Creating an Inclusive Future: Addressing Accessible Transport Needs for Young Disabled People 2025

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Foreword

Motability Foundation

At the Motability Foundation we fund, support, research and innovate so that all disabled people can make the journeys they choose.

Working with others is a huge part of our commitment to improving accessible travel, today and in the future. We work with others in several different ways. We oversee the Motability Scheme and provide grants to help people use it, providing access to transport to hundreds of thousands of people a year. We award grants to charities and organisations who provide different types of transport, or work towards making transport accessible. We also carry out ongoing research, in partnership with disabled people and key stakeholders, to better understand the ways transport accessibility needs to change – funding long-term projects like the National Centre for Accessible Transport.

We know that to innovate we must first create the evidence base and ensure our work is rooted in the experiences of disabled people. There is increasing evidence of disabled people's experiences, but none which delved specifically into the needs of young disabled people. The most recent census found that 1.2 million young people aged 10-24 in England and Wales identified as disabled, which is double the previous decade. Young disabled people are the future of accessible transport. It is paramount that young disabled people's needs are understood and addressed in our existing and new transport modes so we can embed accessibility into future modes.

This research has the experience of young disabled people at its core. It was guided by a group of young disabled people and used mixed methodologies to provide rich insights. Furthermore, it explores the vast range of diverse needs and experiences within this cohort, highlighting how a person's identity, ethnicity and socio-demographics intersect with their disability.

This research provides new insights into the needs of young disabled people, and we hope to see a refreshed focus on young disabled people's needs within the transport sector.

Rachael Badger, Director of Performance and Innovation

Savanta

Savanta was commissioned to undertake this vital research exploring the transport experiences of young disabled people across the UK. This work represents a significant step forward in understanding the complex barriers that impact **young disabled people's daily lives and independence.**

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the Motability Foundation for their expertise and partnership on the 'Creating an Inclusive Future: Addressing Accessible Transport Needs for Young Disabled People' project. In particular, we extend our thanks to Nicola Gampell, Jaya Varsani and Kristiana Kalvane for their invaluable guidance and support throughout this process.

In keeping with our commitment to inclusive research principles, Savanta had the privilege of working alongside young disabled peer researchers who brought their lived experience and unique insights to every stage of this project. Their contributions have been instrumental in ensuring authentic representation and meaningful outcomes. We are deeply grateful to Eden Byrne, Elz Savage, Harvey Brown and the 3 other peer researchers for their dedication and expertise.

"I really enjoyed being part of the research project. I think it will highlight the barriers and accessibility issues that young people face and make a positive step forward towards more inclusive and accessible transport options for young people. The research was amazing, and I thought it was a great way to make a difference and share my feedback as well as being and feeling really supported by the staff on the team. It's encouraged me to take part in hopefully similar projects in the future."

(Eden Byrne)

We would also like to extend our heartfelt thanks to all the young disabled people who gave their time to participate in this research - whether through completing our survey, joining our focus groups or allowing us to accompany them on their journeys. Their willingness to share their experiences and insights has been crucial in building a comprehensive picture of transport accessibility in the UK.

The findings presented in this report reflect not only rigorous research methodology but also the authentic voices of young disabled people across the UK. Their experiences and perspectives have shaped both our understanding and our recommendations for creating a more accessible transport future.

Social Model of Disability

This report is guided by the Social Model of Disability, which is a lens used to view the world and disability through, developed by disabled people. When we use the term 'young disabled people' this refers to any young person who faces a barrier due to their impairment.

The Social Model of Disability outlines that people are disabled due to the barriers that exist in the world, rather than their individual impairments or difference. Those with impairments are not inherently disabled – this is caused due to barriers in the environment and lack of accessible and inclusive culture, the built environment, and in the case of this report, inaccessible transport systems.

Executive summary

Young disabled people face significant barriers when using transport across the UK, profoundly impacting their independence, social connections and ability to participate fully in society. This research, co-produced with young disabled people as peer researchers, provides critical insights into their transport experiences and presents evidence-based recommendations for change.

Notably, this study aims to address existing gaps in research by highlighting the unique challenges faced by young disabled individuals, which have often been overlooked. The goal is to bring these essential needs to the forefront of the agenda for transport providers and policymakers, ensuring that young people's voices and experiences are prioritised in future transport planning and policy development. This research is a crucial step towards creating a more inclusive and accessible transport system that better serves the needs of young disabled individuals.

