Older persons transport and COVID

Draft report prepared for the Consumer Council

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Executive summary

Background

The Consumer Council commissioned Perceptive insight to undertake research with older people (aged 55 and over) to provide an understanding of their views and experiences of the transport system in Northern Ireland. The aim of the research was to assess the extent to which the transport service is meeting their current needs and what will be required to meet their needs in the future.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a great impact on transport and travel in Northern Ireland, particularly with regard to older people. Therefore, the Consumer Council wanted the research to also capture the experiences of and views of older people in relation to COVID-19, to provide an understanding of how transport needs to adapt and build on the lessons learnt from the pandemic to meet their needs going forward.

Methodology

In total, 1,010 interviews were completed with a representative sample of the older population, aged 55 and over. Interviewing took place by telephone during November and December 2020 with each interview taking, on average, 10 to 15 minutes to complete. Interviewing was carried out in compliance with the GDPR 2018 and the Market Research Society Code of Conduct.

Key findings

Car/van usage

- The majority of respondents (82%) own or have access to a car, with 65% saying they have full access. Those least likely to have access to a private car where those living in social housing (50%), those aged over 75 (25%) and those located in urban areas (25%).
- Three quarters (75%) of those with access to a vehicle say that a car or van is a more convenient method of transport over bus or rail services.
- Of those with access to a car, 46% say there is nothing that would encourage them to use public transport instead of a personal vehicle. However, 12% suggested a more frequent and reliable service, and 7% proposed closer transport links as ways to increase public transport usage.
- Of those with access to a car, daily use dropped significantly from 59% of respondents before the Covid-19 pandemic to 23% in the last 6 months.

Frequency of travelling by public transport services

- One quarter (25%) of respondents reported that they never used public transport before the COVID-19 pandemic, while 23% used it at least once a week. Over 75s were more likely to use public transport weekly (28%), as well as those in urban areas (29%). Over the past six months the percentage of respondents who never use public transport has increased to 77%, while weekly usage has dropped to 7%.

- Prior to COVID-19 public transport was more likely to be used for leisure purposes (37%) and other shopping (32%) than for any other purpose. However, driving a car was still the most popular mode of transport when travelling for leisure (44%) or to go shopping (61%). This is also true for over the past six months (30% used a car for leisure and 11% used public transport, 57% used a car for shopping and 15% used public transport), although over half (51%) no longer travel for leisure, an increase of 38% from before the pandemic.

Knowledge of public transport services

- 80% of respondents live within a 26-minute walk of their nearest bus stop or station, and over half (55%) live within a six minute walk. Younger respondents are more likely to be able to walk to their nearest stop more quickly, with 69% of those aged 55 to 64 living within a six-minute walk compared to 47% aged 75 and over.

- While 42% were not sure of how frequently their nearest bus or rail service operates, 25% reported that their service operates at least once every half hour.

- Three quarters (75%) are not aware of the costs of tickets for different transport services; this knowledge is greatest amongst younger respondents (24% of those aged 55 to 64 said they were quite or very aware) and those living in urban areas (20% saying quite or very aware).

- Respondents were most likely to use the Translink website (42%) to locate information about timetables. However just 10% of those aged 75 or over would refer to this source, preferring to use the call centre (24%) or station (20%) instead. Overall, one in five (21%) were not sure where they would search for this information.

Usage of public transport services

- A Senior Smartpass (62%) was the most popular ticket used by respondents, with cash used by 16%. Those using cash were much more likely to be in the 55 to 64 years old age group.

- 3% have made a complaint to a public transport provider in the last two years, with satisfaction low in terms of the quality of information they received, the length of time it took to resolve their query, and how their overall complaint was handled.

Future use

- Respondents were asked what, if anything, would encourage them to travel on transport services more often. Three in five (60%) thought that there was nothing that could be done to encourage more frequent use.

- However, among the suggestions given were a number of ways to make the services more accessible service, including boarding points closer to home (10%), better provisions for the elderly or disabled (5%), and vehicles that are easier to get in and out of (4%). A greater frequency and choice of services were also mentioned, such as having more destinations and routes (10%) and more day (10%), evening (5%) and weekend (6%) services. 10% said they would use public transport more often following a reduction in COVID-19 rates.

COVID-19

- 62% of respondents confirmed that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on how they use all forms of transport. Of those who have been impacted, 75% say they do not travel as much as they used to, and 15% have opted to use their car instead of public transport.

- Most respondents (69%) think that their usage of public transport will return to a similar level after the pandemic is over, while 22% expect their usage to increase.

- Those respondents in the 75 plus age group were more likely to expect their usage of public transport to decrease with age (9%, compared to 3% of 55 to 64 year olds), whilst those in the 55 to 64 age group were more likely to expect usage to increase (48% compared to 36% of 56 to 74 year olds and 15% those aged 75 or older). This is likely due to people in this age group becoming eligible for a Senior Smartpass.

Conclusions and recommendations

The following paragraphs outline several conclusions and areas for further consideration by the Consumer Council based on the survey findings.

Car/van currently a more attractive option than using public transport

For most respondents a car is the primary method of travel, either as a driver or a passenger. 82% of respondents said that they have access to a car, with 97% of those using it on a weekly basis with this figure only dropping to 86% in the past 6 months. This is in contrast to 23% that used public transport at least once a week prior to COVID-19 and 7% that use it as frequently since the pandemic.

For many (75% of survey respondents) a car offers a more convenient form of transport while also allowing them to carry more things. Almost all of those with access (97%) do not think that anything inhibits them from driving.

Transport providers, therefore, may want to look at measures that will make public transport a more attractive option for those aged over 55. This is likely to be a challenge as 60% do not think anything would increase their public transport usage. However, having a more frequent day service (10%), a boarding point closer to home (10%), and more destinations or routes (10%) were possible ways identified by respondents.

COVID-19 has reduced public transport usage

COVID-19 has impacted on all forms of travel and transport for 62% of respondents; and the results show that public transport has seen the greatest impact. Weekly usage has dropped from 23% to 7% over the past six months, with the percentage saying they never use it increasing from one quarter (25%) prior to the pandemic to over three quarters (77%).

In light of the restrictions at the time of writing, requiring people to stay at home and only travel for essential purposes and for those in vulnerable groups to shield, it is unlikely that public transport will become a viable option for older people until after the pandemic.

As travel habits become established during the pandemic, it will become a challenge to change those habits as the impact of the pandemic decreases. Although the results show that after the end of the pandemic people say they are likely to use public transport the same amount (69%) or even more than before the pandemic (22%) it remains to be seen as to whether travel habits are re-established to the same level as before. Therefore, public transport providers may want to look at future measures to ensure older people feel safe when they do return to using buses or trains.

Knowledge of services available to commuters is low

A preference for using cars and reduced public transport usage since the pandemic may have resulted in a poor knowledge of services available. While only 4% of respondents were unaware of where their nearest transport service operates from, 42% were not sure how frequently a scheduled bus or rail service operates on their nearest route and 21% were not sure where they would look for such information. Three quarters of respondents (75%) were not at all aware of the cost of tickets, although this may be due to only 16% using cash and 62% using their Senior Smartpass when they travel on public transport. The Translink website (42%) was the most used source to find information about services, and so making this site more accessible to an older generation, who may not be as confident using technology, is one possible way to increase awareness among older people.

Those living in social housing rely more on public transport

Car ownership was lowest amongst those living in social housing, with 50% of such respondents saying they have no car or access to a car from their home compared to 18% overall. Usage of public transport was also highest amongst respondents in social housing, with 36% reporting weekly usage before the pandemic and 17% over the past six months. Even with the pandemic, bus services are the main form of transport when going shopping for 14% of respondents in social housing (6% overall). While 22% of respondents in social housing use cash to pay for their journeys, 9% suggested having cheaper fares would encourage future public transport usage. Use of a Senior Smartpass by people in social housing is also low when compared with those who own their own home. While 85% in both the 65 to 74 and 75 plus age groups who live in social housing use a Senior Smartpass, only one quarter (25%) aged 55 to 64 use one, compared to 42% who own their own home (38% overall). 44% of respondents aged 55 to 64 in social housing also use cash, compared to under one third (31%) of respondents that own their home (33% overall).

Poorer provision of services in rural areas

Car ownership was highest (91%, compared to 75% in urban areas) and public transport usage lowest (16% weekly before the pandemic, compared to 29% in urban areas) amongst respondents living in rural areas. While over one third (38%) of respondents in rural areas live within a six-minute walk of their nearest bus stop, services on their nearest route operate between every fifteen minutes and every hour for 27%, which suggests public transport is not a viable or convenient option for rural people when compared to using a car. A more frequent and reliable service (17%) and closer transport links (12%) were suggested by rural respondents as ways to increase their public transport usage, and so transport providers may wish to explore ways to make public transport more accessible/viable in rural areas.

Public transport usage is likely to increase with age

Although 46% of respondents expect their usage of public transport to remain the same as they age, over one third (37%) expect it to increase. This is most likely to happen for those aged 55 to 64 (48%), which is likely a result of this age group becoming eligible for their Senior Smartpass. 58% in the youngest age group expect to increase their public transport usage to avail of the free travel offered to them. Other reasons for increasing usage included possibly becoming unable to drive (15%) or less keen on driving (10%). As previously mentioned however, with knowledge of public transport services being low, transport providers may want to explore ways to ensure that those who are eligible for a Senior Smartpass are aware of this and know how to apply for one.

Introduction

Background

The Consumer Council is a non-departmental public body (NDPB) established through the General Consumer Council (Northern Ireland) Order 1984. Its principal statutory duty is to promote and safeguard the interests of consumers in Northern Ireland. The Consumer Council has specific statutory duties in relation to energy, postal services, transport, water and sewerage and financial services. These include considering consumer complaints and enquiries, carrying out research and educating and informing consumers.

Northern Ireland's population is ageing. From 2001 to 2019 the number of people in Northern Ireland aged between 45 and 64 increased by 34%, aged between 64 and 74 by 39% and aged over 75 by 42%[1]. Travel is considered to be beneficial for older people; it helps them maintain contact with friends and family, helps with physical health and helps bind society as older people interact socially and participate in activities such as shopping, or going to work or to volunteer. However, the transport needs of older people are not necessarily the same as people younger than them.

The Consumer Council wants to understand the views and experience of older people on how the transport system in Northern Ireland is meeting their current needs and what will be required to meet them in the future. However, the concept of this research project has come about in during the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic has had a great impact on transport and travel, particularly with regard to older people. Therefore, the Consumer Council wishes to also capture the experiences and views of older people in relation to Covid-19 and to understand from them how transport needs to adapt and build on the lessons learnt from the pandemic to meet their needs going forward.

The Department for Infrastructure (DFI) is currently developing a new Public Service Agreement (PSA), with Translink (the primary provider of bus and train services in NI), to replace the existing one. The duration of the PSA is five full financial years and is due to begin in April 2022. Under the PSA, 'the operators shall… make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which the Services are provided, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency, effectiveness, accessibility and sustainability.'[2]

Obligations of performance under the Service Agreement cover the following areas;

- Finance
- Passenger journeys
- Passenger charter standards
- Safety standards
- Delivery of capital programme
- Accessibility.[3]

[1] NISRA Mid-Year Population Estimates 2019
[2] Public Passenger transport (Service Agreements and Service Permits) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015, section 31.1
[3] Public Passenger transport (Service Agreements and Service Permits) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015, schedule B

This research will help to inform the development of a new PSA. Age NI will facilitate a qualitative follow-up to the findings of this quantitative survey through its network of community-based services, social media and its consultative forum of older people.

