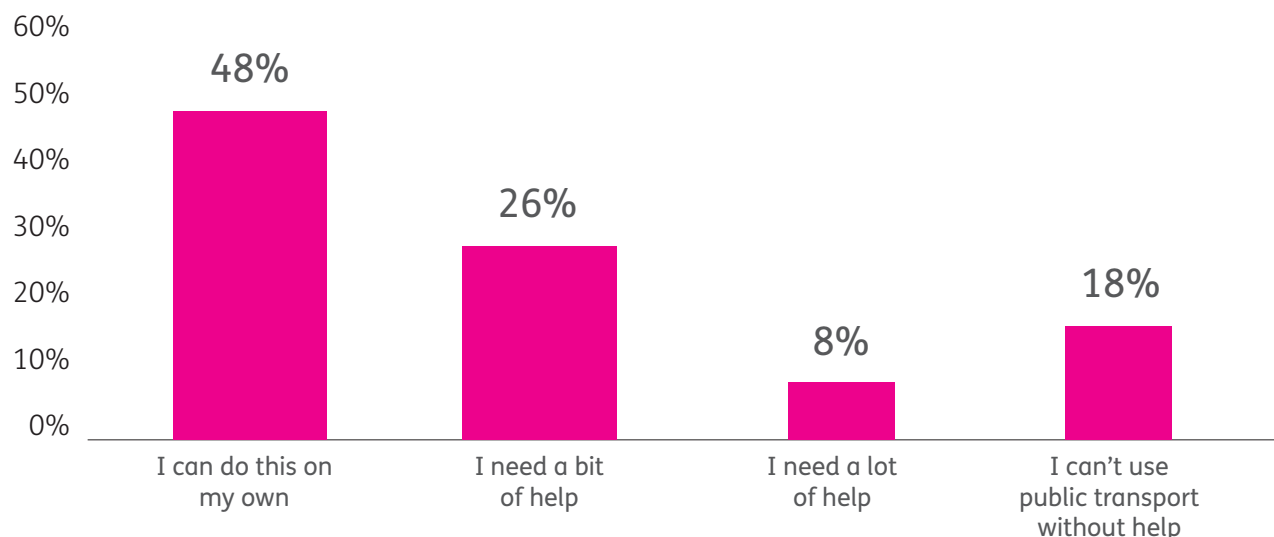
I feel safe if my usual taxi driver collects me. I feel safe with him. I do not feel safe with other drivers unless my mum or dad are with me.”
(Male, North East)

Another participant said:

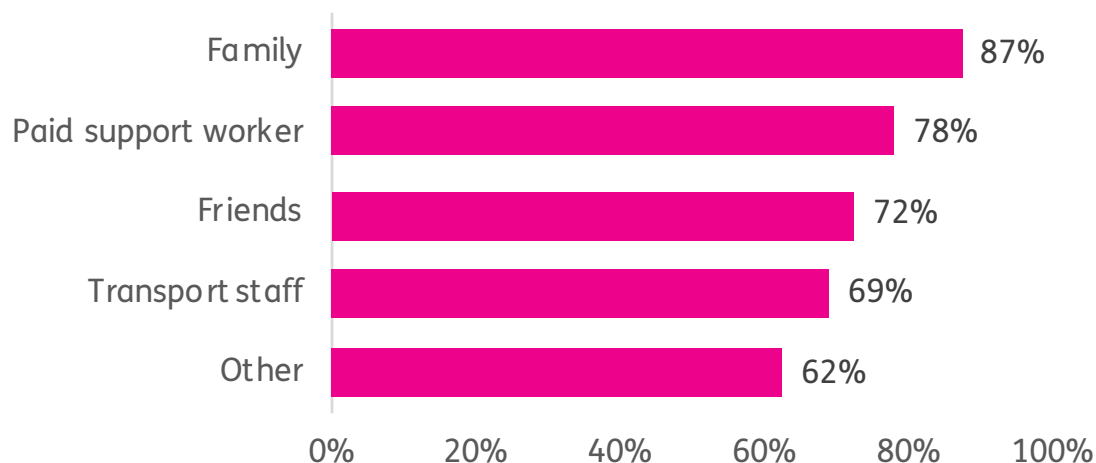
“ I can have difficulty interpreting people on my own and understanding what is going on [when I travel]. I can feel paranoid that I am at risk.”
(Female, Northern Ireland)

Statistical analysis found that people who feel confident using public transport are actually more likely to need assistance from transport staff than those who lack confidence when travelling, highlighting that even independent travellers may need to access the essential supports that transport staff can provide. This finding also reinforces the important point that support must be available to all, regardless of perceived confidence or ability, reflecting the broader need to better understand and accommodate people with hidden disabilities.

How much help do you need to use public transport? n=832



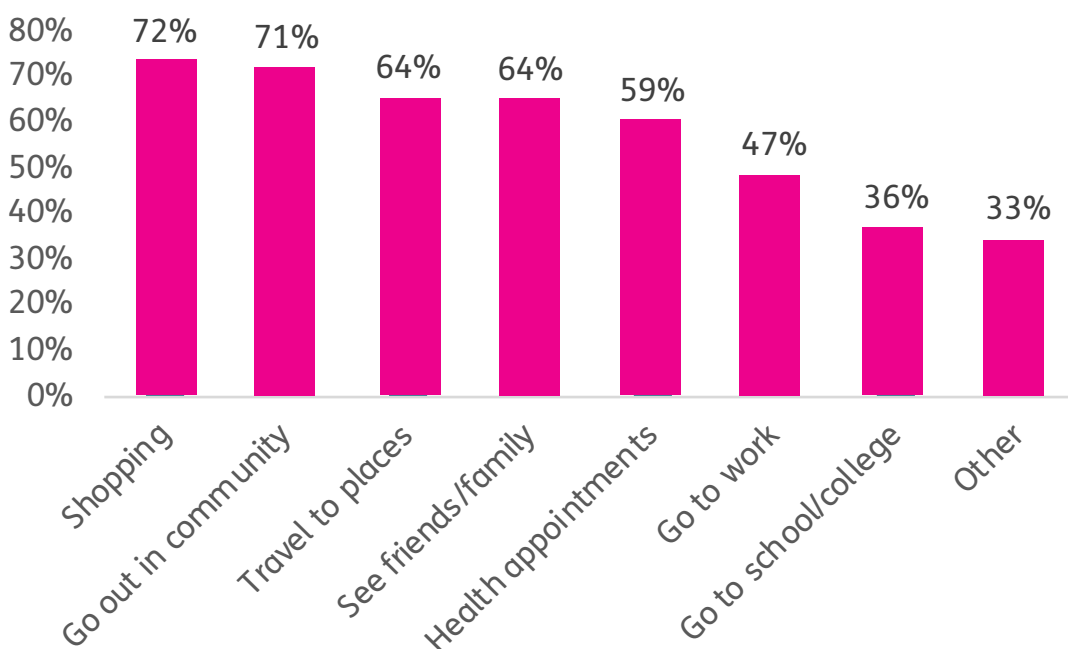
Who helps you to use public transport? n=432