Research Approach

Our mixed-methods study engaged over 1,200 young disabled people aged 15-24 through a large-scale survey, seven focus groups and five in-depth travel-along observations. Distinctively, this research was co-designed and delivered with young disabled people as peer researchers, ensuring authentic representation of lived experience throughout the study. This approach revealed nuanced insights often missed by traditional research methods.

Key Findings

Access and Independence

Nearly half **(47%)** of young disabled people cannot use priority seating without being challenged about their disability status.

One in four **(26%)** young disabled people must rely on others to plan and manage their transport.

A third **(31%)** of young disabled people are forced to reduce their journeys due to financial constraints.

Safety and Wellbeing

69%

69% of young disabled women feel unsafe or uncomfortable using public transport, compared to **56%** of young disabled men.

49%

Half of all respondents **(49%)** experience anxiety when planning journeys.

51%

LGBTQ+ disabled people report particularly high levels of safety concerns, with **51%** feeling vulnerable in crowded spaces.
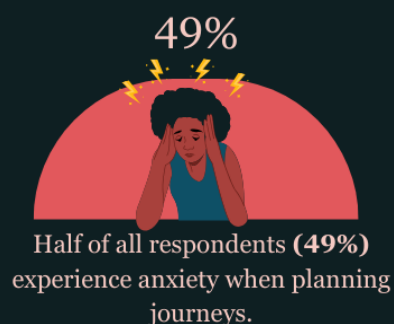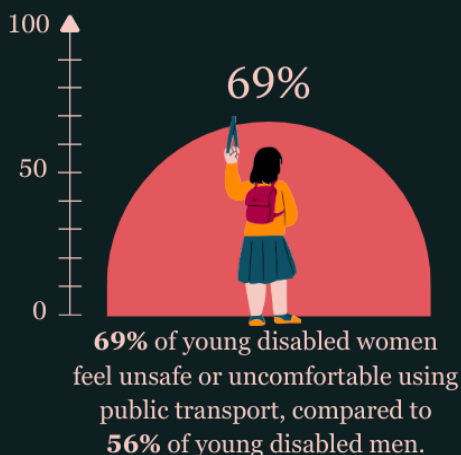
Service Quality and Information

51%

Only half of young disabled people **(51%)** find it 'easy' to use public transport.

24%

A quarter **(24%)** report that service information is complex or difficult to understand.

20%

One in five **(20%)** identify poor staff awareness as a key barrier to access.

Financial Impact

Over half **(53%)** use public transport despite accessibility issues because they can't afford alternatives.

A quarter **(25%)** support the introduction of targeted discounts for accessible transport options.

The high cost of accessible transport forces many to choose between accessibility and affordability.
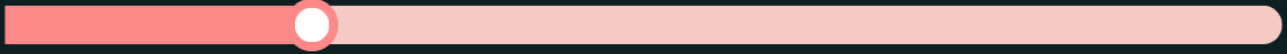
Systemic Barriers

Our findings reveal that transport inaccessibility stems from interconnected systemic barriers:

- Physical infrastructure failures, such as broken lifts and inconsistent accessible features.
- Information systems that fail to meet diverse access needs.
- Staff lacking effective disability awareness training.
- Financial barriers that disproportionately affect young disabled people.
- Safety concerns that particularly impact women, LGBTQ+ individuals and ethnic minorities.

These barriers create a complex web of exclusion that significantly impacts young disabled people's life opportunities and wellbeing. The consequences extend beyond transport, affecting education, employment, healthcare access and social connections.

Implications

This research demonstrates an urgent need for systematic change in transport accessibility. It highlights that young disabled people face multiple, overlapping barriers that cannot be addressed through single interventions alone. Rather, a coordinated approach across policy, practice and provision is required to create meaningful change.

The findings provide a robust evidence base for transport providers, local authorities and national government to develop more inclusive transport systems. They also emphasise the crucial importance of involving young disabled people in transport planning and policy development.

Background and Methodology

Background

The ability to travel independently and access transport services is fundamental to young people's social inclusion, economic participation and overall quality of life. However, young disabled people often face unique and complex barriers in their travel experiences that remain poorly understood and inadequately addressed by current policy frameworks, service provision, and infrastructure design.