Research objectives

The aim of the research is to explore the behaviours and views of older people, aged 55 and over, in relation to the following:

- Their use of transport within Northern Ireland (including cross border to ROI);
- How the transport system within Northern Ireland is meeting their current needs and what improvements could be made;
- Their priorities for transport in the future; and
- The impact of Covid-19, in both the short and long term, on transport and older people.

The following section details the approach taken to meet these research objectives.

Methodology

This section provides an overview of the approach taken in the design and implementation of the survey research.

Approach

In summary, 1,010 interviews were completed with a representative sample of the older population, aged 55 and over. Interviewing took place by telephone during November and December 2020 with each interview taking, on average, 10 to 15 minutes to complete. Interviewing was carried out in compliance with the GDPR 2018 and the Market Research Society Code of Conduct.

Sample design

To ensure that the general population survey was fully representative, quotas were set based on the NISRA 2019 Mid-Year Population Estimates and the 2011 Census for:

- Age;
- Gender;
- Socio-economic group;
- District council, and
- Urban/ rural setting.

A standardised social grade classification based on occupation was utilised and is referenced below.[4] Disability status and housing tenure were also monitored throughout the fieldwork process.

Questionnaire design

The research team at Perceptive Insight drafted a questionnaire based on the objective of the research and as discussed at the initial planning meeting. The questionnaire was piloted prior to it being finalised.

The following section presents the findings from the quantitative research.

[4] http://www.nrs.co.uk/nrs-print/lifestyle-and-classification-data/social-grade/

Car/van usage

In this section, we explore the level of access to and usage of private transport amongst Northern Ireland's older population, aged 55 or older:

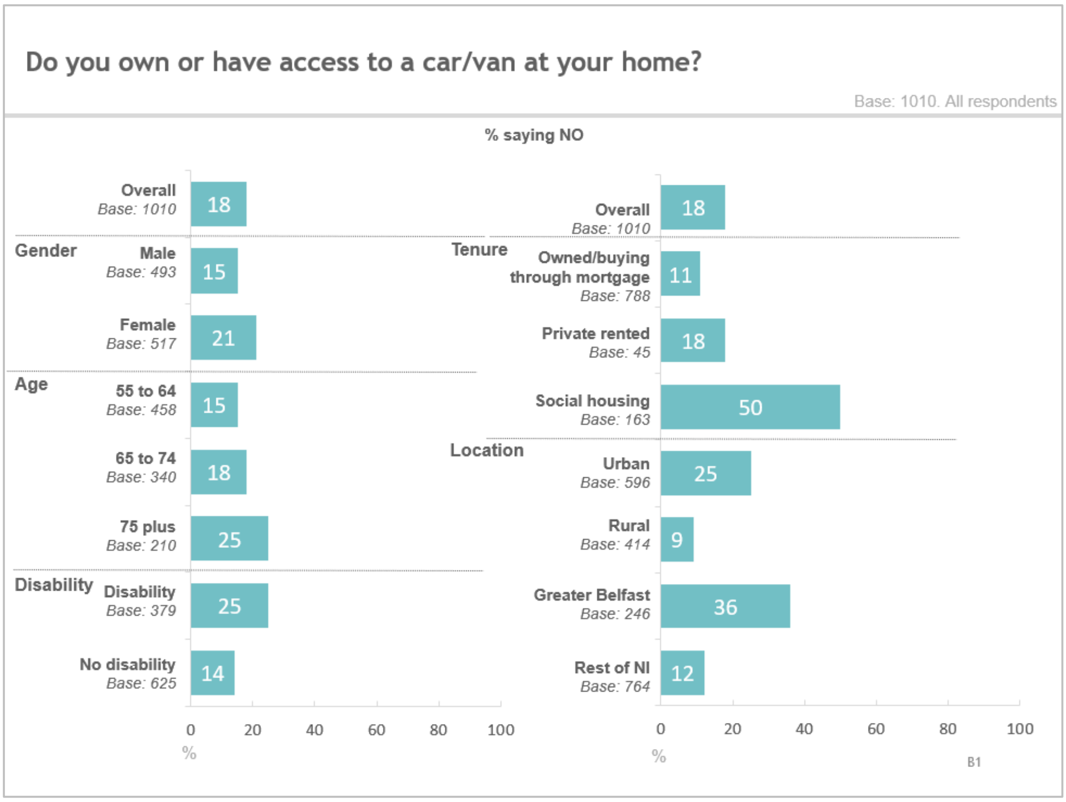
Level of access to a car/van

The majority of older people (82%) reported that they have access to a car or van. However, 18% confirmed that they have no access at their household. Figure 1.1 below, provides an overview of those grouping which are least likely to have access.

Those least likely to have access to a car or van are:

- living in social housing (50%),
- older (25% of those aged 75 or over),
- have someone in their household with a disability (25%)
- live in an urban location (25%); or
- female (21% of females compared to 15% of males confirmed that they do not have access).

Figure 1.1: Lack of access to a car or van at home

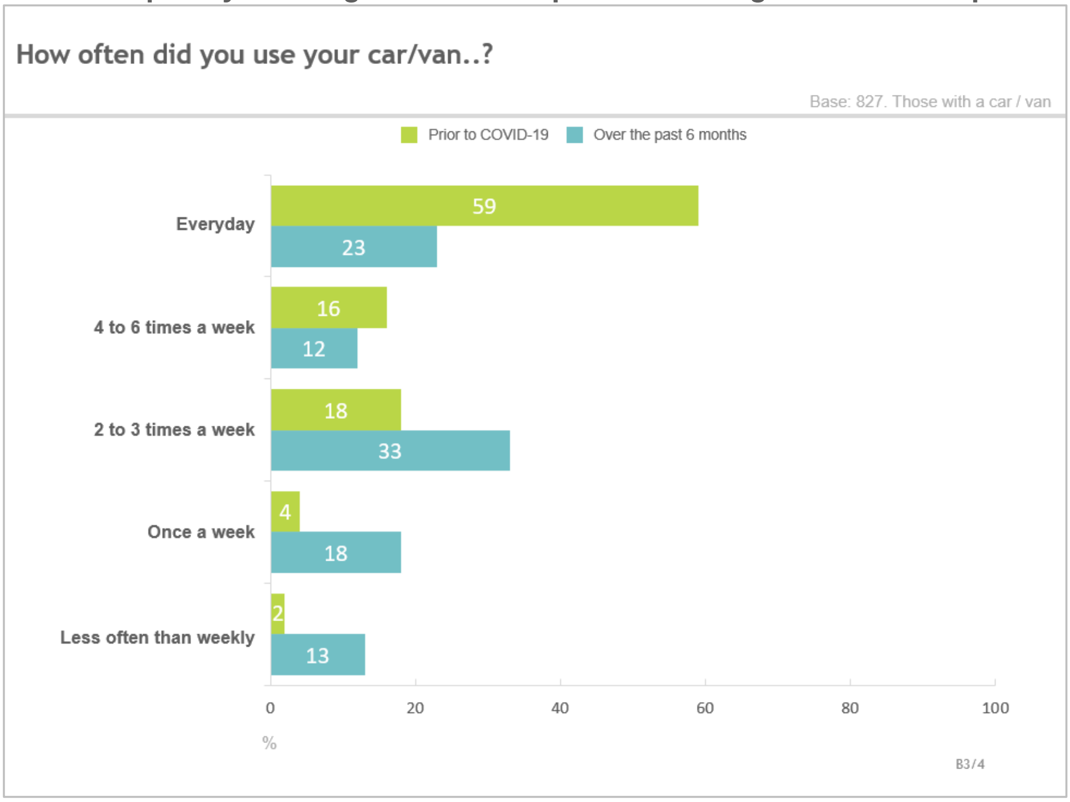


Of the 82% who have access to a car or van, 79% reported having full access, 8% said they have limited access and 13% confirmed that they have access only as a passenger.

Usage of car/van

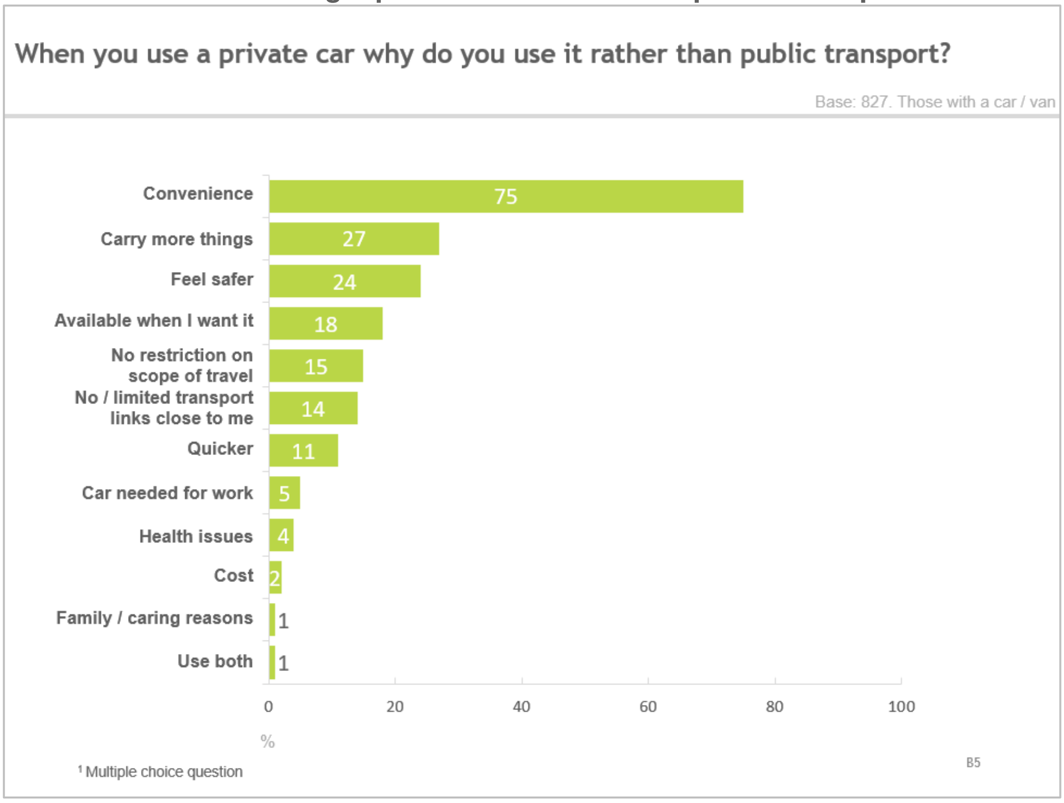
Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 59% said that they used their car or van on a daily basis. This percentage increases to 97% for those who use their car or van at least once a week. However, usage has reduced considerably over the past six months of the pandemic. Less than one quarter (23%) reported using their vehicle on a daily basis and 86% have been using it at least once a week.

Figure 1.2: Frequency of using their car/van pre- and during the COVID-19 pandemic



Those who have access to a vehicle where asked why they use it rather than public transport. The reason given most frequently was ‘convenience’ with three quarters (75%) mentioning this. 27% commented that they use a car as they are able to carry more things and 24% feel safer using their private car compared to public transport. 18% like that their car is available when they want to use it, and 15% appreciate the lack of restrictions on the scope of their travel. 14% reported having to use a private car as there are no or limited transport links close to them.