We also asked survey respondents what they use public transport for. The most popular answer option was ‘Go shopping’, closely followed by ‘Go out in my community’. Nearly two-thirds of respondents reported that they use public transport to travel to places, see friends and family and attend health appointments. Of those selecting ‘Something else’, using public transport to go to day opportunities services and social clubs were commonly mentioned. Other answers mentioned attending specialist groups and services, such as an autism support group and a mental health drop-in centre. Finally, a small number of respondents spoke about travelling on public transport as an activity in itself. One described using public transport as entertainment:

“ I love the full sensory experience of a moving vehicle.” (Person with a learning disability, South West).

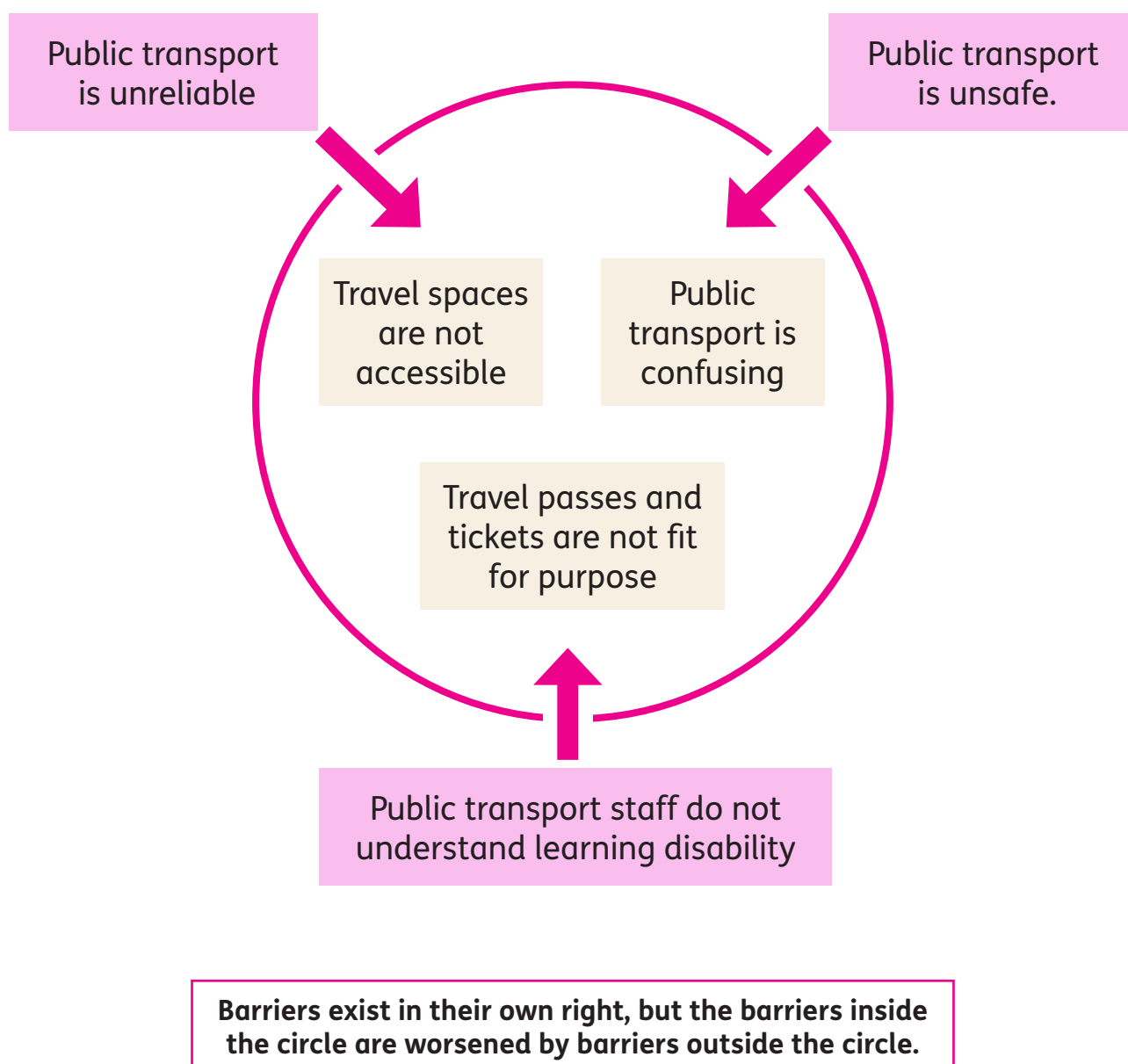
What do you use public transport for? (n=820)



3.2. What are the barriers to using public transport for people with a learning disability?

We found six themes that show the barriers experienced by people with a learning disability when accessing public transport:

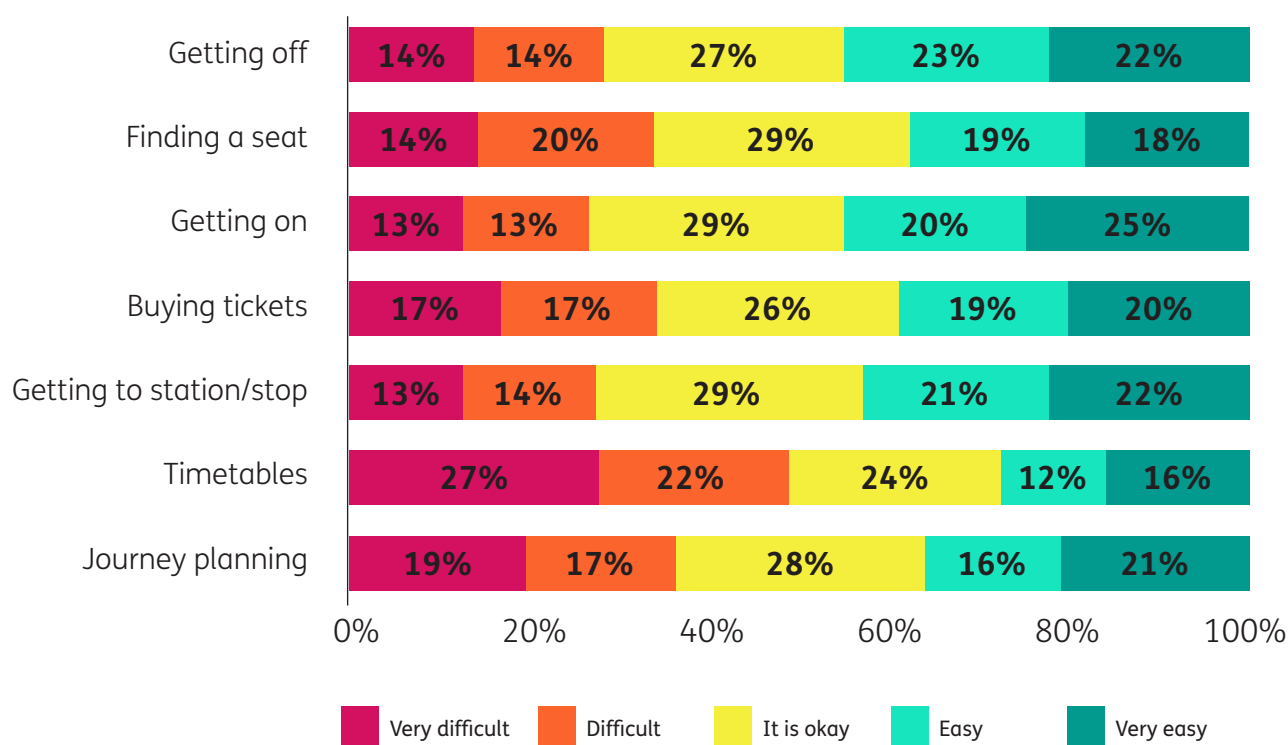
1. Public transport is confusing
2. Travel passes and tickets are not fit for purpose
3. Travel spaces are not accessible
4. Public transport is unreliable
5. Public transport staff do not understand learning disability
6. Public transport is unsafe.



3.2.1. Public transport is confusing

Using public transport can be a confusing experience for many people with a learning disability. Indeed, 48% of survey respondents (n=824) said that they find public transport hard to understand, making it more difficult to use or stopping them from using it altogether. Participants across all three stages of data collection highlighted how confusing public transport is at every point of their journeys: from planning a route to navigating busy stations and stops, the various ways information is presented does not meet the needs of people with a learning disability. This includes information presented by transport companies on their websites, at stations and stops, and on travel apps such as Google Maps and Citymapper.

How easy or difficult do you find these parts of using public transport?



Timetables were commonly described as confusing, preventing people with a learning disability from planning and undertaking independent journeys. Nearly half of respondents with a learning disability described reading timetables as difficult and over a third described journey planning as difficult. The use of the 24- hour clock, as well as small writing, was pointed out by many:

“ I always find bus timetables not clear. When they say eighteen hundred hours, or seventeen hundred... I can't do it”. (Male, Wales)

Another participant said:

“Timetables need to be spaced out more instead of it being all close together... So, it's easier to read and changing the timetable on the website to an easy read one.” (Female, Northern Ireland)

Similarly, participants identified transport maps as difficult to navigate. They described barriers such as difficult routes and confusing line names, which made it hard to work out where they needed to go. The use of too many colours – or colours that were too similar – added to the challenge. In bigger cities, multiple lines sharing the same stops further complicated the map, making it harder to work out which route to take or where to change services. Unfamiliar journeys were taken less often by participants:

“One thing I dislike about [using public transport] is changing the stops and also the Circle and District line should be separate, not together because they get confusing.” (Male, London)

Another difficulty was the phasing out of physical timetables by transport companies, who often assume customers are able to access timetable information online and through travel apps. Unfortunately, many told us that they either do not have access to the internet or a smartphone, or they find navigating websites and travel apps too difficult:

“Mum uses an app which shows me when the bus arrives. I would be able to use the app if someone could help me.” (Person with a learning disability, West Midlands)

“I find it confusing, doing it online. It is all not clear to me, really. The words and the writing.” (Person with a learning disability, Wales)

More commonly, participants relied on physical timetables, which they had printed themselves or collected from support groups or day services.

“If I need to go to the doctors then I need to make sure buses are running. I go to the library to print timetables off.” (Male, West Midlands)

“We have a timetable at my parents' house. It is a sheet of paper. It is on the fridge.” (Male, Northern Ireland)

People with a learning disability told us that they rely on support from friends, family and support workers to plan their routes, with independent travellers often needing to take familiar journeys. In this way, people with a learning disability have adapted to a complex and confusing system that is not accessible to them by learning specific routes. However, different systems and rules for transport across the UK, as well as what can seem like

constant changes to timetables made by transport companies make it increasingly difficult to become familiar with how to use public transport.



Oliver's story*

Oliver used the bus to travel to a café in South Shields. This was a journey he had done many times.

“I think public transport has got safer for people with learning disabilities, but it can be hard. I remember in my head where I am getting off. And when you are on the bus it tells you when you are coming to your destination. And it tells you on the tv screen. Some of the buses don't speak though. And so, if you can't see, or if you have a learning disability and you are by yourself, it is hard. If I get shown where to go, like if someone took me, I would be alright. But if I was just going on my own, I'd probably be a bit shook up. I struggle with money. I can't read or write so it is going to be hard to go somewhere new.”

*Names have been changed to protect privacy. Images not of the individuals featured.

Other participants emphasised that they need to travel with support because information presented to them before, during and after their journeys is not accessible. For example, one person said:

“I can't read so couldn't read a timetable. I rely on other people to assist me everywhere I go.” (Man with a learning disability)

Another mentioned:

“I would not be able to use public transport without my support staff as I cannot read. I get my words mixed up and I do not know what stops to get off at or which bus I need to be catching.” (Male, East Midlands)

As with Oliver's story, other people with a learning disability spoke about how audio announcements support them to understand where to go, when to board and when to alight transport vehicles. Unfortunately, many reported that these often don't work, or that they are not available on certain buses or trains:

“The bus sometimes speaks and tells us where we are going to stop at next. But sometimes it doesn't turn on.” (Person with a learning disability, South East)

“What would really help me, is if I’m travelling by myself, having the speaking on the buses. Like on the trains. Saying ‘your next stop is...’”
(Person with a learning disability, Wales)

Without this, people shared that they are not able to access public transport, worrying that they will get lost:

“With trains, I just don’t feel comfortable getting on without somebody. How do I know that I am getting on the right train? It is frustrating.”
(Person with a learning disability, Wales)



Michael James’ story*

Michael James went on the tube from Aldgate East to Camden Town. He hadn’t done this journey before.