This groundbreaking research represents the first UK-wide study to examine the transport needs and experiences of young disabled people through the lens of peer research. By placing young disabled people at the heart of the research process - as both researchers and participants - this study offers unprecedented insights into the challenges faced by this demographic when accessing and using transport services.

The impetus for this research emerged from a rapid evidence review which identified significant gaps in our understanding of young disabled people's transport experiences. This research focuses specifically on young people aged 15-24, a crucial developmental period encompassing the transition from secondary education into further education, employment, and independent living. This age range was selected as it represents a critical time when transport accessibility can significantly impact educational, social, and economic opportunities. While existing literature explores general disability access issues, the specific intersection of youth and disability in transport contexts has received limited attention. This knowledge gap has potentially led to transport policies and services that fail to fully address the distinct needs of young disabled users.

Methodology

Rapid Evidence Review

The initial evidence review encompassed a diverse range of sources:

- Academic research papers and systematic reviews
- Government reports and policy documents
- Publications from advocacy groups and charities
- Stakeholder insights from policy-makers and practitioners

This comprehensive review approach ensured thorough examination of both theoretical frameworks and practical applications in transport accessibility. The synthesis process involved identifying common themes and emerging trends, with particular focus on:

- Transport accessibility patterns
- Disability-specific challenges
- Youth mobility behaviours
- Existing support systems
- Recommendations for improvement

Despite the comprehensive nature of existing literature, several significant gaps remain in the research on young disabled people's experiences with transport in the UK. One notable gap is the lack of emphasis on directly involving disabled individuals in crafting transportation solutions. Incorporating their perspectives can lead to more nuanced and effective strategies that accurately reflect the actual needs and challenges faced by the disabled community. Additionally, many studies have not sufficiently addressed the financial implications of the issues discussed. This includes the costs associated with improving transport accessibility, the financial burdens faced by users due to inaccessible transport, and the potential economic impacts of policy changes. A deeper examination of existing policies and their implementation could provide better insights into necessary reforms.

Furthermore, there is a clear need for more intersectional research that delves deeper into how intersecting identities such as race, gender, disability, and socioeconomic status affect individuals' experiences with transport and public life. Many studies also did not examine the long-term impacts of the issues explored, such as the long-term mental health effects of constant self-advocacy and the long-term effects of mobility experiences on young people's future life outcomes. Moreover, the psychological impact of limited transport options on young disabled people is not covered in existing research.

The role of emerging technologies in improving transport accessibility was not extensively explored in many papers. This includes both assistive technologies and digital solutions like mobile apps and smart infrastructure. Understanding how technology can aid or hinder accessibility is crucial for future transport planning. Additionally, many studies did not thoroughly explore broader social and cultural factors that influence the issues discussed, such as societal attitudes and perceptions towards disabled individuals, the influence of cultural contexts on experiences of discrimination, and the impacts of factors like digital connectivity and cultural context on loneliness and social disconnection.

Finally, studies were often limited to specific geographical areas or contexts, which may not represent experiences or challenges across the UK as a whole, or the differences between urban and rural areas.

Peer Research Approach

Following the evidence review, young disabled people became active co-researchers rather than merely subjects of study. Our peer researchers were integral to the project's design, fieldwork, analysis, and dissemination phases. This innovative approach ensured that the research was informed by lived experience, enhancing its relevance and authenticity. Through dedicated workshops, peer researchers were equipped with research skills while their experiential knowledge shaped the study's direction and focus.

Quantitative Phase

The quantitative phase involved a comprehensive survey of 1,054 young disabled people aged 15-24, conducted between 6th-21st August 2024. This sample was carefully weighted (a statistical technique used to adjust the results of a survey to more accurately reflect the characteristics of the overall population) to ensure national representation of UK young disabled people across age, sex, region and ethnicity, providing robust statistical evidence of transport experiences and challenges.