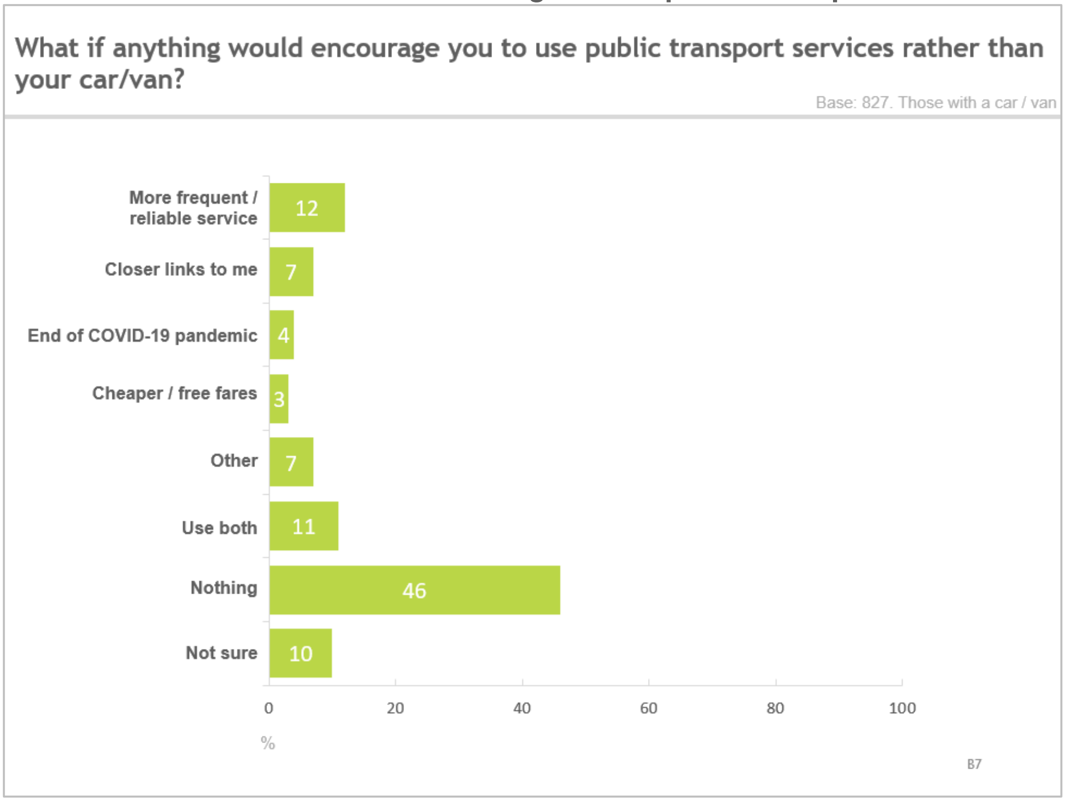
Figure 1.3: Reasons for using a private car rather than public transport



When asked what inhibits their use of a private car, 97% of those with access to a vehicle reported no deterrents. Among the barriers mentioned, by the remaining 3%, were not feeling safe while driving and the difficulty of physically accessing a car.

Those with a private car were asked what would encourage them to use public transport instead. 46% reported that nothing would incentivise them to change to public transport and 10% were unsure of what steps could be taken. Just over one in ten (11%) confirmed that they already use both modes of transport. Among the other responses, 12% said that having a more reliable or frequent service would encourage their usage of private transport and 7% suggested that having public transport link closer to them would help. 4% commented that the end of the pandemic would increase their usage and 3% thought that cheaper or free fares would encourage them.

Figure 1.4: Motivations that would encourage use of public transport services



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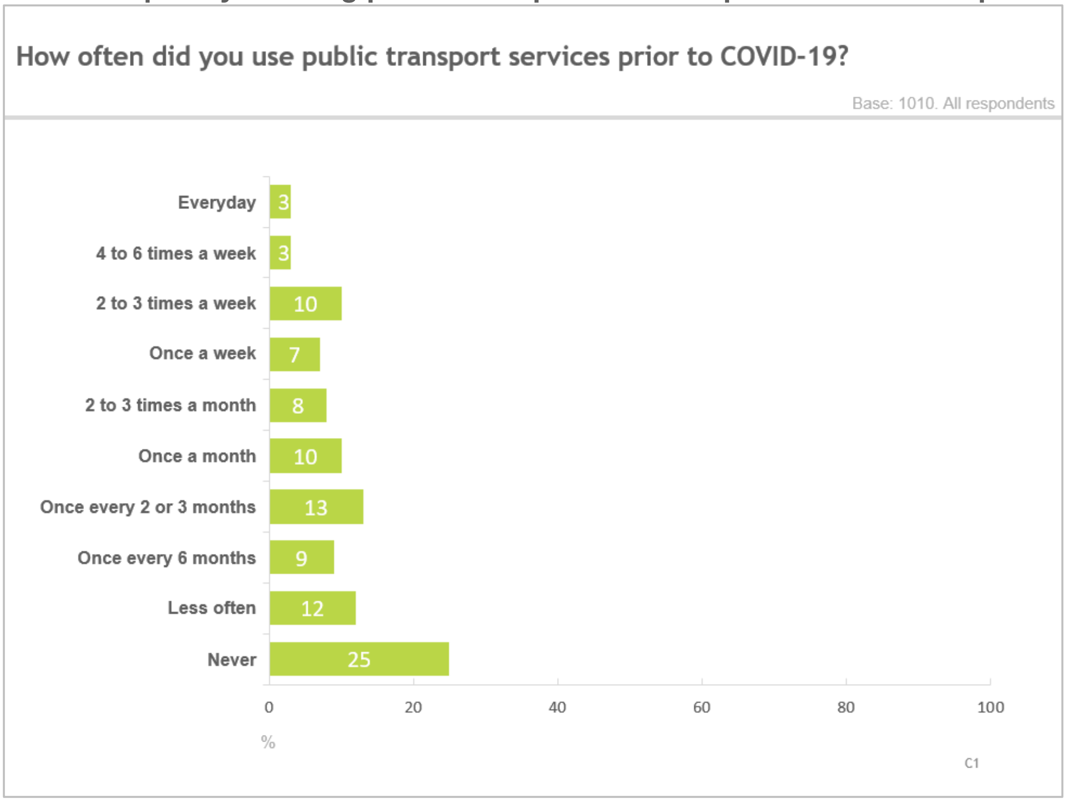
Frequency of travelling by public transport services

This section looks at the frequency of travelling by public transport services in Northern Ireland.

Frequency of use and modes of transport

Respondents were asked how often they used public transport service prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. 3% confirmed that they used public transport every day, with this percentage increasing to 23% for those who use it at least on a weekly basis. 18% reported using public transport less frequently than weekly but at least monthly and a further 22% used it less often than monthly but at least once every six months. However, 37% commented that they never use or very infrequently use public transport.

Figure 2.1: Frequency of using public transport services prior to COVID-19 pandemic



The key differences in usage of public transport services by demographics, are shown in the table below. It can be seen that the following groups are more likely to use public transport on at least a weekly basis:

- Females (27% compared to 19% of males);
- Older people (28% of those age 75 plus and 27% of 65 to 74 year old compared to 18% of 55 to 64 year olds);
- Those in social housing (36% compared to 21% of homeowners);
- Those in urban areas (29% compared to 16% of rural dwellers);
- Those in Greater Belfast (38% compared to 19% in rest of NI).

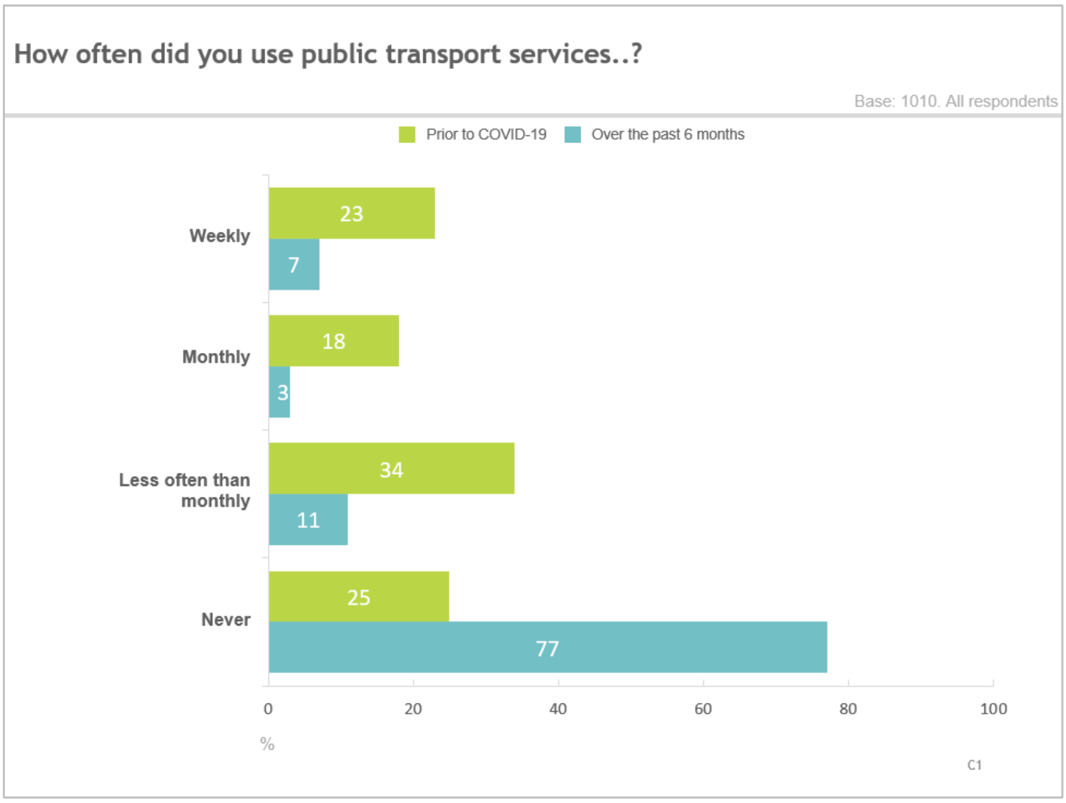
Table 2.1: Frequency of using public transport services prior to COVID-19 pandemic by demographics

	All	Male	Female	55 to 64	65 to 74	75 plus	Disability	No disability
Base	*1010*	*493*	*517*	*458*	*340*	*210*	*379*	*625*
Every day	3%	2%	3%	3%	4%	0%	3%	3%
Less often than daily but at least weekly	20%	17%	24%	15%	23%	28%	21%	21%
Less than weekly but at least monthly	18%	18%	17%	16%	22%	15%	15%	18%
Less often / Never	59%	62%	56%	66%	53%	57%	59%	59%
Total	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*

	All	Home owner	Private rented	Social rented	Urban	Rural	Greater Belfast	Rest of NI
Base	*1010*	*788*	*45*	*163*	*596*	*414*	*246*	*764*
Every day	3%	2%	4%	7%	4%	1%	8%	1%
Less often than daily but at least weekly	20%	19%	15%	29%	25%	15%	30%	18%
Less than weekly but at least monthly	18%	20%	13%	11%	16%	18%	14%	18%
Less often / Never	59%	61%	67%	51%	55%	67%	49%	62%
Total	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*