“How I see it is that the map at the top of the tube, it can be deceiving. Today, I thought I got off on the wrong stop. I felt a bit nervous. Because this is a journey I don’t usually go to. If I’m not familiar with the places I need to go, I will not feel comfortable.”

One thing I like is it’s a new challenge to go where I’ve never been before. It makes me feel happy. I’m proud I’ve done it.

I’ve been trained by my support worker. We catch the bus, taking pictures to make things accessible. We listen to the announcements and remember the stop. If the bus broke down, it’s good to know alternative things. If you don’t know alternative things, you will be stuck in your head. The maps should be more accessible. Accessible is a key thing for learning disability. And it’s important that someone with a learning disability don’t get confused. It’s easy to make mistakes when things aren’t accessible. I will use the announcements. They help my journey a lot. When they have announcements and you have a learning disability, it makes it easier to understand.”

Michael James shared this example as an enabling resource that supports him to use public transport.

*Names have been changed to protect privacy. Images not of the individuals featured.

3.2.2. Travel passes and tickets are not fit for purpose

29% of respondents said that the cost of public transport stops them or sometimes stops them from using it (n=856). Only 43% said they have a disability travel pass (n=856), having to pay for travel due to being ruled ineligible for a pass, not receiving a necessary companion pass or because they found the process of applying for a pass too inaccessible. In addition, disability travel passes in Northern Ireland only provide discounted travel:

“*I have only a half pass... so I have to use money and interact with driver. Because of this I never use public transport.*” (Female, Northern Ireland)

“*We do not have a full bus pass. Just a half pass which is silly and puts me off using bus. When I lived in [Republic of] Ireland, I had full companion pass and I used to use public transport every day.*” (Female, Northern Ireland)

Many people with a learning disability and their families also have to cover the additional cost of paying for tickets for their support workers:

“*Though I have a travel pass, it still costs me as I have to pay for my carer as my travel pass is just for me. It's not fair.*” (Man with a learning disability).

People with a learning disability furthermore explained that their travel passes are not valid for use during peak hours, such as before 9:30am, forcing them to pay for travel or face restrictions on when and where they can go:

“*Sometimes I have appointments that start before 9:30am and I'm on a fixed income from my benefits.*” (Female, Yorkshire and the Humber)

43% of respondents said that their travel pass only works at certain times and this stops them from using public transport (n=355). One person reported that:

“*If I want to go around Southampton or wherever, I can't do it till half nine. Like if I needed to go to the hospital, then I couldn't use it.*”
(Person with a learning disability, South East)

Others said they were prevented from using public transport to go to work or volunteering roles. For these people, they relied on getting lifts from other people or were unable to access work. One person described how they had been unable to go to their volunteering role because of this restriction. Although they had attempted to commute and pay for their ticket, increased anxieties about managing money meant they were not able to continue.

Inaccessible application processes put many participants off applying, whilst others described being denied travel passes for themselves and their supporters. For many receiving companion pass rejections, public transport was no longer an option. Indeed, 52% of respondents said they need some help to use public transport, with 18% saying they wouldn't be able to use it at all without help (n=832). It was also highlighted that the criteria for travel passes are not always clear, meaning that some people do not apply for a pass despite being eligible. Many described the whole process as very stressful, with some people with a learning disability telling us that this has stopped them from getting a travel pass:

“ It is complicated. When you are applying for a SmartPass. The amount of details on the form is just so overwhelming. I couldn't fill it in last time.”
(Male, Northern Ireland)

A common frustration was having to provide proof of having a learning disability each time at each application:

“ For the bus pass what I got now, the doctors had to send proof in a letter of my disability and everything that I am on to Transport for Wales. To prove that I am disabled. How could we fake it? We have it from day one. And why do you have to keep doing it? It is the same disability every time and it is not going to go overnight.” (Male, Wales)

Another participant said:

“ I have to re-prove my disability every time... It will not change or improve; this is who I am! We have to prove our disability and income/benefits each time which creates extra work for staff and leaves us without bus passes whilst waiting for new ones. Unlike an illness, we do not recover from a learning disability so why do we have to repeatedly prove this.”
(Male, Yorkshire and the Humber).

Whilst most of the survey's participants did not have a travel pass, people with a learning disability emphasised ticketing as a particularly difficult stage of travelling on public transport. One participant explained that:

“ I am worried I will be fined if I travel without a ticket... I can't use the machines on the platform... I can't read the screens. I also find it difficult talking to staff.” (Female, Yorkshire and the Humber)

Others spoke about how they are unable to buy tickets due to closed ticket offices and confusing ticket machines which only accept card payments. 34% of respondents said buying tickets is difficult or very difficult (n=794), however, many explained that they do not buy tickets for themselves which suggests that this figure is likely underestimating the scale of the barrier.

Statistical analyses showed that those living with parents, a partner or other family members are less likely to find buying tickets a challenge. Living with others provides opportunities for support pre-journey, including buying tickets on someone's behalf or assisting them during the process. This was explained to be the case for lots of focus group participants:

“My mum helps me buy my ticket if I need to go somewhere.”
(Person with a learning disability, South East)

“My partner does that for me.”
(Person with a learning disability, South East)



Liam's story*

Liam took the train independently from Bangor to Belfast, changing to the bus to get to the Mencap centre. This was a journey he had taken before.

“We have these new ticket vending machines. I had to buy my ticket through the machine. It's a hard one. Some people with a learning disability struggle. The railway staff are not selling tickets, they are getting people to buy from their machines. When I'm at the station I see a lot of people with a learning disability, struggling with the machines. I came up with the idea of having volunteers at the machines to help with the purchase of tickets. I still haven't heard back yet.”

*Names have been changed to protect privacy. Images not of the individuals featured.

3.2.3. Travel spaces are not accessible

Participants discussed how public transport spaces were not accessible to them due to physical and sensory barriers. This theme includes difficulties experienced by people with a learning disability who have a co-occurring physical disability or other physical needs, were neurodivergent or had a sensory disability as well as those who didn't. However, people with a learning disability are more likely than the general population to have co-occurring disabilities or health conditions, which can make it significantly harder to access and navigate public transport spaces. In addition, when challenges relating to the physical or sensory environment present themselves – for example, if a lift is broken, assistance does not arrive or the public transport vehicle is too crowded – the need for on-the-spot problem solving can be even more difficult for people with a learning disability.

