

**Exploring the journey
experiences of
disabled commuters**

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Research conducted by Synovate

Executive Summary

Introduction

TfL required additional research to understand the journey experiences of disabled people who regularly commute during peak hours using London Underground, buses, and London Overground, and to compare their peak and off-peak travel experiences.

This report details feedback from a qualitative study, designed to:

- Understand in detail the barriers faced by disabled commuters travelling in peak time and in the evenings
- Explore the extent to which these barriers affect disabled commuters' travel plans and modal choices for travelling during peak times or in the evenings

The research took the form of two Online Bulletin Boards (OBBS) amongst people with different types and severity of disability who commute using public transport in London, together with eight depth interviews amongst people with learning disabilities.

Discussion of Key Findings

Looking at this research alongside TfL's existing knowledge about the barriers experienced by disabled travellers, there are some distinct issues which are experienced by disabled **commuters travelling during peak times and in the evening**.

Disabled commuters mention many of the key barriers which have emerged in previous research, such as problems moving within stations, particularly those without step-free access; lack of appropriate information provision at stations; and problems with getting a seat on both London Underground and buses. However, these barriers are exacerbated when commuting during peak times because of increased passenger numbers, which often leads to overcrowding in stations, at bus stops, and on buses and trains.

For example, difficulty with navigating through stations is heightened during peak time travel because of the volume of other passengers moving at speed through the station, as is changing routes at short notice if there is any disruption. Many also comment on the fact that they are rarely offered a seat during peak times, even those specifically reserved for disabled travellers, and say that other commuters are generally inconsiderate towards disabled commuters.

There are also some specific issues during the morning peak when there are school children travelling, as disabled commuters say that they are particularly unwilling to give up their seats and can be loud and disruptive.

This combination of barriers during peak time travel can lead to physical discomfort and strain, which some disabled commuters say affects their ability to work productively. It also causes emotional distress and concern about physical safety and the danger of falling.

However, disabled commuters also note some benefits of travelling during peak time, including the increased frequency of trains and buses, frequent provision of service updates and travel information, and the presence of more staff at stations than at other times of the day.

In terms of **travelling during the evening**, the general accessibility and communication barriers described above apply. Specific issues to do with travelling during the evening centre around concerns about anti-social behaviour, particularly from other passengers who have been drinking. Some also comment that travelling in the evening can be busier than travelling during the day, which can mean that the problems caused by overcrowding and large volumes of passengers - experienced when commuting during morning and evening peak times - are also an issue when travelling in the evening. However, others find travelling in the evening easier than travelling during peak times because there are fewer passengers and it is easier to move around and get a seat.

The barriers experienced by disabled commuters have an impact on their travel choices, particularly travel routes and transport modes. Some participants say that they plan their journeys in order to minimise the physical strain of commuting, even if this means taking a longer route or increasing the overall journey time. This is also linked to modal choice, with many disabled commuters preferring to use the bus where possible, often because it is felt to be easier to access.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and objectives

TfL carries out regular research to understand the experiences of disabled travellers through the Disabilities Mystery Traveller Survey. In total, 6,215 assessments are carried out annually by trained disabled assessors. However, most of the assessments are carried out during the day off-peak, because the assessors conduct their journeys at the time of day that is most convenient for them. TfL therefore required additional research to understand the journey experiences of disabled people who regularly commute during peak hours using London Underground, buses, and London Overground, and to compare their peak and off-peak travel experiences.

The additional research involves quantitative and qualitative elements to provide both comparable quantitative data, and an in-depth understanding of disabled commuters' journey experiences. This report details the feedback from the qualitative element of the research. Specifically, the qualitative research was designed to:

- Understand in detail the barriers faced by disabled commuters travelling in peak time and in the evenings
- Explore the extent to which these barriers affect disabled commuters' travel plans and modal choices for travelling during peak times or in the evenings

1.2 Methodology and sample

We conducted two Online Bulletin Boards (OBBs) amongst people with different types and severity of disability who commute using public transport in London. A total of nine people took part across the two OBBs:

- Six disabled commuters with a mobility impairment
- Two disabled commuters with a visual impairment
- One commuter with a hearing impairment

The sample also included:

- A mix of ages: all over 25
- A mix of gender, socio-economic group, ethnicity, and employment status
- A mix of full and part time workers

Participants were recruited from a database provided by TfL which included a range of people with different types of disability, and who use London transport on a frequent basis.