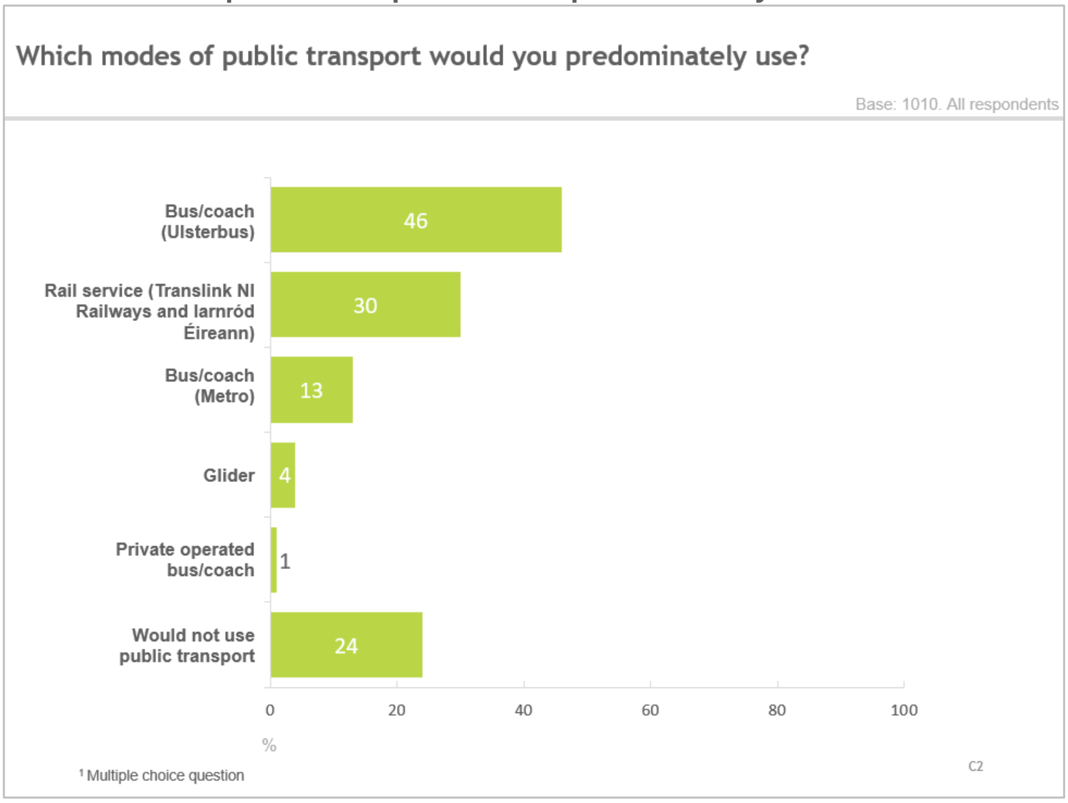
The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has had considerable impact on the usage of public transport services by older people. Prior to the pandemic 23% were using it at least weekly but that figure has now reduced to 7%. While 25% never used public transport prior to the pandemic, this figure has now risen to 77%.

Figure 2.2: Frequency of using public transport services pre- and during the COVID-19 pandemic



Respondents were asked which types of public transport services they would predominately use. While just less than one quarter (24%) confirmed that they would not use any, the most popular service was Ulsterbus (46%), followed by rail (30%). Overall, 13% reported using the Metro bus service; however this figure increases to 48% for those living in the Greater Belfast area. The Glider service, which has 4% usage overall, is used by 10% of those living in Greater Belfast. Just 5 respondents (<1%) reported using community transport or the disability action service.

Figure 2.3: Modes of public transport that are predominately used



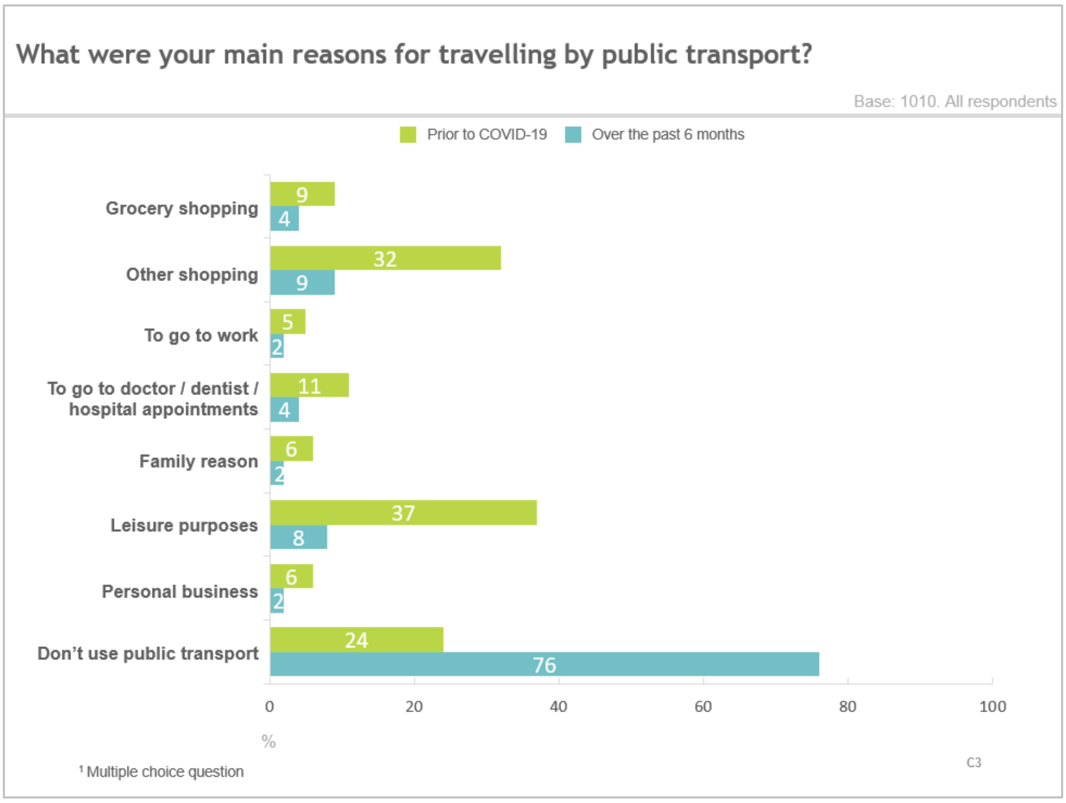
Reasons for using public transport

Prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the most common reasons for travelling by public transport included; for leisure (37%), for general shopping (32%), to attend health appointments (11%) and for grocery shopping (9%).

It should be noted that those who live in social housing are more reliant (prior to the pandemic) on public transport with 17% saying that they used it for grocery shopping and 17% for attending health appointments.

However, over the past six month (during the COVID-19 pandemic) the reasons for using public transport have changed considerably. Just 8% now use it for leisure, 9% for general shopping, 4% for health appointments and 4% for grocery shopping, with 10% of those in social housing still reliant on public transport for grocery shopping.

Figure 2.4: Reasons for using public transport prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic



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Normal mode of transport for activities pre- and during the pandemic

Respondents were asked what their normal mode of transport was for a number of activities including:

- Shopping,
- To attend health and personal appointments,
- For work and volunteering activities, and
- For social or leisure purposes.

The respondents were asked about their normal mode of transport both prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The following table show that use of a car (either as a driver or passenger) is the predominant mode of transport across all activities, both prior to COVID-19 and over the past six months.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact of with an increase in the percentage not undertaking each of the activities. Most notably, just over half (51%) reported that they no longer travel for social or leisure purposes since the start of the pandemic, compared to 13% that said this prior to COVID-19.

Usage of public transport for each of the activities has also decreased during the pandemic.

Table 2.2: Normal mode of transport for activities prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic

	Shopping		Health and personal appointments		Work or volunteering		Social or leisure	
Base: 1010 All respondents	Prior to	During	Prior to	During	Prior to	During	Prior to	During
Car - as driver	61%	57%	55%	49%	35%	30%	44%	30%
Car – as passenger	15%	15%	22%	22%	3%	3%	13%	7%
Car - all	*76%*	*72%*	*77%*	*71%*	*38%*	*33%*	*57%*	*37%*
Ulsterbus	6%	3%	5%	2%	1%	0%	9%	2%
Metro	6%	3%	3%	1%	1%	1%	2%	1%
Walk	5%	6%	6%	5%	3%	2%	6%	5%
Taxi	2%	2%	4%	3%	0%	0%	6%	2%
Rail	1%	1%	3%	1%	1%	0%	6%	1%
Glider	1%	0%	0%	0%	-	-	1%	0%
Public transport - all	*21%*	*15%*	*21%*	*12%*	*6%*	*3%*	*30%*	*11%*
Other	1%	1%	1%	1%	0%	0%	1%	1%
None - not applicable	4%	13%	1%	15%	55%	63%	13%	51%

Knowledge of public transport services

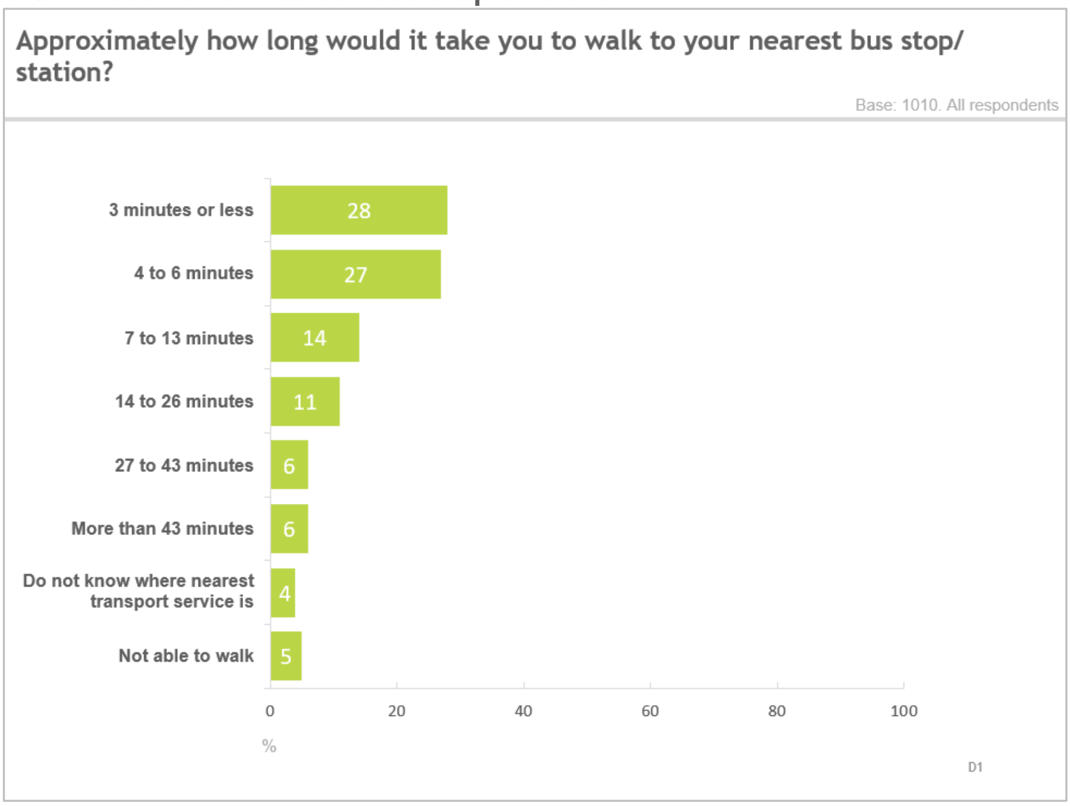
In this section we explore respondents' knowledge of and access to public transport services in their area.