37% of respondents said that they are stopped from using public transport because it does not meet their physical needs (n=824). Participants reporting a co-occurring physical disability were more than twice as likely to avoid using buses compared to those who did not have a physical disability. Commonly mentioned physical difficulties included public transport vehicles, particularly buses, not being big enough to accommodate wheelchair users, difficulties boarding and alighting due to gaps between the vehicle and platform or stop, inadequate ramps and a limited availability of disability priority spaces. For example:

“ It is difficult for me to use a bus ‘cause I use a frame and the drivers don’t lower the platform. The other day the driver said there was no room for me or my frame on the bus. And so, I had to wait for the next one. I would have to have got a taxi if it was the last bus.” (Female, West Midlands)

“ Someone last week tried to get onto the bus, the wheelchair was too wide so he got stuck and so the bus driver told him to get off and was really rude.” (Person with a learning disability, South West)

Some spoke about how this forces them to rely on lifts from family, friends and support workers:

“ [Participant] has issues as he has a powerchair and this will not fit on the majority of buses due to the way the buses are designed, luckily he has a car but needs a carer to drive him, this isn’t always possible due to lack of carers that drive in the industry.” (Male, Yorkshire and the Humber)

“ If the ramps worked I could use a tram independently without my support worker.” (Male, Yorkshire and the Humber)

Many explained that these barriers mean they are not able to rely on public transport and so it is not always a viable option. One participant said:

“ I cannot go on bus trips with my housemates as it is impossible to fit more than one wheelchair on the bus and we often have to wait at bus stops for the next bus or the one after that, as there may be a push chair or another wheelchair on. This makes buses unreliable for getting to appointments, so I spend a lot of money on taxis even though I have a bus pass.”
(Male, Yorkshire and the Humber)

Another said that they

“ I gave up on buses a long time ago as there are never any wheelchair spaces or the spaces are too small. Often buses would go straight past us and not stop.” (Male, North East)



Frances and Katie's story*

Frances and Katie took the bus together to a retail park in Fife. They were supporting each other on this journey, which they had both taken before to go shopping.

“The buggies got on. I had to fold up my walker and put it near me. They should get the buggies to fold up if their children are able to stand. I just don't like the way they sort of look at you, with me being disabled. It's the looks you get, because I've got the walker and I'm a young age.” – Frances

“A lot of people come on with the buggies. And then there's a guy using a wheelchair and no one really got up to move the seat up. So, I got up and helped him move the seat so he could get his

wheelchair in. It's just like no one really bothers with people, disabled people. They should actually have a bigger bus and spaces for disabled people.” – Katie

It is clear that regardless of additional physical needs, public transport is not physically accessible to many people with a learning disability due to the limited number of disability priority seats and spaces. Participants explained how disability priority spaces are not always available, even when they have been pre-booked:

“On a train, even if you book a seat for a journey, frequently the reservations are cancelled or there is another passenger sat in it. The train crew do not, in my experience, make people move out of your reserved seat. This makes the journey far more stressful than needs to be.”
(Male, South West)

In addition, some emphasised that they are further kept from accessing public transport as they also require their carer, support worker or other supporter to be sitting near them when travelling, which there is not always space for. Considering that more than half of respondents need some level of support when using public transport, travelling with someone is not just common – it helps keep people safe. The presence of a supporter can make people with a learning disability feel safer, more confident and better able to manage unexpected challenges during the journey. When seating arrangements do not allow for this support to be close by, it can discourage travel altogether.

Another common experience for people with a learning disability was that public transport does not meet their sensory needs. Indeed, 66% of respondents reported that they are stopped from using public transport because it is too crowded (n=824). For example:

“ I can’t deal with crowds. I get claustrophobic, I get really anxious.”
(Male, London)

Others explained that the sensory overwhelm makes it harder to travel independently as it can make it harder for them to think clearly and make decisions:

“ Too many people, too noisy, can’t get on or off without help.”
(Male, West Midlands)

“ Noises and smells overwhelm me and disorient me which again can cause me to miss my stop.” (Female, South East).

Another participant explained that they often get lost when taking the train due to crowds, leading them to get on the wrong train.

Participants with a learning disability reported that disability priority spaces were not always available or accessible to them. Some participants also considered how having a learning disability and being autistic made travel especially hard because of overwhelming sights, sounds and other sensations. Others with a learning disability on its own emphasised that reduced services and small public transport vehicles made travelling very difficult due to overcrowding. People who had a co-occurring sensory disability, a mental health condition or were neurodivergent were more likely to report crowdedness as a barrier to using public transport.



Gareth’s story*

Gareth took the train from Llanelli to Cardiff with his support worker. This is a journey that he had taken before.

“ I used to get the bus to work, but my dad had to pick me up after my shift because the buses didn’t run late enough. I prefer to use my electric scooter to get places. It means I can be independent and I don’t have to spend time on a crowded bus or train. The train is usually just a few carriages. It is difficult being autistic and using public transport because it is loud and you can get all pressed up against people you don’t know.”

*Names have been changed to protect privacy. Images not of the individuals featured.

3.2.4. Public transport is unreliable

An almost universal experience was that public transport can be unreliable. Delays, diversions and unexpected cancellations mean that even the best laid plans can fail, and familiar or well-practiced journeys for people with a learning disability can become unfamiliar very quickly. Significantly, the impact of unreliable public transport is worsened by the absence of accessible information, which would help people with a learning disability to make safe and effective decisions when travelling and things go wrong. Similarly, unreliability was described as particularly difficult for participants who experience physical and sensory barriers as it can make crowding even more likely. Inaccessible transport spaces were also pointed out as making public transport inherently unreliable for some participants, as physical and sensory needs meant that participants were often left waiting for multiple vehicles before they could get on.

58% of respondents identified late public transport as a key barrier to accessing public transport.

“ *Planning a journey and doing it without being late or dealing with unreliable transport is impossible.*” (Female, East of England)

Late transport, along with diversions and cancellations were seen to impact wellbeing and cause significant anxieties. One participant said:

“ *Once, the bus route changed on my way to college and I didn’t realise. I still got to college OK, but the change in route made me anxious.*” (Female, West Midlands).

Another said:

“ *Buses and trains that turn up on time would make me less stressed.*” (Person with a learning disability, South West).