Questions on the OBB evolved over the fieldwork period with fresh questions uploaded each day to facilitate discussion. The key topics covered each day were as follows:

- Day One: Introductions and background information, the advantages and disadvantages of using public transport during peak and off-peak hours.
- Day Two: Discussion of different journey stages, experiences of using buses during normal and peak hours, experience of travel planning, buying tickets and checking travel information.
- Day Three: experiences of using the Underground, Overground, taxi and minicab services, and experiences of interactions with TfL staff.

We also conducted eight 30 minute depth interviews amongst people with learning disabilities. We worked closely with local organisations in order to identify the most appropriate people to speak to and ensure the sample included:

- A range of learning disabilities
- A range of age and gender
- A mix of modes of transport used / frequency of journeys

All the people we spoke to regularly use public transport in London to travel to work or education at peak times or in the evening on bus, London Underground or London Overground.

2. Main findings

2.1 Usage and experiences of public transport

The disabled people who took part in this project use London transport services during peak hours for commuting, primarily travelling within or to central London. Most participants' journeys to work involve more than one mode of transport, usually the Underground plus the Bus or London Overground. In addition to commuting, participants use a variety of transport for different purposes and at different times of the day. For other journeys, respondents tend to avoid rush hour when possible, choosing to travel late in the morning or early afternoon. The experience of travel at peak times is generally negative for many disabled commuters, although there are also some positive aspects.

2.1.1 Negative aspects of commuting during peak times

Travelling during peak hours can be a daunting experience for disabled commuters both psychologically and physically. The key negative aspects to using public transport during peak hours are:

- Overcrowding
 - Navigation
 - Inability to change routes
 - Inconsiderate behaviour of other commuters
- Behaviour of school children and parents with pushchairs
- Freedom pass restrictions

Many of these are of course, shared with commuters more generally, but they have a more significant impact on disabled commuters. Each of these issues is discussed in more detail below.

Overcrowding

Overcrowding on the various modes of transport and at stations creates specific issues for disabled commuters travelling at peak times. These are difficulties with navigation; inability to change routes if there are service disruptions; and problems caused by the behaviour of other commuters.

Navigation

Disabled commuters find it hard to navigate through the stations during peak times because of rushing crowds, which leaves them feeling nervous and fearful of being pushed

over. This is a particular issue for those with mobility impairments. The navigation difficulties and fear of being pushed or jostled are identified as being particular concerns in stations where there is no step-free access and commuters are forced to use the stairs. As well as causing physical discomfort, disabled commuters also feel anxious about potentially holding up other passengers.

"If something like the lift / escalator isn't working I find it really difficult to use the stairs and I feel nervous because I may fall [...] I am slowing down the people behind me too"

Female, mobility impairment

Some disabled commuters also say that they find it difficult to use the hand rail when using stairs because of the volume of other passengers using the station.

"Going up and down steep steps to the Underground in rush hour - when I like to hang on to the rail - is tricky"

Female, mobility impairment

Inability to change routes

Due to a lack of physical mobility, disabled passengers can find it difficult to make changes to their route if there are delays or cancellations to services. This is emphasised during peak hours when the atmosphere is more chaotic due to the number of people using public transport. They may also find it more difficult to find a member of staff to help advise them on appropriate journey changes to make.

If people with learning disabilities are making new journeys and are travelling independently, they tend to plan them in advance. This might involve making the journey with a friend first or asking somebody to write simple, clear instructions on a piece of paper. Because the journey has been carefully planned, disruptions can be initially disorientating.