Access to public transport

Over half (55%) live within a six minute walk of their nearest bus stop or station. A further 14% reside within a 7 to 13 minute walk and 11% are located within a 14 to 26 minute walk; this means that four out of five (80%) live within a 26 minute walk of their nearest stop. It should be noted that one in twenty (5%) confirmed that they would not be able to walk to their nearest stop and 4% were not aware of where their nearest stop is located.

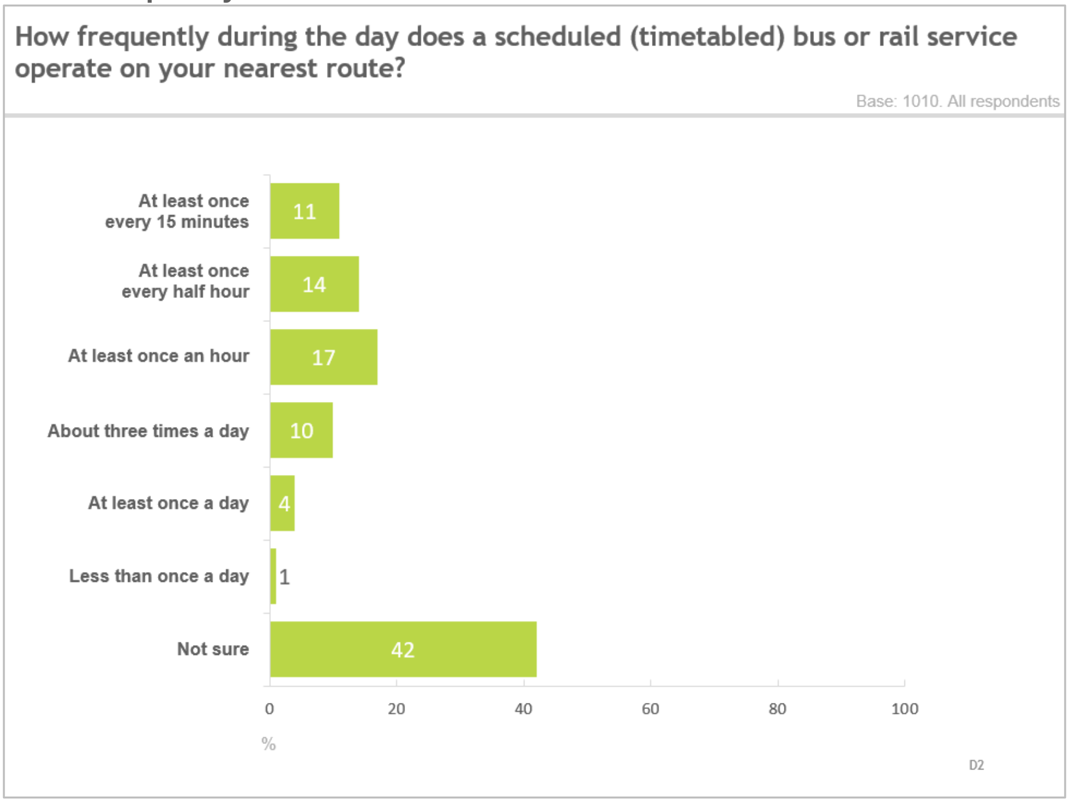
Analysis by demographics shows some predictable variations. Those living in urban locations are more likely to reside closer to a stop than rural dwellers (65% of urban households are within six minutes of a stop compared to 39% of those in a rural location) and younger respondents are able to get to a stop more quickly than older respondents (59% of those aged 55 to 64 compared to 52% of those aged 65 to 74, and 47% of those age 75 or older, are located within six minutes' walk of a stop).

Figure 3.1: Location of nearest bus stop or station



Respondents were asked about the frequency of their nearest scheduled bus or rail service. 42% commented that they were unsure of the frequency of scheduled services at their nearest route. One quarter (25%) reported that their nearest service operated at least once every half hour and a further 17% said it was at least hourly. 15% confirmed that their services was less frequent than hourly.

Figure 3.2: Frequency of nearest scheduled service

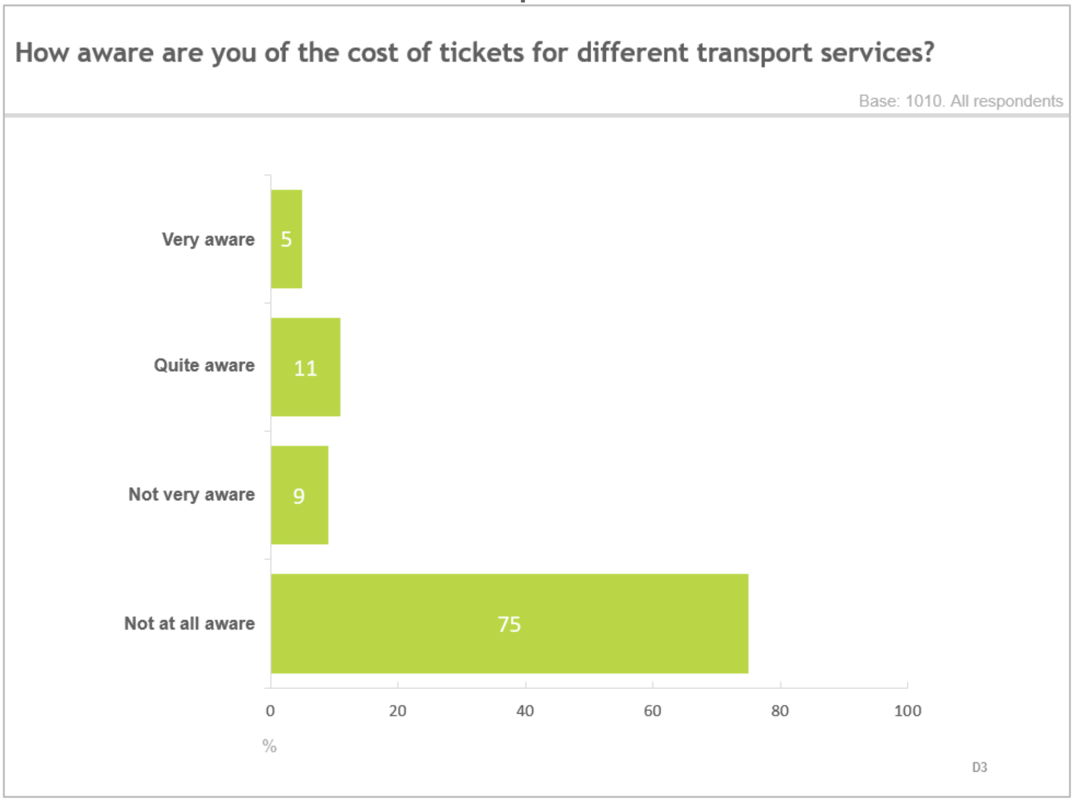


Knowledge of costs and timetables

When asked about the cost of tickets for transport services three quarters (75%) reported that they were not at all aware and a further 9% commented that they were not very aware of the prices. Just one in twenty (5%) confirmed they were very aware and 11% reported that they were quite aware.

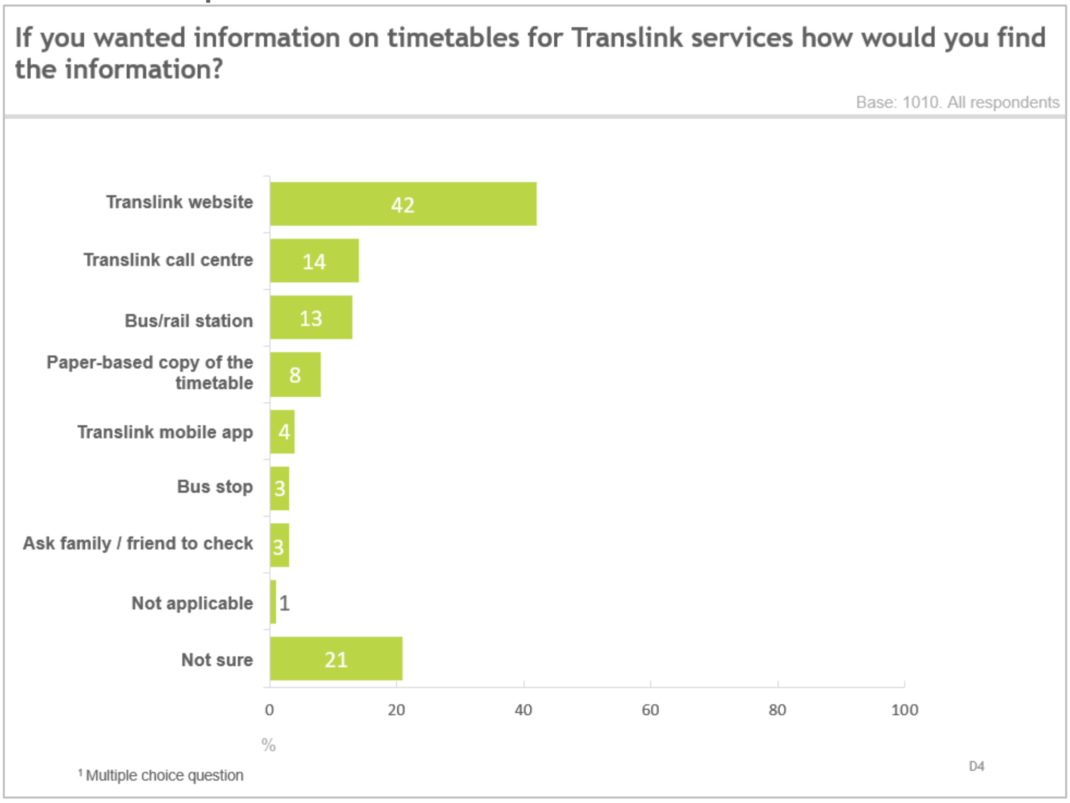
Those most likely to be aware of the costs of transport services were younger respondents, those living in social housing and those who reside in the Greater Belfast area.

Figure 3.3: Awareness of the cost of transport services



Respondents were asked how they would obtain timetables for Translink services. One in five (21%) were unsure as to how they would locate this type of information. 42% reported that they would access the timetables via the Translink website and a further 4% via Translink's mobile app. 14% said that they would telephone the Translink call centre, 13% would obtain the information from the bus/rail station and 3% at the bus stop. 8% confirmed that they have a hard copy of the timetable that they would use.

Figure 3.4: How respondents would obtain timetables for Translink services



As shown in the following table there were a number of differences by demographics in relation to how respondents would obtain timetable information. Younger respondents are more likely to access the information on the Translink website compared to older respondents, while older respondents are more likely to rely on telephoning the call centre or obtaining the information from the station. A similar trend can be seen by type of housing with those who own their own home more likely to access the website compared to those in social housing. Those in social housing are more likely to be unsure as to how to access the timetable, and to use the Translink call centre for obtain the information.