For participants living in rural areas, unexpected changes had left them in a vulnerable position:

“ *When the bus broke down, I was waiting there for another two hours in the middle of nowhere.*” (Person with a learning disability, Wales)

Lots of people with a learning disability spoke about their reliance on family, friends and carers to support them when unexpected things happen to them when travelling. For example:

“ *Where I work, the roads are rubbish. There is often a diversion. Sometimes they don’t tell us and they just stop the bus and you have to get off somewhere else. That is not the route that you thought you were doing. I have to ask my mum to help and pick me up.*” (Person with a learning disability, South East).

This participant spoke about experiencing anxiety when diversions aren't expected or explained to them. They rely on calling up a family member to support them to find a new route or to come and pick them up. Similarly, another person explained:

“ I had to call my brother when a bus I was on stopped at Market Drayton... The last thing I want is a driver who tells me to get off the bus.” (Person with a learning disability, West Midlands)

As was identified in the literature review, unreliable transport needs passengers to be able to problem solve, for example by figuring out new routes when things go wrong. This is something that a lot of respondents explained they struggle to do independently. One person said:

“ I do not understand the times displayed on the board for buses. I do not understand what to do if a bus is cancelled.” (Female, East of England).

Although travel training has been found to equip people with a learning disability with the competencies needed for independent travel,^{11,e} participants explained that it had not reliably helped them to handle unexpected changes or travel on new routes:

“ I only go on the train to places I have been before. It is too nerve wracking and I wouldn't know what to do. It means I can't see my friends and can only talk to them online. People say, 'just use Google Maps', but they don't understand why it would be difficult for me.” (Male, Wales)

3.2.5. Public transport staff do not understand learning disability

39% of respondents said there was a time they didn't go out in the past month because they were worried about using public transport (n=858). One fifth said they were worried about asking transport staff for help (n=346). Unfortunately, within the video journey interviews and focus groups, negative experiences people had with public transport staff featured heavily. For example:

“ They can be rude and angry.” (Person with a learning disability, South East)

“ I remember one time I got on the bus and I didn't have the right change out in time. And the bus driver said, 'for God's sake' and slammed his hand down.” (Male, Northern Ireland)



Ciara's story*

Ciara went on the train with her mum. They travelled from Ballymena to Derry/Londonderry to go for a day out shopping.

“The staff were all pretty nice today. That’s not always the case. Sometimes they would shout. I think they were more aware because there was a camera. If there was no camera, I think it would have been a different story. They should be more aware of people that have a disability because not everyone’s the same. And be patient. If I was going to stop using public transport, it’s probably because [the staff] weren’t patient enough or didn’t understand the situation or judge before they see the person.”

Another common experience was the feeling that transport staff were not patient or understanding of the fact that people with a learning disability and other co-occurring disabilities and conditions may need additional time when travelling. For example, when boarding and alighting buses, many participants spoke about there not being enough time to safely find a seat. This was felt to be complicated by the fact that a learning disability is often an invisible condition which is less understood by staff. One person said:

“I have experienced a train ticket office staff member who didn’t think I was disabled... but I have difficulty processing information and environments at times.” (Person with a learning disability, South West).

Another described how:

“Staff never want to help me, despite having my sunflower lanyard.” (Female, South East)

Similarly, many participants spoke about how staff did not always understand or behave acceptingly towards people who communicate in different ways. A supporter of one participant in the Northallerton focus group explained:

“You have said it would be better if people knew basic Makaton. Drivers on buses. Or even just took the time to not get annoyed with you when you are trying to use your AAC. Because bus drivers have got frustrated with [participant] before, when you have been typing things in. You don’t even take long! There is no excuse for it. But if there was more awareness,

[participant] would be a lot happier. You would have been able to do that volunteering role that you had wanted to do.” (Male, Yorkshire and the Humber).

For this individual, they no longer take the bus because of the negative experiences they have had with drivers and this has meant they are unable to travel to their volunteering role as well as the hospital because they are too far away.

Crucially, people with a learning disability told us that staff did not always communicate clearly, exacerbating the challenges involved in navigating unreliable transport and unexpected changes:

“ *I panic when the train breaks down and [I’m] forced to get off by unkind train workers who shout that announcements were made and I didn’t hear them, then no help to find another train to get home.”*
(Male, West Midlands).

Interacting with staff was felt to be unreliable in itself, negatively impacting people with a learning disability’s confidence when travelling. For example:

“ *Some drivers are very helpful and some will argue over putting the wheelchair ramp down, you just never know what you are going to get. This can be an added stress.”* (Male, South West).

Certainly, having supportive staff was seen to enable many people with a learning disability to travel independently. Many participants, particularly in rural areas, spoke about positive relationships they have with bus drivers and ticket inspectors, which allow them to travel independently.



Judith’s story*

Judith travelled into Nottingham on the bus to go to Me Time, her day service. This is a journey that she does multiple times a week.

“ *I felt quite calm. I know the bus drivers very well and it’s all very helpful to me. I tell the bus drivers where to stop. Cause I can’t read very well.”*

We asked Judith whether this journey is important to her.

“ *Yeah. I got friends here.”*

*Names have been changed to protect privacy. Images not of the individuals featured.

Finally, people with a learning disability expressed having difficulties with travelling due to the reduced staff presence at bus and train stations, as well as onboard. 36% of respondents said that there are not enough staff at their station and this stops them from using public transport (n=824).

“ You don’t see members of staff on the platform that often though.”
(Person with a learning disability, South East)

For many, this meant they did not feel safe to travel. Furthermore, people with a learning disability said that the reduction in staff signalled to them that they were not a priority. This was also apparent for those who discussed booked assistance. Some talked about the panic that comes along with sorting assistance, with worries that they won’t be there and that they will get trapped on the train. One person said:

“ Assistance to get on or off the train, though booked in advance, rarely shows up at all or on time.” (Male, South West)

3.2.6. Public transport is not safe

Alongside a limited understanding of learning disability from public transport staff, people with a learning disability felt that the general public did not understand or accept their differences when travelling. This was again connected to a learning disability often being an invisible condition:

“ I’ve got a hidden disability. When I sit in the front two seats, people say you’ve got to move. But I don’t think I should have to.”
(Person with a learning disability, Wales)

This participant spoke about how they do move when asked as they are afraid of confrontation, a sentiment echoed by many. Limited understanding from the public was also described as worsening the environmental barriers that some experience:

“ The bus is a very stressful and over sensory experience and other passengers do not understand why I am different and they do not give me space or a seat.” (Female, East of England)

Similarly, participants described a lack of patience from the general public:

“ I need extra time to get on or off buses or trains. People get frustrated with me. So I tend not to use [public transport].” (Man with a learning disability)

Survey analyses furthermore found that people with a learning disability who felt worried about people calling them names or being bullied on public transport were less likely to use public transport. They also had higher odds of finding public transport hard to understand.^f



Elliot's story*

Elliot took the tube across London to go to work.