However, the inability to change routes easily is not a big concern for the people we spoke to with learning disabilities. Those with severe learning disabilities will often travel with other people who will help them find a new route. People with milder learning disabilities will usually go and find a member of staff for help, especially those who find it difficult to read. Sometimes they will take their time to work out a new route themselves though.

"There was one time when the tube stopped working so I went outside and looked at the buses. The maps are ok to read, the stops are clear. I checked with the bus driver anyway"

Male, mild learning disability

Inconsiderate behaviour from other passengers

Disabled commuters say that other passengers do not take their needs into consideration when at crowded bus stops or on Tube and train platforms. Disabled commuters have to jostle in line in order to board and they also have to wait longer to board the bus or train during peak hours when services, stations and stops are busy. This can lead to physical discomfort and also feelings of frustration.

"As I am unsteady I do not like to stand on the tube platforms for long periods of time. I experience pain in my legs and back when waiting and this makes me feel frustrated and irritable."

Female, mobility impairment

Travelling at peak times means that there is often a lack of available seats and disabled commuters say that it is common that other commuters do not offer their seats to disabled people, even the seats specially reserved for them.

"Hardly anybody will offer me a seat, even though they have been staring at me and the fact that I have mobility problems."

Female, mobility impairment

"The main problem is that the seats reserved for disabled people are no longer respected by the able bodied people."

Male, mobility impairment

Some feel that they must make a choice between sitting at a bus stop, which means they get on the bus last and are more likely to have to stand on the bus, or standing at the bus stop which means they are more likely to get a seat as they are first on the bus.

“Sometimes, depending on how busy it is, I need to decide between sitting down while waiting for a bus and standing whilst on the bus.”

Female, mobility impairment

For some disabled commuters, standing on their journey to work can put a physical strain on their bodies which has a negative impact on the rest of the day.

“If I don't get a seat then I'm in a lot of pain and feel like I want to turn right round and go home because I'll be in a great deal of pain for the rest of the day and I won't be productive at work.”

Female, mobility impairment

People with learning disabilities find travelling at peak times less pleasant than travelling during off peak hours because they cannot get a seat, but it does not tend to cause discomfort or have a negative impact on the rest of their day.

Behaviour of school children and parents with pushchairs

Disabled commuters also identify issues due to school children travelling during the morning peak hours. This is most often an issue raised regarding travelling by bus. School children are identified as being particularly unwilling to give up their seats and disabled commuters find them loud and disruptive which contributes to a feeling of being “unsafe, frustrated and neglected”.

“I find the biggest problem at bus stops is adolescent schoolchildren who have no manners, pushing onto the bus and taking seats!”

Female, mobility impairment

As well as finding them loud and disruptive, the people we spoke to with learning disabilities say that school children are also more likely to stare at them and make unpleasant remarks than any other passengers. These incidents are seen as being rare but can be upsetting.

Some also suggest that parents with pushchairs make little accommodation for disabled passengers.

“Parents with pushchairs are also a major hazard and seem to think that they should have preferential treatment and have no regard for the difficulty of others.”

Female, mobility impairment

Freedom Pass restrictions

One disabled customer objects to the fact that even with a Freedom Pass, she is unable to use Southern and South Eastern lines before 9.30am due to travel restrictions. She feels it is a discriminatory approach which could potentially negatively impact her career. It also makes her feel that she is treated differently from other passengers.

“This is not only frustrating but feels quite discriminatory and stops me feeling like I fit in with everyone else in the working world as I have to travel at a ‘special’ time. This isn’t a very inclusive approach and can cause problems with some employers who aren’t so flexible in working hours.”

Female, visual impairment

Some customers with learning disabilities feel that TfL staff can fail to be understanding when their freedom passes are not functioning. They feel that because their disability is less obvious than mobility impairments, staff are too quick to challenge them and argue that they cannot travel. Some have also experienced staff being rude to them in these circumstances.

2.1.2 Positive aspects of commuting during peak times

Participants also identify some positive aspects to peak time travel:

- Frequency of the trains and buses
- Travel announcements and service updates
- Number of staff at stations

Frequency of trains and buses

One of the main advantages to travelling during peak hours is the frequency of buses and tubes. This allows some disabled customers to be more flexible with the route they take to work in order to ensure it is as comfortable as possible, and they feel able to choose not to board a particularly crowded bus or train because they are confident that there will be another service within a short period of time.