Table 3.1: How respondents would obtain timetables for Translink services by age and type of housing

	All	55 to 64	65 to 74	75 plus	Home owner	Private rented	Social rented
Base	*1010*	*458*	*340*	*210*	*788*	*45*	*163*
Translink website	42%	60%	39%	10%	45%	58%	29%
Mobile app	4%	6%	4%	0%	4%	2%	3%
Translink call centre	14%	9%	14%	24%	14%	7%	18%
At bus/rail station	13%	10%	14%	20%	13%	9%	12%
At bus stop	3%	2%	4%	4%	3%	2%	6%
Paper copy	8%	5%	9%	12%	8%	7%	8%
Family / friend	3%	3%	4%	4%	4%	-	4%
Not sure	21%	17%	22%	28%	19%	20%	27%
Total	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*

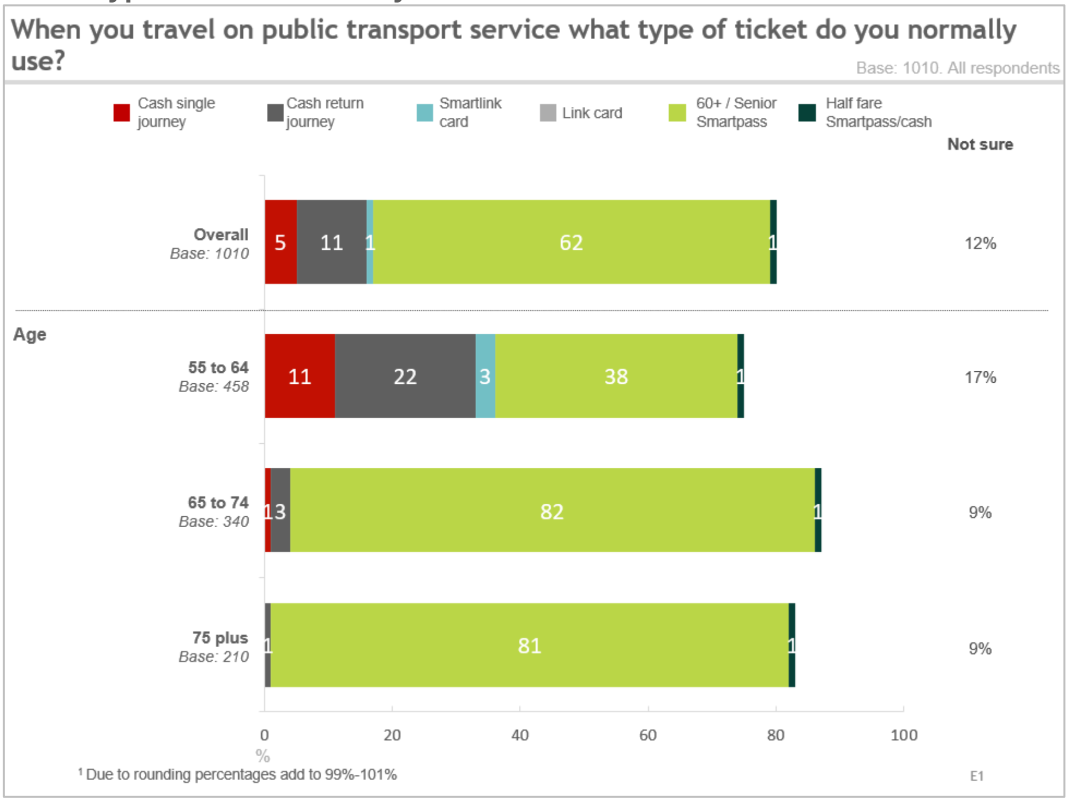
Usage of public transport services

This section addresses the experience of older people who use public transport services.

Method of paying

Those who use public transport services were asked what type of ticket they normally use. The most popular ticket is the 60+/Senior Smartpass with the majority (62%) availing of this. Cash is used by 16% (11% for a return journey ticket and 5% for a single journey ticket).

Figure 4.1: Type of ticket normally used

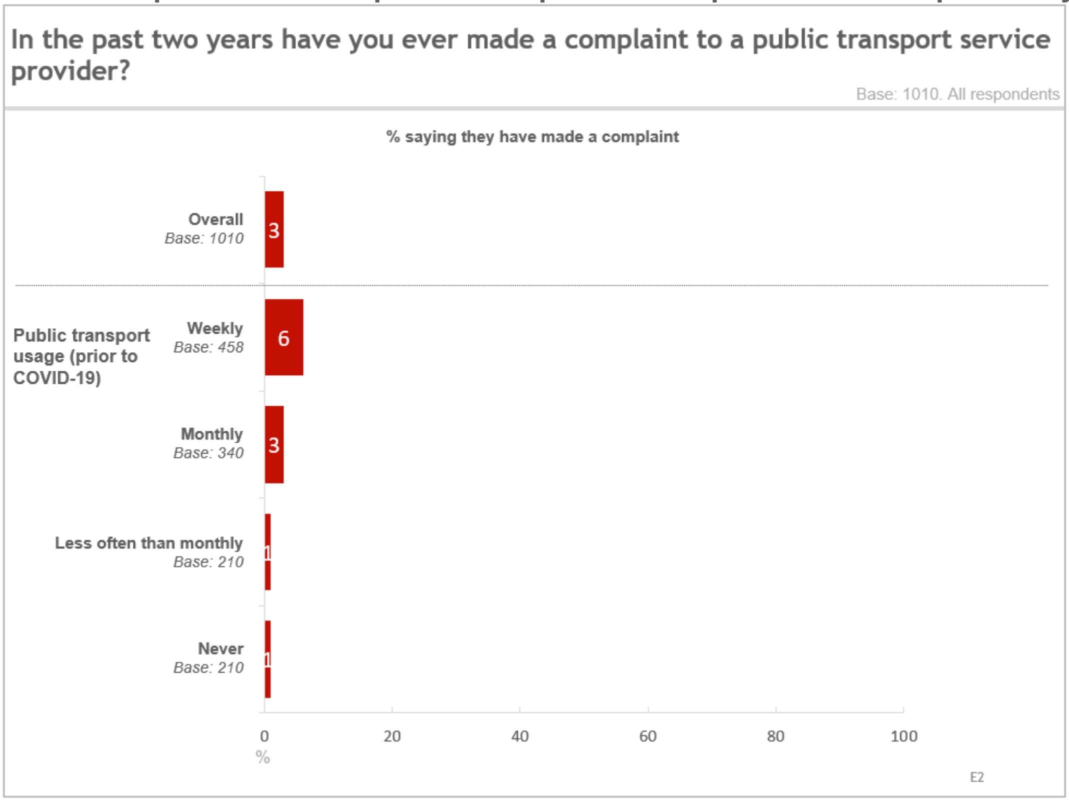


Complaint handling

3% of respondents have made a complaint to a public transport service provider in the past two years, with 6% of those that used public transport weekly (prior to COVID-19) having done so, compared to 1% that used it less often than monthly.

Satisfaction among those that have made a complaint was low in terms of the quality of information they received (17 out of 26 respondents were dissatisfied), the length of time it took to resolve their query (15 out of 26 were dissatisfied), and how overall their complaint was handled (16 out of 26 were dissatisfied).

Figure 4.2: Complaints made to public transport service providers in the past two years



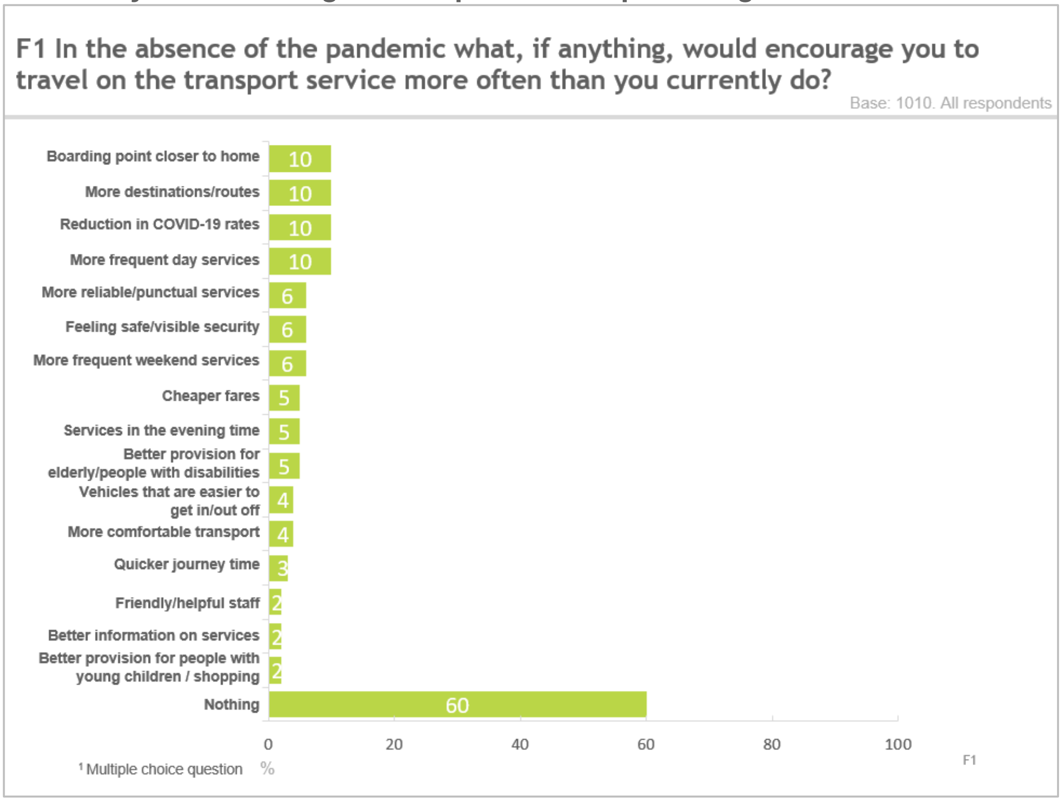
Future use

This section examines what potentially could be done to encourage future use of public transport.

Ways to encourage future use

Respondents were asked what, if anything, would encourage them to travel on transport services more often. Among the suggestions given were a number of ways to make the services more accessible service, including boarding points closer to home (10%), better provisions for the elderly or disabled (5%), and vehicles that are easier to get in and out of (4%). A greater frequency and choice of services were also mentioned, such as having more destinations and routes (10%) and more day (10%), evening (5%) and weekend (6%) services. 10% said they would use public transport more often following a reduction in COVID-19 rates. However, three in five (60%) thought that there was nothing that could be done to encourage more frequent use.

Figure 5.1: Ways to encourage future public transport usage



Cheaper fares

Overall 5% said that lower prices for fares would encourage them to increase their public transport usage. This was more common among those in social housing (9%) than those that own their home (5%) or privately rent (4%), and amongst younger respondents (10% of 55 to 64 year olds, compared 1% of 65 to 74 year olds and 1% of those aged 75 and over).