Table 1: Regional distribution of survey respondents

	Unweighted	Weighted
England	**890**	**862**
North-West	115	111
North-East	56	53
Yorkshire & Humberside	92	89
West Midlands	116	112
East Midlands	82	79
South-West	68	66
South-East	111	107
East of England	72	71
London	178	173
Scotland	**77**	**107**
Wales	**58**	**52**
Northern Ireland	**29**	**32**

Table 2: Demographic distribution of survey respondents

	Unweighted	Weighted
Age		
15-17	57	56
18-21	618	617
22-25	379	381
Sex		
Male	450	480
Female	593	563
Disability		
Physical	220	221
Mental	523	518
Physical and mental	229	231

Reporting on Gender

When discussing gender in this report, we have used the terms "young men" and "young women" to refer to individuals. It's important to note that these terms encompass those whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. However, young people that identified as non-binary were not specifically included in the analysis of gender differences due to low numbers of participation and, therefore, the focus was on comparing experiences between those who identified as a young man or young woman.

To be inclusive and respectful, this report has aimed to use language that recognises the nuances of gender identity, while also acknowledging the limitations in the data collected.

Qualitative Phase

The qualitative phase consisted of seven focus groups and five travel-along observations, strategically designed to capture diverse perspectives:

- Two groups with participants with physical disabilities
- Two groups with participants with sensory disabilities (sight/sound)
- Two groups with participants with behavioural, emotional, or developmental disabilities
- One dedicated group for younger participants (aged 15-16)

Table 3: Regional distribution of qualitative participants

	Focus Groups	Travel Alongs
England	31	3
Scotland	3	1
Wales	6	1
Northern Ireland	2	0

Focus group participants were aged 15-24 and reflected a balanced demographic profile, including:

- Equal representation from rural and urban areas
- Representation from all four UK nations (five participants per nation)
- Diverse transport usage patterns
- A mix of gender, ethnicity and socio-economic backgrounds

Additionally, five travel-along observations were conducted, documenting real-world transport experiences. To protect participants' privacy and confidentiality, pseudonyms have been used throughout this report for both focus group and travel along participants.

While participants were drawn from across all UK regions, our analysis revealed that geographical variations played a relatively minor role in transport experiences. Instead, factors such as urban versus rural living environments, specific disability types, and individual demographic characteristics emerged as more influential determinants of transport accessibility and user experiences. This finding underscores the importance of looking beyond regional boundaries when designing inclusive transport solutions and instead focusing on the nuanced intersectional challenges faced by young disabled people.

The triangulation of multiple data sources, combined with the peer research approach, provides robust evidence to inform policy and practice across the transport sector, disability services, and youth services. This methodological approach offers a new standard for inclusive research practice, demonstrating how meaningful engagement with young disabled people can enhance our understanding of complex social issues and lead to more effective policy solutions.

The findings presented in this report are therefore uniquely positioned to inform government policy, transport providers, and support services in their efforts to create more accessible and inclusive transport systems for young disabled people.

Section 1: How Young People Travel

Private car transport dominates as the primary mode of travel amongst young disabled people, with more than half **(53%)** travelling by car most often. Our research shows that nearly all young people with a disability utilise multiple forms of transport, including buses, cars, trains and walking/wheeling.

Figure 1: Travel by transport type – Ever used and most often (% selected)

Q1. What kind of transport and travel options have you ever used? Base: All respondents (1,054)