"It's good that the trains are still quite regular enough for me to justify giving myself a longer journey to go home. It is frustrating and annoying, but I feel I have no choice if I don't want to suffer from the aches and pains of standing".

Female, mobility impairment

Travel announcements and service updates

Passengers who have difficulty reading signs rely on information conveyed over loudspeakers, or advice from other passengers and TfL staff. One of the advantages of travelling during peak hours is that there are sufficient announcements, compared to off-peak times when announcements are less frequent, which can leave disabled commuters feeling stranded and poorly informed.

"Once you get outside of rush hour these announcements can often stop - this can be very frustrating for me as I am not able to read the signage on most platforms: it is too high up and the contrast on the electronic display is too poor, or moves too quickly!"

Female, visual impairment

More staff at stations

The increased number of staff at tube and train stations during peak times is identified as a positive aspect for disabled commuters as they can offer assistance and direct passenger flow. This is particularly important in light of the problems experienced during peak times due to overcrowding.

2.2 Disabled commuters' experience of evening travel compared to peak travel

Please note that not all of the commuters spoken to in this research regularly travel in the evening. The following section is therefore based on feedback from the participants with experience of travelling during the evening.

2.2.1 Negative aspects of travelling during the evening

Travelling during the evening is typically seen as easier for disabled people than commuting during peak times, though there are still a number of challenges associated with it. These tend to be associated with safety and security and the lack of available assistance if required.

Issues with overcrowding

The continued presence of passengers from the evening peak hour commute means that some lines remain very busy. This means that disabled respondents face the same barriers that they experience when travelling in peak hours.

“Some lines are still very busy with all ensuing problems of peak situations.”

Female, mobility impairment

Longer waiting times for buses and trains

Disabled passengers who travel during the evening say that there are longer waiting times for both buses and trains, which become less frequent as the night progresses. This leads to longer waits at bus stops and on Tube platforms which can be uncomfortable.

Anti-social behaviour of other travellers

Disabled travellers also say there is potential for more anti-social behaviour in the evenings, particularly after pub closing hours. Some participants say they feel unsafe if travelling with other passengers who are drunk. While this experience is not unique to disabled people, the added difficulties they have in moving can make them feel more vulnerable.

“Just one word; Drunks!! These problems are not peculiar to disabled people but we do experience them, and because of our situation it is not always possible to change seats like others.”

Male, mobility impairment

Safety concerns

Safety can be a concern for disabled people in the evening and at night. This is felt most strongly especially on the Underground when there are fewer visible staff compared to buses.

“I don’t like travelling in the dark on tubes because of the stations being dark and if here is nobody about in the ticket office or porter or whatever it is very off-putting.”

Female, mobility difficulties

The people we spoke to with learning disabilities do not tend to travel much in the evening and so safety is not a big concern. Although one customer did say that he is aware of fewer members of staff at his train station in the evening and that in the winter he feels slightly unsafe because it is dark.

“It is only in the winter when it is dark that I notice it. I turn the sound on my phone off in case it rings and somebody thinks they can steal it”

Male, mild learning disability

Fewer announcements and visible staff

Some disabled people feel that there are fewer travel announcements and visible staff, so they are less able to find the information that they need to make their journey easier.

“It would be nice to have the same level of information available to me at night that is available during the day – after all you often need to move at night as it is quiet and there are less people to ask!”

- Female, visual impairment

Reduced staff availability in the evenings also exacerbates safety concerns:

“I have to arrive early to walk to the end of the train furthest away from the barrier because otherwise when I get to my station I have a long lonely walk from the back end of the train until I reach the exit to my station (everyone else has walked by at a normal gate) and there is no member of staff on the station. It’s scary.”