“ I could tell you lots of things about the London Underground. Today, I used the Hammersmith and City line and the Circle line. Both of them are called the sub-surface lines and they are some of the oldest of the lines. And they go just below the ground but not deep underground like the

rest of the lines go. I feel good most of the time when I use it. I like using it to get to different places and being able to see different things.

I can really struggle to get my bus pass out of my bag or my pocket quick enough. Some people get impatient with you because they also want to get on. Sometimes they don't seem very nice or sometimes the bus driver is not patient. But it's not easy to quickly get out your bus pass, and when you do use your bus pass and get on the bus, it can be hard to find a seat on the bus... and then some bus drivers just get going immediately when closing the doors. And it's not fair when they do that.

I just hope I'm not annoying anyone. But I don't think I should be annoying. I'm just trying to get on the bus, even if I can't do it quickly. Finding a seat on the train is often not easy. I have real trouble standing on moving trains. People are nicer to me when I use my crutch. I just feel that it's a shame that it takes using a crutch for people to be kind on public transport.”

Only 42% of respondents (n=779) reported feeling safe on public transport, with a majority linking their concerns to witnessing antisocial behaviour, experiencing disability hate crime or feeling especially vulnerable to abuse. For example:

“ I sometimes get verbal abuse on public transport because of my appearance.” (Scotland)

“ Although I like riding on buses and trains... people can be nasty, call names, refuse to let me past... It is very frightening. I can also be stimming and have flappy hands or when I get nervous I do things that make people talk about me.” (Northern Ireland).

Lots of participants told us that they only travel in the day or when it is light outside in order to protect against this, as well as avoiding busy times, such as when school children are also likely to be on public transport – indeed, 46% said they only feel confident travelling at certain times (n=824).

3.3. The impact of transport exclusion

Wellbeing



62% of respondents said that public transport makes them feel stressed (n=507). This was even more common for people with a co-occurring mental health condition or who were also neurodivergent. Barriers to travelling were explained to create anxieties, preventing people with a learning disability from using public transport.

“If the bus doesn’t come, I panic and ring my sister. I’m scared of getting lost.” (Male, South East)

In addition, respondents who said they felt sad about public transport were less likely to find it easy to get to the station compared to those who did not feel this emotion. Many people with a learning disability face challenges when using public transport – but those struggling with their mental health may face further barriers.

Whilst the most commonly felt feeling about public transport was ‘worried’, the second and third most popular selections by survey respondents were ‘happy’ and ‘confident’. People with a learning disability told us that using public transport was a significant achievement for them. The independence it brings also supported the wellbeing of many. In turn, respondents who felt confident, excited or happy in the last month were more likely to use public transport more often and found planning their journey easier than those feeling other emotions.

“If I needed help, I could have asked at the tube stop, but I’d rather do [the journey] independently. If I was stuck as I would ask, but I felt good about myself that I’d done it independently.” (Male, London)

Community



Respondents living on their own were more likely to use public transport to see friends and family as well as to go out in their communities, highlighting the importance of public transport in helping maintain social connections. However, 39% of people with a learning disability said there was a time they didn’t go out in the past month because they were worried about using public transport (n=858). In particular, people spoke about not being confident travelling at night, limiting their access to social and recreational activities.

Furthermore, respondents who felt worried about asking staff for help were less likely to use public transport and almost five times less likely to use it to go out in their community. Respondents who reported that the cost of public transport stops them from using it were twice as likely to avoid using it to go out in their community.

Some people with a learning disability in rural areas emphasised how limited services meant they couldn’t access their community. In addition, people told us that they can only

travel to familiar places, or within their community where their travel pass works. They highlighted that this isolates them and prevents them from building further community.

“The Mencap discos, I can’t get there because of transport. I’d love to go to the discos.” (Male, Northern Ireland)

Others shared that going out could never be spontaneous when you have to plan and book assistance in advance. One person said this was

“mind blowing. You have to know what train you want and book it two weeks in advance if you want to go anywhere.” (Person with a learning disability, Wales)

Employment & volunteering



People with a learning disability told us that transport is vital for getting to work and volunteering. They also explained that being able to use public transport allows them access to day opportunity services, where they can build employability skills and get important support with finding a job.

However, others explained that inaccessible transport had shut them out from paid work and volunteering opportunities. 56% of respondents with a job said that a barrier relating to transport stops them or makes it more difficult to work (n=233). Respondents who were unable to work or take on paid employment because it places a strain on their body or mind were also more likely to find public transport stressful.

Restrictions on travel passes were also frequently mentioned by participants as limiting their access to work and volunteering.

“I believe that travel passes should be accessible at any time of the day as I’m in a position now where I have to get change for the bus to get to volunteering and as I struggle to handle this sometimes it makes it harder and increases my anxiety about using public transport.” (Female, West Midlands)

People who said that a lack of public transport makes it hard to get a job were over three times more likely to say they can’t use public transport without help.

Crucially, in rural areas where buses and trains run a reduced service, people with a learning disability are particularly isolated:

“Stop reducing services and making it difficult for people who cannot drive to access the local facilities in their town centres. It is isolating and discriminatory.” (Female, East Midlands)

57% of respondents said that there is not enough public transport near them or it does not come often enough, and this stops them from using public transport (n=824).

“ There is no public transport in my rural village. I am totally reliant on my mum and brother to be able to go out. I have done some travel training with college, but I’ve left college now... I have a disabled bus pass but no bus to get on. Not having public transport is keeping me totally reliant on others to be able to access my community and keeps me isolated and dependent.” (Male, South West)

“ A normal week like this will be five twenty-three in the evening. So if you miss the ten to, you will be sitting around about three hours. And not everyone has funds to pay for a taxi. They aren’t cheap either.”
(Person with a learning disability, Wales)

4 Conclusion and recommendations

Public transport should work for everyone – but people with a learning disability have told us that it often fails to meet their needs. Travelling is confusing, travel passes are not fit for purpose and spaces are not accessible. Unreliable services, along with a lack of support and understanding from transport staff and the general public create further barriers. These challenges make independent travel difficult, limiting access to employment, community and negatively impacting health and wellbeing.