Q1b. And which of the following transport and travel options do you use most often? Base: All respondents (1,054)
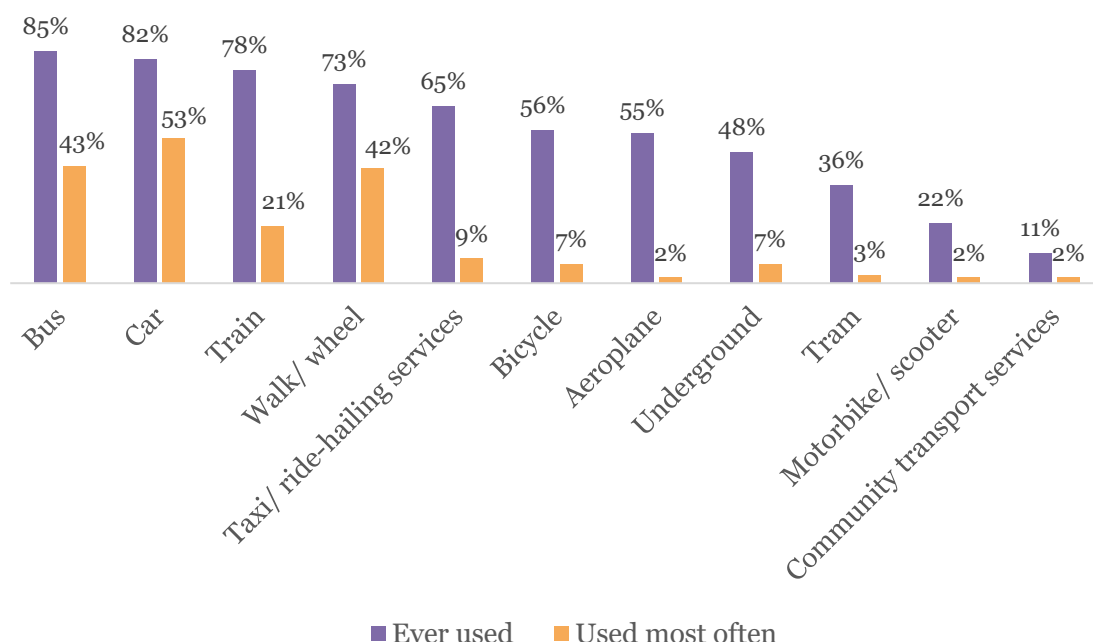
A clear gender pattern emerges in transport choices: young women consistently travel more frequently by car than young men (**59%** vs **49%**). However, this substantial gap in car usage does not translate to an equivalent difference in public transport use. Our data also reveals a notable difference in transport patterns between white young people with disabilities with more than half of this group (**57%**) travelling by car most often compared to ethnic minority young people with disabilities (**47%**). This may be as a result of difference in where our respondents live with almost half of ethnic minority young people with a disability living in a city (**48%**) compared to approximately a third (**32%**) of white young people with a disability.

Focus group discussions unveiled diverse transport preferences and experiences, shaped by accessibility needs, convenience, safety concerns and personal comfort levels. Young disabled people regularly use various transport modes, each offering distinct advantages and challenges.

Buses serve as a crucial transport option, particularly for short urban journeys. Whilst some participants praised modern accessibility features like audio-visual announcements and low-floor entry, others highlighted significant issues with reliability. One participant captured this frustration:

" I do agree on the transport being really unreliable, like the buses. I used a specific company, [bus company name], to get from point A to B. Their app is really not updated enough. You will see a bus that is supposedly coming, and then 10 minutes before it's even arrived, it says it's cancelled. It's weird. Sometimes, it even stays on the app as well, so you just think, 'Oh, maybe,' and then after you leave the bus stop waiting for the next one, you actually see it arrive—even though it says it's cancelled in the first place. It's really strange and confusing, and I honestly don't know why it hasn't been sorted out a long time ago.

(Leah, Behavioural/Emotional/Developmental Disability, age 18)

For longer journeys, trains often emerge as the preferred choice, particularly for visiting family or travelling between cities. Young disabled people value the speed and directness of train travel, along with designated priority seating and accessible facilities on many services. The Trainline app received particular praise across focus groups for its help with platform information and timing updates, boosting confidence for independent travel. However, train accessibility varies considerably, with boarding assistance sometimes unavailable or staff lacking adequate training to properly assist passengers. This can lead to issues, such as staff failing to enforce reasonable accommodations like quiet carriages, which are important for passengers with sensory disabilities. Cost presents a major barrier, with many finding train travel prohibitively expensive without concessions.

Rural areas present particular challenges, as one participant explained:

"There's just less people around in general, and so the problems... like the lift being broken or no one being around to help you, are worse in rural

areas. Obviously, you can't get someone to come out to fix it very quickly
or easily, and there's less likely to be more staff there to help you if you do
need help. That is another problem that I've had when I'm in that area.

(Ruby, Physical Disability, age 19)

Taxis and ride-hailing services like Uber provide crucial flexible transport options, especially for door-to-door journeys. These services offer valued independence, particularly during unsociable hours or in unfamiliar locations. However, costs can prove prohibitive, especially for accessible vehicles, making regular use unsustainable for many.

As two participants noted:

"I mean, obviously the worst part is that sometimes there's surge pricing,
which is like through the roof and it's ridiculous."

(Erik, Behavioural/Emotional/Developmental Disability, age 17)

"I use Uber and Bolt, and I don't know if it's a Sheffield thing or if it's
widespread. I use [taxi company name] interchangeably with them.
They're all quite expensive, but Uber tends to be the most reliable."