When asked what price the fare would need to be to encourage more use of public transport, a range of responses were given including daytime promotions/deals and blanket pricing throughout the day. 12 respondents suggested a free bus pass and 20 respondents were 'not sure' of what price to suggest. Making fares more in line with other countries was mentioned as a possible way to reduce prices, with one respondent saying transport in Northern Ireland is *"usually expensive compared to other countries".*

More frequent weekend services

6% of respondents said that they would be encouraged to use transport more often if there was a greater number of services running during the weekend, including 8% of those living in rural areas and 7% of those living outside the Greater Belfast area. When asked how frequent weekend services would need to be, a range of frequencies were provided with 47% saying they should run at least every two hours. Other responses included requests for more services at specific times of the day (evening (12%) and morning (5%)).

More frequent day services

One in ten (10%) respondents said they would use public transport more often if there were more day services available to them. Again, those living in rural areas were more likely to say this (14%, compared to 8% in urban areas). Hourly day services were more likely to encourage greater usage in rural areas, while those in urban areas would prefer a service running between every 20 to 30 minutes.

Improvements to facilitate the elderly/disabled

Making public transport more accessible to the elderly and disabled would encourage 5% of respondents to increase their usage, including 8% of those with a disability themselves or who live with someone with a disability. Having vehicles that are easier to get on to and off was again mentioned, with several respondents suggesting that the driver should wait until people have found a seat before driving off, as well as providing more elderly or disabled seating and making transport more accessible to those in wheelchairs or on scooters.

Table 5.1: Methods to encourage increased public transport usage

	All	Male	Female	55 to 64	65 to 74	75 plus	Disability	No disability
Base	*1010*	*493*	*517*	*458*	*340*	*210*	*379*	*625*
Cheaper fares	5%	4%	6%	10%	1%	1%	4%	6%
More frequent weekend services	6%	5%	7%	9%	6%	2%	7%	6%
More frequent day services	10%	10%	11%	14%	8%	5%	12%	9%
Improvements to facilitate the elderly/disabled	5%	4%	5%	6%	4%	3%	8%	3%

	All	Home owner	Private rented	Social rented	Urban	Rural	Greater Belfast	Rest of NI
Base	*1010*	*788*	*45*	*163*	*596*	*414*	*246*	*764*
Cheaper fares	5%	5%	4%	9%	6%	4%	8%	4%
More frequent weekend services	6%	6%	7%	7%	5%	8%	5%	7%
More frequent day services	10%	11%	9%	10%	8%	14%	11%	10%
Improvements to facilitate the elderly/disabled	5%	4%	9%	10%	6%	4%	6%	5%

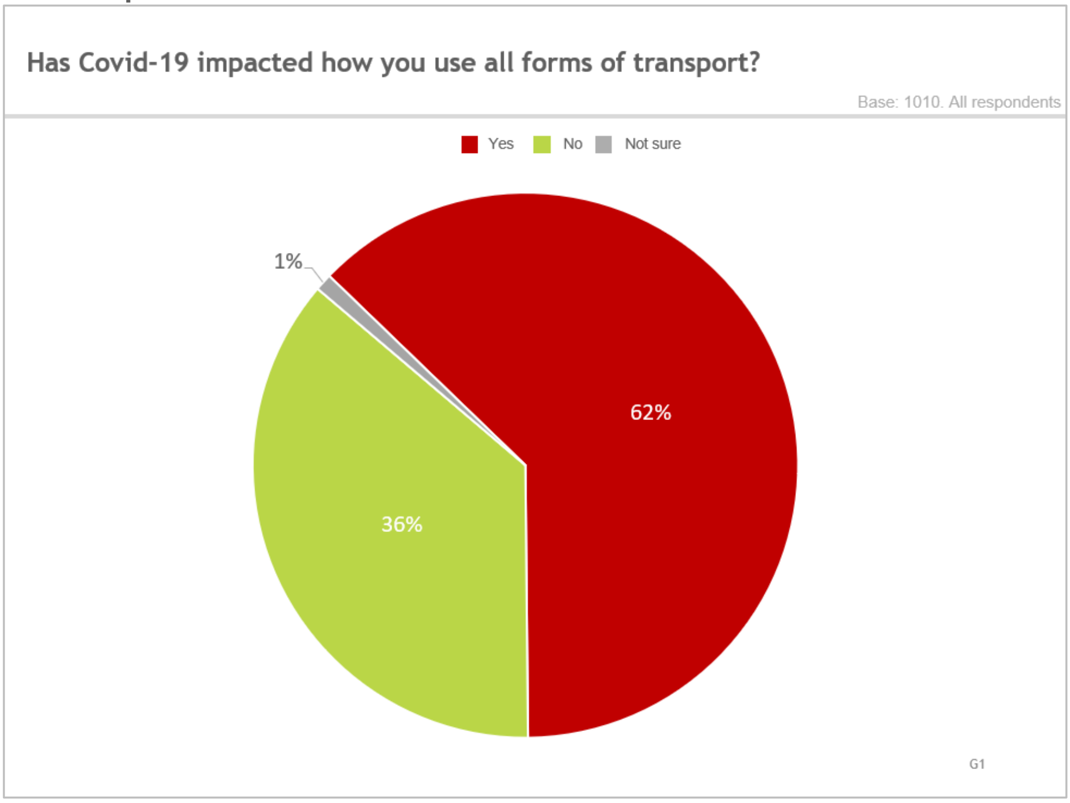
Impact of COVID-19

This section addresses the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on travel for the older population and what their expectations are for using public transport after the pandemic.

Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic

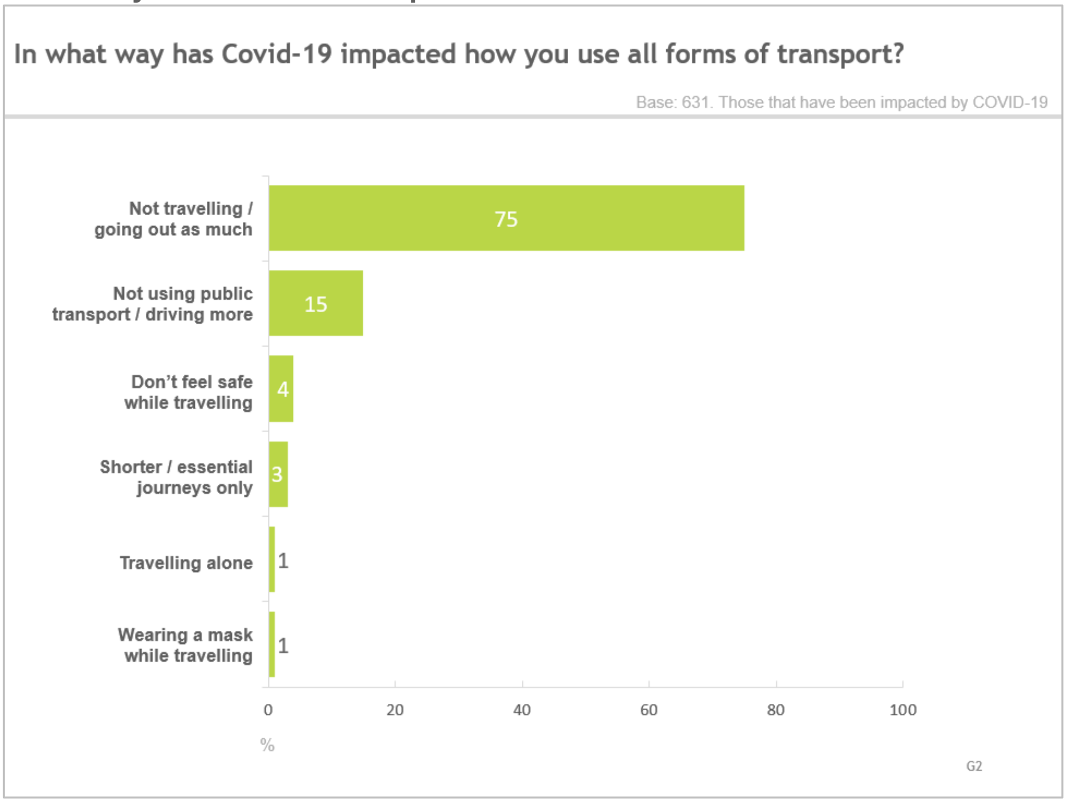
Over three out of five (62%) respondents reported that COVID-19 has impacted on their travel habits compared to 36% that have seen no impact.

Figure 6.1: Impact of COVID-19 on travel



Three quarters (75%) of those that have been impacted said that they no longer travel or go out as much as they used to before the pandemic, and 3% stated that they only travel for shorter or essential journeys. 15% reported that they now avoid using public transport and instead drive more.

Figure 6.2: Ways COVID-19 has impacted on travel



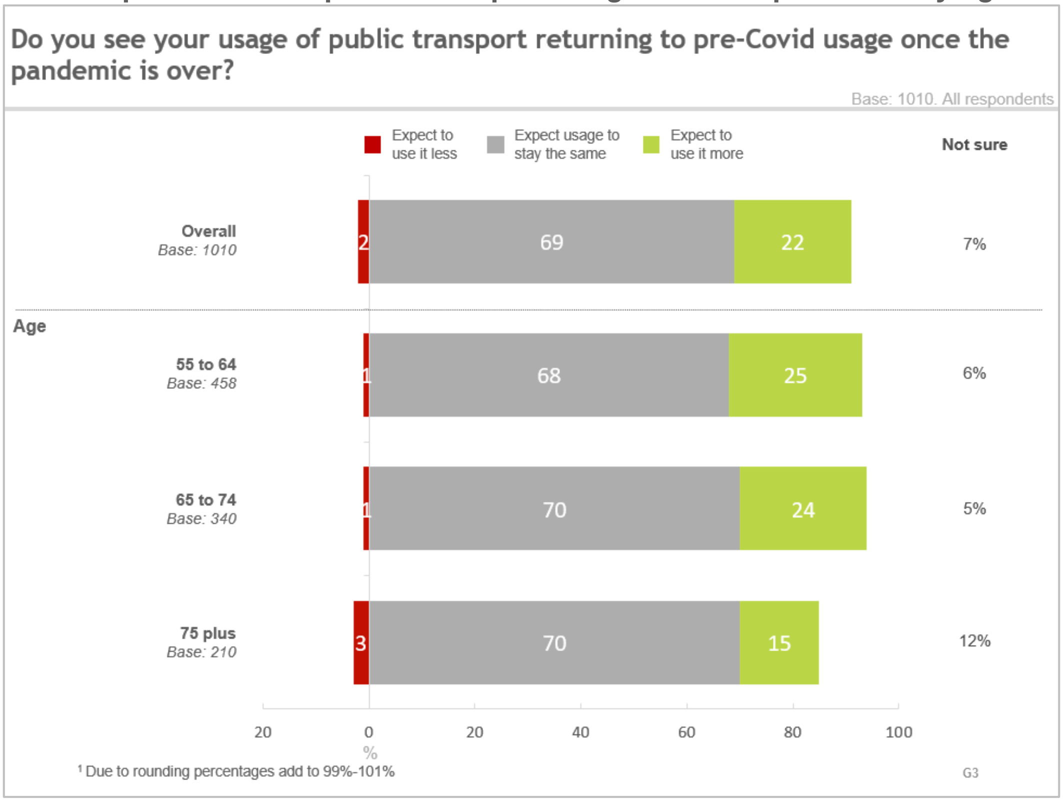
Usage after the pandemic

Almost seven in ten (69%) expect that, after the pandemic, their use of public transport will return to pre-COVID levels, 22% anticipate that their usage will be greater and 2% believe they will use public transport less often.