This section sets out key recommendations to improve public transport accessibility for people with a learning disability. Recommendations were developed using data collected throughout the project and then shaped in close collaboration with co-researchers with a learning disability and local Mencap groups (comprised of people with a learning disability and their supporters).

Recommendation 1: Make travel feel familiar no matter where you go

When systems look and work the same, it is easier for people with a learning disability to learn and remember how to use them in a way that works for them. Consistent signs, ticketing methods, announcements and platform layouts regardless of location or transport mode would make public transport immediately less complicated and more predictable, supporting independent travel. People with a learning disability told us that they only feel confident using certain modes of transport, expressing that they had been taught how to use the bus but not the train or vice versa. Others spoke about how they avoid certain modes of transport due to how complex they appear. Standardisation would also support people with a learning disability to access opportunities beyond their community, where currently public transport may look very different to what is familiar in their local area.

Recommendation 2: Co-produce accessible travel information

People with a learning disability need clear, simple and accessible information to travel confidently on public transport. Information should be co-produced and available both online and in physical forms to be accessible to people regardless of their level of access to the internet. Maps and timetables should be produced in an Easy Read format, using clear symbols and plain language. Easy Read formats should also be utilised for on-journey travel information, including physical and digital signs and screens. Audio announcements are further crucial in supporting people with a learning disability to travel. This includes alerting people to where and transport is departing, what the next stop on the journey is and where you can find additional information or support.

Information across websites, timetables, maps and signs should be co-produced with people with a learning disability to ensure that they effectively meet their needs. Transport companies should establish learning disability accessibility panels with the

support of learning disability organisations to co-design materials. Travel apps should meet the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines standard and include Easy Read plug-ins, developed with inclusive user experience companies and testers with a learning disability.

Recommendation 3: Create lifetime travel passes without time restrictions

People with a learning disability should be able to use public transport any time of the day or week, without restriction. Our recommendation is to allow people with a learning disability access to a lifetime travel pass that works at any time and ensures people with a learning disability can travel free of charge. The lifetime travel pass would not require reapplication once initial evidence of having a learning disability has been submitted.

Travel passes significantly enable people with a learning disability to access public transport by reducing barriers such as difficulty of buying tickets and the cost of travel. However, restricting disability travel passes to off-peak hours greatly limits access to community, employment, education and healthcare. We additionally recommend that the processes involved in applying for a travel pass are reviewed with people with a learning disability to make them more accessible, for example, by producing an Easy Read travel pass application package.

Recommendation 4: Provide companion passes

It should be recognised that the extra costs of supporter tickets often prevent people with a learning disability and their families from travelling. As public transport is hard to understand and spaces are often inaccessible, many people with a learning disability need supporters to travel with them. This is why companion passes are essential – to ensure people with a learning disability and their families can use public transport without facing additional financial barriers.

Recommendation 5: Build quiet and calm zones

Many people with a learning disability struggle with sensory overwhelm or may need a peaceful space away from crowds where they can access additional support. Creating ‘quiet zones’ at train stations and ensuring vehicles have quiet carriages where possible would make public transport spaces much more accessible. Trained staff should attend to these zones to provide assistance and ensure a welcoming environment.

Recommendation 6: Create simple delay alerts:

Delays and cancellations can happen to anyone, but for a lot of people with a learning disability this can cause heightened stress and anxiety. A real-time SMS/WhatsApp alert system operated by train and bus companies would enable individuals to feel more informed about their journey when unexpected changes happen. These alerts should use an Easy Read template that passengers can opt in to receive via the public transport operator’s website. To support passengers who can’t access digital alerts, trained transport staff should be available to support people with a learning disability who may need assistance with onward journey planning when there are changes to their journey.

Recommendation 7: Involve more people with a learning disability.

People with a learning disability and the people that support them should be involved in future conversations and decisions about how public transport is run. For example, transport companies should

- Receive training on learning disability that is co-designed and co-presented by people with a learning disability. Transport staff have a legal duty to provide an inclusive service for people with a learning disability, including by making reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act 2010. Reasonable adjustments must be anticipatory and based on individual needs – not just provided after problems arise. For example, staff should be ready to offer clear and simple information, allow additional time for communication and boarding and provide calm and patient support during service disruptions.
- Work with a diversity of people with a learning disability with different levels of support needs to review how spaces and information can be made more accessible.
- Designate a staff role that will regularly review accessibility features alongside people with a learning disability and the people that support them. They should serve as a clear point of contact for enquiries and complaints and their contact details should be easy to find on websites, at stations and on vehicles, so people know where they can find help.

Recommendation 8: Have more passenger awareness campaigns

Passenger awareness campaigns promote patience, acceptance of differences and respect for priority seats and spaces would help improve staff and public understandings of learning disability and hidden disabilities. Signs for priority seats should also be reviewed to ensure they are clear and easy to understand.

Recommendation 9: Promote ‘Safe Place’ locations

A ‘Safe Place’ is a registered location that will provide help and support to anyone feeling anxious or frightened. We recommend that more cafes, libraries and shops sign up to be a Safe Place for people with a learning disability to go for support. Public transport companies should promote the Safe Places scheme to increase its reach and encourage additional venues to sign up.

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Endnotes

- a. Journal articles on public transport and people with a learning disability were reviewed to identify the barriers found in existing research. In the word cloud, larger words represent barriers that appeared more frequently across the articles.
- b. Invalid responses included those where the respondent: did not answer questions beyond the demographic questions; declared living outside of the UK; declared not having a learning disability within open text responses; gave the same name and contact details as a previous response. A small number of responses were identified as being AI-generated and were also excluded.
- c. Prior to conducting inferential statistical tests, assumption testing was performed for each model. This included checking for multicollinearity using variance inflation factors (VIF), assessing normality, linearity (where applicable), and ensuring model fit requirements were met. Inferential analyses were guided by the type of outcome variable: binary logistic regression was used for binary dependent variables; ordinal logistic regression was applied to ordinal outcome variables where assumptions were met, and multinomial logistic regression was used for nominal categorical outcomes or ordinal outcomes where assumptions were violated. Only statistically significant results have been included in the findings section. For each result, the corresponding p value is provided in a footnote for transparency. All analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS 30.0.
- d. Data were coded manually and all personally-identifying information was removed.
- e. Travel training offers a supportive environment where individuals can learn to use public transport safely. It is often offered by charities, support services, councils and transport providers. Training may involve assessing the trainee's needs, giving practical advice and practising journeys together with a trainer.
- f. $p=.022$; $p=.039$