Female, mobility difficulties

2.2.2 Positive aspects of travelling during the evening

Disabled commuters who also travel in the evenings feel that it is often less crowded than at peak times. This can make it easier for a number of reasons. Firstly, walking through stations can be easier as there are fewer passengers to act as obstructions. There are also shorter queues for getting on buses and getting through ticket barriers to get on trains. This makes accessing transport less arduous than at peak times. Similarly, it is generally easier to find a seat in the evening than during peak times, as there tend to be fewer passengers.

Some disabled commuters also feel that compared to off peak times during the day, there are sometimes more buses and trains in the evening as these times are more popular. This can mean that there is less waiting required.

2.3 Other barriers to using public transport for disabled commuters

In addition to the specific issues experienced by disabled commuters during peak time and evening travel, participants also raised a number of other barriers to using transport which they can experience at any time.

Lack of step-free access and lifts in Underground and Overground stations

Stations that do not have lifts or step free access are a major challenge to disabled customers, who are often forced to re-route their journey to find what they see as the most convenient route. When customers use the term “convenience,” it is in reference to physical convenience as opposed to expediency of travel because they understand and expect journeys to take longer because of the physical obstacles they face, such as stairs and long distances between platforms.

“I always look for the most convenient routes for where I am going - I look to see which stations have step free access...”

Female, mobility impairment

However, disabled customers sometimes have to use stations where they must ascend and descend stairs and walk long distances. Walking long distances, standing upright for long periods of time, and stepping on and off train platforms can cause extreme physical discomfort for some disabled passengers. Disabled customers also fear that they are holding up other passengers, and worry about falling and injuring themselves.

Generally, disabled customers feel that Underground stations present the greatest physical challenges. Therefore, step-free access is essential in making sure disabled passengers are freely able to access transport facilities with confidence.

“Tube stations are not disabled friendly with the number of stairs to traverse to get from one line to another and to get to exits.”

Female, mobility impairment

Taxi and Minicab stands

Disabled customers are concerned about plans at some stations to reposition taxi and minicab stands further away from the station, as this will add further distance to their overall journey. Ideally, they would like to see taxi and minicab stands fully integrated into the physical infrastructure of stations so that access is quick and efficient.

“I find it very hard getting up and down the stairs carrying my case and when I get to Richmond I struggle up the steps and fall into a taxi. The taxis are due to be moved by TfL to a place along the road which is not immediately outside the station and this would be the last straw.”

Female, mobility impairment

Bus travel

Many disabled customers prefer using the bus instead of trains or taxi and minicabs because it is a convenient and comparatively disabled-friendly form of transport. One respondent observed that travelling on the bus is more pleasant because of the “human element,” whereas on the tube and trains, the lack of staff present to regulate passenger flow and behaviour on the platform makes travel more difficult.

“The buses are generally more user friendly - possibly because the human in charge is visible.”

Female, mobility impairment

However, bus stops pose a number of physical difficulties for disabled passengers. Firstly, disabled customers feel that they are not given priority either for boarding or for seating. Some feel that they must often make a choice between sitting at a bus stop, or trying to make sure they can get a seat on the bus.

Customers suggest that a specially designated seating and queuing area for disabled passengers would provide them with easier access, and reduce the possibility of being pushed over by impatient passengers who are trying to get to the available seats first.

Disabled commuters also feel that many other passengers often fail to offer them a seat, or make room to manoeuvre a wheelchair. This is exacerbated by the fact that there are no conductors onboard to enforce the rights of disabled passengers and minimise anti-social behaviour generally.

“Old and disabled do not appear to have a fairly certain ‘right’ to these seats and no-one to enforce it. Transport companies do not do enough to support these passengers.”

Female, mobility impairment

Disabled commuters also say that the integration between the bus and the bus stop needs improvement, as physically stepping onto and off the bus to the kerb is tricky. This barrier is aggravated if a bus driver fails to pull up close enough to the kerb, making the step even higher.

“I find the step onto buses a little high... Getting off buses can be difficult because of high steps.”