(Zara, Physical Disability, age 22)

For those with access, private cars offer unparalleled independence and control. Many young people rely heavily on car travel, particularly in areas with limited public transport. However, not all young disabled people can drive due to their conditions, whilst four in five **(82%)** have travelled by car, not all drive themselves, and a third **(34%)** need assistance when travelling. Those who do drive themselves face substantial costs for vehicle maintenance and fuel. Dependence on parents or carers for transport can significantly restrict independence.

Technology plays a vital role in transport accessibility. Apps like Google Maps and Trainline received frequent mention as essential journey-planning tools, offering real-time updates and reducing travel anxiety through clear information. However, not all transport apps work effectively with assistive technologies like screen readers, limiting their usefulness for some disabled users.

Despite the range of transport options available, young disabled people face persistent barriers affecting their travel experiences. Key challenges include inconsistent accessibility, unreliable assistance, high costs and safety concerns. Focus group participants emphasised the pressing need for improved staff training, stronger anti-discrimination measures and enhanced accessibility features to create truly inclusive transport systems.

case study

This case study examines the travel experiences of Jacob, a 23-year-old graduate with Tourette's Syndrome. He has a degree in geography, a history of working in administrative roles and student unions and primarily relies on train services for leisure trips and social outings.

Background

Age: 23
Occupation: Recent graduate with a degree in geography, currently unemployed
Residence: Lives in Kidderminster
Conditions: Tourette's, OCD, dyslexia, anxiety, ADHD and autism

Daily Travel Routine

Jacob's travel routine varies depending on the severity of his Tourette's symptoms. He prefers to travel with friends or family to manage anxiety and ensure a more comfortable journey.

Key Observations

Logistical Challenges

Experiences confusion due to unclear platform screens and signposting, particularly in unfamiliar stations.

Utilises multiple apps (Trainline, Realtraintimes, Trainpal) to cross-reference journey details and ensure accuracy. Detailed note-taking helps alleviate anxiety.

Comfort

Preferred seating near the door enhances comfort and eases the journey.

Previous experiences of bullying and discrimination are significant stressors.

Quiet environments are critical for a more comfortable travel experience.

Anxiety & stress management

Noise, crowded places, and unclear signposting significantly increase stress levels. Extensive planning is essential coping strategies.

Traveling with friends or family provides social support and helps manage anxiety. Prefers minimal interaction with strangers to avoid judgment and discrimination.

*A pseudonym has been used to protect the participant's identity.

Feedback and Improvement Areas

Positive Aspects

Accurate and up-to-date information from travel apps.

Quiet carriages and timely trains contribute to a less stressful journey.

Direct train journeys without the need for connections are less stressful and more convenient.

Areas for Improvement

Better platform screens with clear signposting, especially at unfamiliar stations.

Availability of quiet carriages and more visible staff for assistance.

Introduction of tap-on and tap-off features for bus travel in the Midlands to reduce anxiety about ticket purchases.

Role of Technology

Uses travel apps to cross-reference and ensure accurate and up-to-date information.

Extensive use of travel apps provides a sense of control over the journey, reducing the need for interaction with strangers and helping to manage stress.

Currently not aware of many disability-specific apps, except those pinpointing locations for disabled toilets, which he appreciates.

Future Aspirations

Envisions a future with more quiet carriages, better staff availability, and clear signposting.

Desires a more inclusive transport system that accommodates various disabilities and personal differences.

Advocates for systemic changes to educate the public and reduce discrimination.

Recommendations for Improving Accessible Transport

Technology Enhancements: Develop apps that provide detailed real-time updates on train times, platforms, and seating availability.

Infrastructure Improvements: Increase the number of quiet carriages and improve platform screens and signposting.

Support Systems: Ensure visible staff presence and clear information on how to locate staff if needed.

Policy Changes: Implement policies to educate the public about disabilities and promote inclusivity.

*A pseudonym has been used to protect the participant's identity.

Section 2: The Choice – What Choices Do Young Disabled People Have To Travel?

The United Kingdom boasts one of the world's most extensive transport networks. For most people, particularly in urban areas, transport choices are abundant - from frequent buses and trains to expanding tram networks, cycling infrastructure, and reliable taxi services. The average person might deliberate between taking a quick bus journey, hopping on the train, or cycling to their destination based simply on convenience or personal preference.

