

TUESDAY 5 SEPTEMBER, 2023

Briefing paper: WHAT DID OUR SURVEY OF LOCAL BUS USERS TELL US?

In July and August, we interviewed 300+ bus users in Cambridge, Ely and Huntingdon. We found that the bus can be a convenient and pleasant way to travel, but local bus users depend heavily on services which often let them down. They also have little awareness that the Sustainable Travel Zone package would improve the bus network. Full survey results will be available on our website shortly.

More often than not, bus users are dependent on the bus to get around

Our interviews suggest that bus users rely deeply on bus services. 74% of non Park&Ride (P&R) bus users we talked to did not own or have access to a car ([compared to the national average of 22% of households](#)) and 56% said they would not have made their journey without the bus.

"I use the bus because I haven't got any other choice."

"I'm too young to drive; I have no other way of getting there."

"I have seizures so I can't drive."

"I have a car but someone else is using it."

"I've never driven. I don't have my husband any more so I have to use the bus."

People also take the bus because it's affordable (at the moment) and convenient

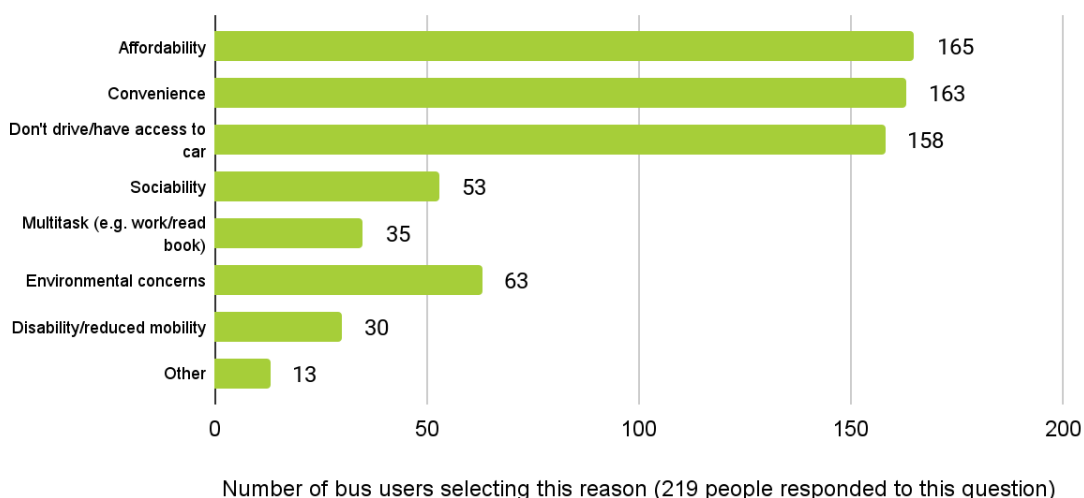


Figure 1: Survey of non P&R users: Which of the following are reasons you use the bus? (Choose all that apply)

75% of non P&R bus users said that 'affordability' was a reason they chose to take the bus; 74% said 'convenience'. Some mentioned that the bus hasn't always been affordable in the past, but is currently due to [the central government's short-term £2 fare cap scheme](#). People said that they liked not having to worry about congestion, driving in the city or parking.

"It's £2 each way. You can't argue about that."

"The bus services areas it would be too expensive to travel to by taxi."

"The best thing about the bus is the convenience. I don't have to worry about parking or congestion."

Nearly a third of non P&R users said that environmental concerns were one of the reasons they chose to use the bus. The social aspects of bus journeys were also important, and people said that they value the independence the bus gives them.

"The environment is the main reason we don't have a car."

"I think the buses are just wonderful...They are such charming drivers and everyone has a chat. The view is great from the top deck and I get to see beautiful cottages. It's a great day out."

"I am an independent woman. My son in law lives in the village and can take me by car if I need to but I like to be independent."

Our survey puts the spotlight on the current poor state of (non P&R) bus services in our region, with half of Cambridge bus users currently experiencing problems.

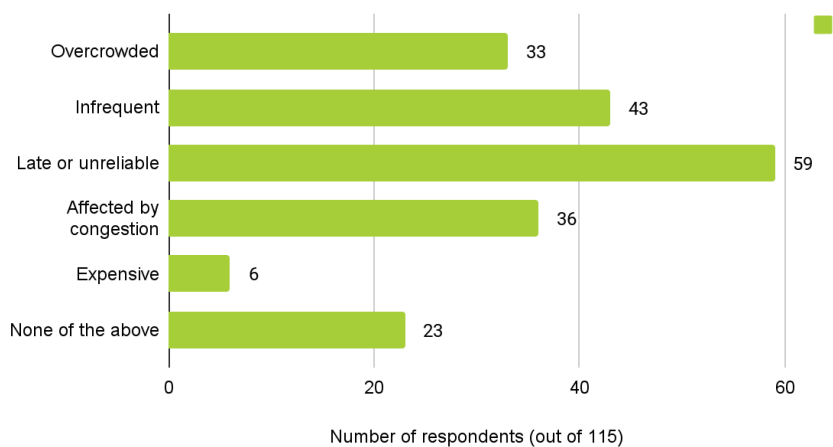


Figure 2: Survey of Cambridge non P&R users: Would you say your buses were any of the following?