Female, mobility impairment

Travel information and signage

Some disabled commuters commented that the physical signage in train stations and bus terminals did not suit their needs. Specifically, customers wanted more way-finding information to assist navigation through stations, and more accurate bus timetables in order to plan their journeys with greater precision.

“Information about traversing stations is not comprehensive enough. Bus timetables are very misleading.”

Female, mobility impairment

Clear signage is fundamental for passengers who have visual impairments, and who require signs that are highly visible. Customers with impaired vision found new electronic signs difficult to read due to a combination of glare and small text size. Customers also stated that they wanted more signs on platforms, and that the physical position of signs often needs improvement so that they are not obstructed by other objects.

"I would score my travelling experience 4. This is because I find it extremely difficult to recognise numbers and signs."

Male, visual impairment

Customers suggest that improvements need to be made to both the physical positioning and characteristics of the signage, and the frequency of information conveyed over loudspeakers. The latter is particularly important for commuters with visual impairments as they rely on these more for guidance.

However, they tend to talk positively about TfL resources such as the website and travel information telephone line, which they find easy to use and highly informative.

TfL staff

In general, customers are positive about TfL staff, who they describe as courteous and helpful. Customers also acknowledge that TfL staff are put under pressure by demanding passengers, and therefore appreciate their efforts to maintain their composure and politeness.

"Generally my experience of TfL staff is good. They are helpful and courteous for the most part which makes me feel respected."

Female, mobility impairment

Some passengers feel that TfL staff need more “diversity” training, in the sense that they should be specifically trained to deal with passengers with different types of disability. They understand that some have experience and training at this, but they feel that the inconsistencies in the service they receive from staff could be minimised with greater training.

“Some are more helpful than others but it’s amazing how many of them will just point at a sign rather than answer your question - and pointing doesn’t really help me much so I have to be explicit and explain that I can’t see the signs.”

Female, visual impairment

Customers with learning disabilities sometimes find that LU staff speak too quickly when providing directions and giving advice on alternative routes. On these occasions they do not always feel comfortable asking them to slow down or to repeat what they have said. One customer says that he tries to pre-empt this by telling members of staff that he has a learning disability up-front, but does not always feel that members of staff will take this into account because they haven’t had the right training.

Some disabled commuters believe that bus drivers’ approach to helping passengers is variable. While customers do not expect to have long conversations with drivers, they nonetheless expect them to be helpful and answer questions regarding bus routes in order to better accommodate and guide passengers. This is not always the case.

“Bus drivers are quite variable. Some are helpful which makes the experience feel good but many seem chippy, bad tempered and unhelpful to their passengers.”

Female, mobility impairment

2.4 Impact of barriers on disabled commuters’ travel plans and modal choices

Disabled commuters say that they often modify their travel behaviour because of the various difficulties they find when using transport in London. They tend to modify their travel behaviour by either changing the travel route and / or mode of transport, or in some cases avoiding travelling during peak hours entirely.

Altering travel routes and modes of transport

Given the effort required to use public transport, disabled commuters usually plan journeys ahead of time in order to identify travel routes that are the least physically strenuous and time consuming. This means identifying and using Underground and Overground stations with step-free access, and bus routes and terminals that are accessible , rather than choosing the most direct or quickest route. In general, customers prefer using the bus to travel because it is the easiest to access.

"The buses are easier to board. There are more lifts and escalators so alternative ways to enter/exit stations."

Female, mobility impairment

Decision to travel during peak hours

The disabled commuters who took part in this research say that they prefer not to travel during peak hours if they have flexibility around time of travel, and therefore divide journeys into essential and non-essential, avoiding peak time for non-essential journeys. However, essential journeys, such as getting to work on time, mean that they have to travel at peak time, despite the fact that it may have a negative impact on the rest of their day. This impact can be quite significant and much greater than for non-disabled people.

"If I don't have a seat [...] it is very uncomfortable standing and then that has an impact on my ability to work effectively when I get to work. It's worse when there are delays and I don't have a seat and am subjected to standing even longer. Having a seat on the way to work has a huge impact on the rest of my day, and ability to work."

Female, mobility impairment