Analysis by age shows little variation, although older respondents (aged 75 or over) are more likely to be unsure what their level of usage might be after the pandemic.

Reasons for expecting usage to be less included being too old or having health problems, and not having any need to use it.

Figure 6.3: Expectations for public transport usage after the pandemic by age



Usage with age

Less than half (46%) of respondents expect their public transport usage to remain the same as they age, with those aged 75 and over (58%) the most likely to report this, although 9% also expect to use it less compared to 4% of all respondents. 37% expect their usage to increase with age, including almost half (48%) in the 55 to 64 age brackets. Those who did not use public transport before the pandemic were more likely to expect this to continue (64%, compared to 19% who expect to increase usage).

Just 4% expect their usage of public transport to be less as they age. Health and mobility problems and not having any need to use public transport services were again mentioned as reasons for this.

Of those who expected their usage to increase with age (37%), 43% said that this was because they expected to avail of free travel, while other respondents feel they may become unable to (15%) or less keen (10%) on driving.

Figure 6.5: Expectations for public transport usage with age

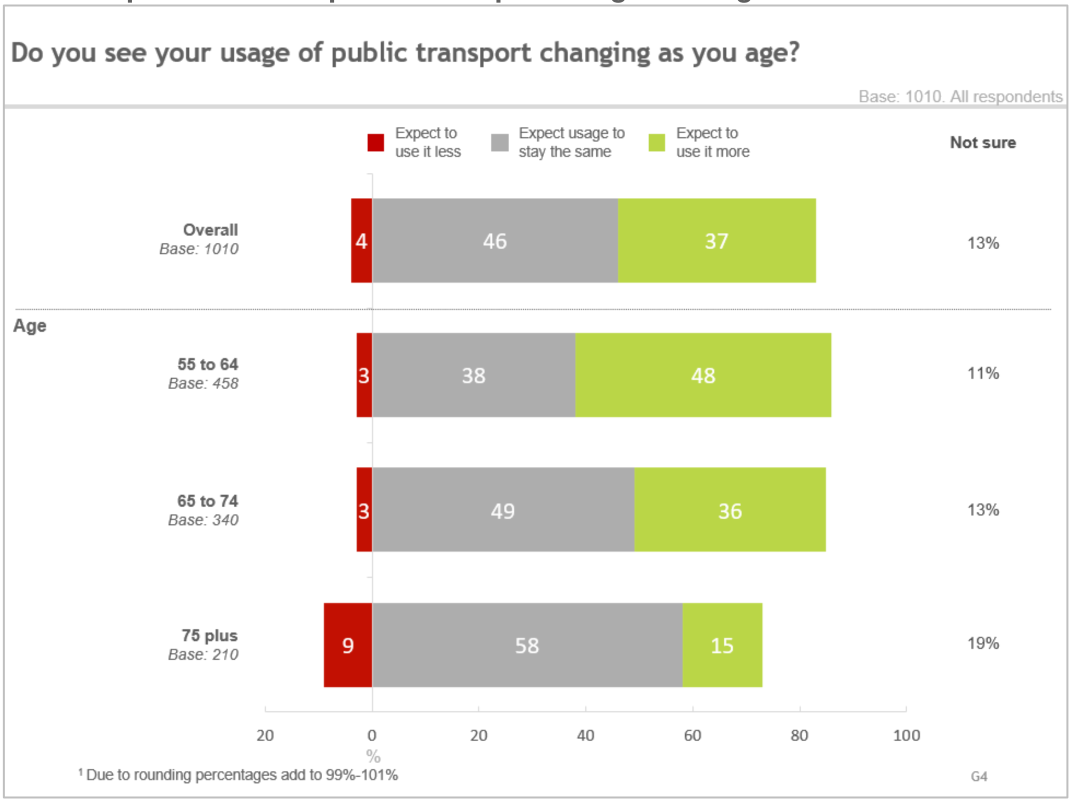
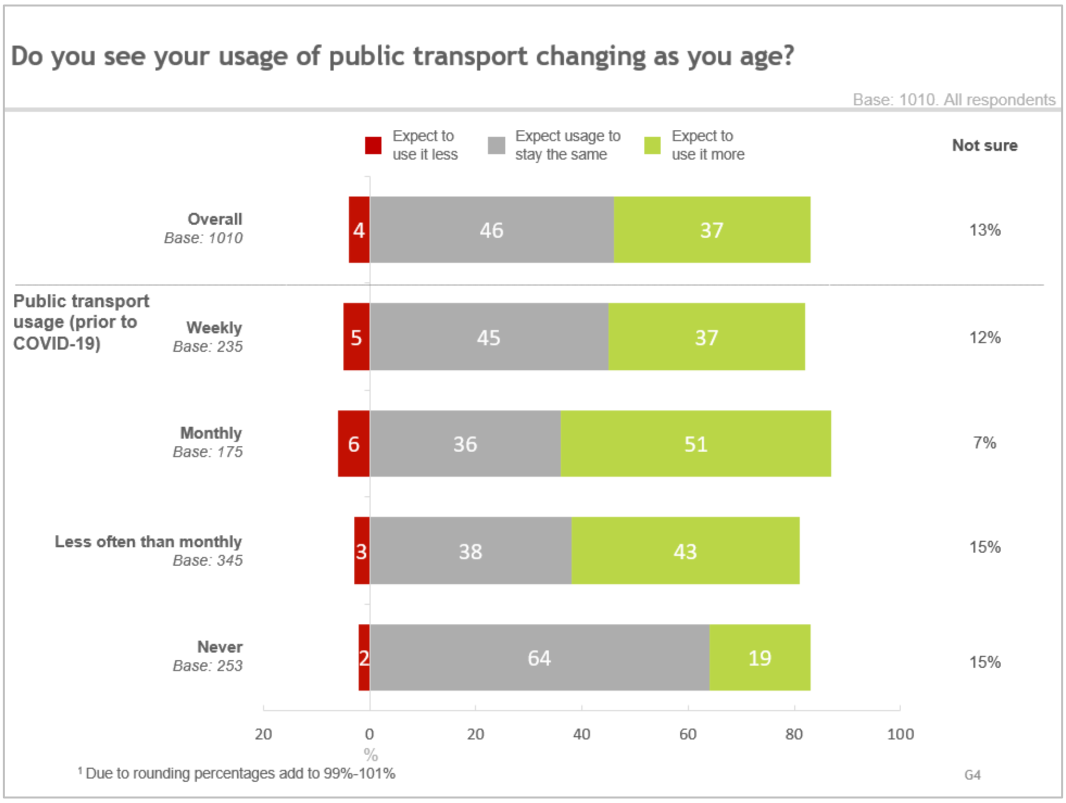


Figure 6.6: Expectations for public transport usage with age by usage before the pandemic



Conclusions and recommendations

The following section outlines several conclusions and areas for further consideration by the Consumer Council based on the survey findings.

Car/van currently a more attractive option than using public transport

For most respondents a car is the primary method of travel, either as a driver or a passenger. 82% of respondents said that they have access to a car, with 97% of those using it on a weekly basis with this figure only dropping to 86% in the past 6 months. This is in contrast to 23% that used public transport at least once a week prior to COVID-19 and 7% that use it as frequently since the pandemic.

For many (75% of survey respondents) a car offers a more convenient form of transport while also allowing them to carry more things. Almost all of those with access (97%) do not think that anything inhibits them from driving.

Transport providers, therefore, may want to look at measures that will make public transport a more attractive option for those aged over 55. This is likely to be a challenge as 60% do not think anything would increase their public transport usage. However, having a more frequent day service (10%), a boarding point closer to home (10%), and more destinations or routes (10%) were possible ways identified by respondents.

COVID-19 has reduced public transport usage

COVID-19 has impacted on all forms of travel and transport for 62% of respondents; and the results show that public transport has seen the greatest impact. Weekly usage has dropped from 23% to 7% over the past six months, with the percentage saying they never use it increasing from one quarter (25%) prior to the pandemic to over three quarters (77%).

In light of the restrictions at the time of writing, requiring people to stay at home and only travel for essential purposes and for those in vulnerable groups to shield, it is unlikely that public transport will become a viable option for older people until after the pandemic.

As travel habits become established during the pandemic, it will become a challenge to change those habits as the impact of the pandemic decreases. Although the results show that after the end of the pandemic people say they are likely to use public transport the same amount (69%) or even more than before the pandemic (22%) it remains to be seen as to whether travel habits are re-established to the same level as before. Therefore, public transport providers may want to look at future measures to ensure older people feel safe when they do return to using buses or trains.

Knowledge of services available to commuters is low

A preference for using cars and reduced public transport usage since the pandemic may have resulted in a poor knowledge of services available. While only 4% of respondents were unaware of where their nearest transport service operates from, 42% were not sure how frequently a scheduled bus or rail service operates on their nearest route and 21% were not sure where they would look for such information. Three quarters of respondents (75%) were not at all aware of the cost of tickets, although this may be due to only 16% using cash and 62% using their Senior Smartpass when they travel on public transport. The Translink website (42%) was the most used source to find information about services, and so making this site more accessible to an older generation, who may not be as confident using technology, is one possible way to increase awareness among older people.

Those living in social housing rely more on public transport

Car ownership was lowest amongst those living in social housing, with 50% of such respondents saying they have no car or access to a car from their home compared to 18% overall. Usage of public transport was also highest amongst respondents in social housing, with 36% reporting weekly usage before the pandemic and 17% over the past six months. Even with the pandemic, bus services are the main form of transport when going shopping for 14% of respondents in social housing (6% overall). While 22% of respondents in social housing use cash to pay for their journeys, 9% suggested having cheaper fares would encourage future public transport usage. Use of a Senior Smartpass by people in social housing is also low when compared with those who own their own home. While 85% in both the 65 to 74 and 75 plus age groups who live in social housing use a Senior Smartpass, only one quarter (25%) aged 55 to 64 use one, compared to 42% who own their own home (38% overall). 44% of respondents aged 55 to 64 in social housing also use cash, compared to under one third (31%) of respondents that own their home (33% overall).

Poorer provision of services in rural areas

Car ownership was highest (91%, compared to 75% in urban areas) and public transport usage lowest (16% weekly before the pandemic, compared to 29% in urban areas) amongst respondents living in rural areas. While over one third (38%) of respondents in rural areas live within a six-minute walk of their nearest bus stop, services on their nearest route operate between every fifteen minutes and every hour for 27%, which suggests public transport is not a viable or convenient option for rural people when compared to using a car. A more frequent and reliable service (17%) and closer transport links (12%) were suggested by rural respondents as ways to increase their public transport usage, and so transport providers may wish to explore ways to make public transport more accessible/viable in rural areas.

Public transport usage is likely to increase with age

Although 46% of respondents expect their usage of public transport to remain the same as they age, over one third (37%) expect it to increase. This is most likely to happen for those aged 55 to 64 (48%), which is likely a result of this age group becoming eligible for their Senior Smartpass. 58% in the youngest age group expect to increase their public transport usage to avail of the free travel offered to them. Other reasons for increasing usage included possibly becoming unable to drive (15%) or less keen on driving (10%). As previously mentioned however, with knowledge of public transport services being low, transport providers may want to explore ways to ensure that those who are eligible for a Senior Smartpass are aware of this and know how to apply for one.