Buses are unreliable

44% of all non P&R users surveyed (and 51% of non P&R users in Cambridge) said their services were late or unreliable. The worst thing about the bus for users in Cambridge and Huntingdon was unreliability.

"The worst thing is the unreliability. I have no idea if it is coming or not. It's difficult to be on time for hospital appointments."

"If we have an appointment we have to get a taxi as we can't rely on the bus to get us there."

"On Saturday there was a two and a half hour wait because two buses were cancelled."

"It'll say on the board they're coming then it won't turn up. There's two minutes to go then it's cancelled."

"Two weeks ago we had four attempts to get in and all the buses were cancelled."

Buses are infrequent, there's a lack of services on Sundays and operating hours are too short

37% of non P&R bus users said their bus services were too infrequent (increasing to 44% of bus users in Ely) and short operating hours limit opportunities.

"I'm a Londoner. If you waited 20 mins in London that was a long time. Here it's every two hours. Why isn't there a Sunday service?"

"Mornings are tricky. We have to get the bus at 7.30am, which arrives in Soham at 8am for a 9am school start."

"Weekends are impossible. I rely on colleagues or my husband has to drive me from our village to work at Papworth hospital."

"If there's no bus we're stuck at home. Bank holidays we're stuck. Sundays we're stuck. We are older people and have to rely on buses."

"We need later services. Teenagers just can't get to anything in Ely. The cinema is seven miles from Chatteris"

"You go to West Road [concert hall] for a concert performance. You can't see all of it because the last bus is too early. It puts you off getting out."

The 'turn-up-and-go' P&R service

In contrast, the P&R service appears to be operating more reliably, with only around 23% saying that the service was late or unreliable.¹ In fact, due to the 'turn-up-and-go' nature of the P&R service, it took longer to interview P&R users, as there was often a bus at the stop when they arrived, so many boarded without waiting at the stop.

"It's prompt - every 10 mins."

"The best thing is the speed of the journey."

[Qu: What's the best thing about the P&R] "It's comfy and easy. Everything really."

The vast majority of P&R users have the option of driving into Cambridge city centre, but choose to use the P&R instead as it's more convenient

70% of P&R users we interviewed owned or had access to a car, 54% mainly used the car for transport (compared to 18% for non-P&R bus users) and they didn't use the bus often (nearly a third only used the bus occasionally). Despite the car being an option, however, they choose to take the P&R into Cambridge. In fact, nearly 40% said that they wouldn't have made their journey if the bus wasn't an option. They took the P&R as it was convenient (51%) and affordable (18%) (compared to the cost of parking). We think this brings into doubt the idea that a road charge would be damaging for shops in Cambridge town centre.

"To drive into the city and park is a faff. [Without the bus] we would have gone somewhere else."

"I avoid driving into town. The cost of parking is outrageous. I would only bring the motor in if I were collecting something big."

"I never come into Cambridge any other way than by bus. I don't like driving in towns."

The reaction to the new electric buses is positive

When we asked P&R users what they thought of the new electric buses, 68% made positive comments (in addition, 18% were indifferent and 10% hadn't noticed the change). 25% said they thought the buses were

¹ The figure for P&R routes 1 to 4 is likely to be lower. We are likely to have disproportionately captured the views of users of the PR5 (which has lower frequencies than the other P&R services and is currently less reliable due to roadworks on Milton Rd), as PR5 users were more likely to be waiting at the bus stop.

quieter, 16% said the ride was smoother, 10% said they thought the buses were good for the environment and 8% said they were smart. It is the ambition of the Combined Authority to upgrade the entire diesel fleet of buses to electric by 2030. We think that increasing the number of electric buses will help to improve the image of bus travel and boost ridership.

“The best things the Park&Ride has ever done has been the changes to double decker and electric. They are quiet and more comfortable.”

“They are a damn sight better than the crappy ones. They don’t rattle.”

“Really good. Super happy for the environment. I’ve noticed they’ve started announcing stops. It’s very helpful if you’re falling asleep or not paying attention.”

“It’s convenient to charge my phone.”

There is little public awareness that the Sustainable Travel Zone package would improve the bus network

In total, 61% of all those we talked to had heard of the proposed Making Connections road charge. Only 15% of those we surveyed recognised that the money generated by the road charge would be spent on improving the bus network and on other sustainable travel schemes. It appears that much of the public is unaware of the benefits of the proposals, mistakenly believing the scheme is all ‘stick’ and no ‘carrot’. We believe the lack of positive communication about the benefits of the proposals is leaving a void that is being filled with anti-STZ messaging, which is further entrenching poor understanding and fear. We believe that improving the public understanding of the benefits of the Making Connections proposals will increase support for the scheme before and after implementation.