However, this research revealed a stark reality: for young disabled people, this wealth of options is often illusory. Even in major cities, where transport links are theoretically comprehensive, young disabled people frequently face a drastically reduced set of viable choices. What appears on paper to be a connected, accessible transport network often presents insurmountable barriers in practice.

The Reality of 'Choice'

The concept of choice in public transport becomes significantly more nuanced - and often severely limited - for young disabled people. While transport timetables might show multiple daily services, and maps might display numerous routes, the actual usability of these services is frequently compromised by various external factors beyond their control. These barriers transform what should be routine journeys into complex challenges requiring extensive planning and contingencies.

Accessibility: The Primary Barrier

Accessibility emerges as one of the most fundamental determinants of transport choice. Whilst the UK has several legal frameworks in place for accessible transport, such as The Equality Act 2010[1], The Public Service Vehicles Accessibility Regulations (PSVAR) 2000[2], The Rail Vehicle

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[1] **The Equality Act 2010:** This act requires service providers, including transport providers, to make reasonable adjustments to ensure that disabled people can access their services. This includes providing accessible vehicles, equipment, and services, as well as ensuring that staff are trained to assist disabled passengers.

[2] **PSVAR:** These regulations set out specific requirements for buses and coaches, including features such as wheelchair access, priority seating, and audio-visual information systems. All new buses and coaches must comply with these regulations, and existing vehicles must be retrofitted to meet these standards by certain deadlines.

Accessibility Regulations (RVAR) 2010[3] and The Civil Aviation Authority's Guidance[4], the inconsistent implementation of accessibility features often restricts genuine choice. This was starkly illustrated by one participant's experience with inadequate staff training. As one young person explained:

"With the ramps on buses... they are useful, but they're also kind of dangerous. One did decompress on my foot. So, people having proper training in mobility aids and disabilities would be useful."

(Max, Behavioural/Emotional/Developmental Disability and Physical Disability, age 22)

Despite these legal requirements, the inconsistent implementation and enforcement of accessibility features often leave disabled passengers facing significant barriers. Improving staff training and ensuring the consistent application of these requirements across all modes of transport are crucial steps towards making transport genuinely accessible for all.

Vehicle Design Challenges

The physical design of transport vehicles presents another significant barrier. While modern vehicles often incorporate accessible features, the mixed fleet nature of most services means that disabled passengers cannot rely on consistent accessibility. Features that many take for granted - such as step-free access or adequate space for mobility aids - become critical factors that can render entire services unusable. Moreover, inconsistent design can also inhibit socialisation, as disabled passengers may be unable to travel with friends or family if certain vehicles are not accessible. This lack of reliable and inclusive transport options can prevent disabled individuals from participating in social events and community activities, further isolating them and limiting their social engagement.

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[3] **RVAR:** These regulations require that trains be accessible to disabled passengers. This includes features such as wheelchair spaces, accessible toilets, and clear signage. These regulations apply to all new trains and require existing rolling stock to be upgraded.
[4] **The Civil Aviation Authority's Guidance:** This includes requirements for airports and airlines to provide assistance to disabled passengers, such as help with boarding and disembarking, and ensuring that information is available in accessible formats.

The Rural-Urban Divide

The situation becomes particularly acute in rural areas, where infrastructure limitations compound existing challenges. While urban residents might have alternative routes or backup options, rural disabled passengers often face binary choices - either the service is accessible and functioning, or they simply cannot travel. Notably, the research found that regional variations across the UK were less significant in determining transport experiences compared to the stark differences between rural and urban accessibility. One participant highlighted this issue when they said:

> " I live in in a rural-ish area and it's quite difficult to get into the town centre...buses can just get cancelled because it's not an important bus. They just cancel it anytime they want, and so it's quite difficult to make sure that the reliability of the buses is good enough."
>
> *(Alexei, Behavioural/Emotional/Developmental Disability, age 18)*

Issues such as broken lifts or unstaffed stations can render entire routes unusable, effectively stranding young disabled passengers with no alternatives. This lack of reliable transport options highlights a market failure in public transport provision, where the market fails to provide efficient and equitable transportation services to all individuals, particularly those with disabilities. Inadequate supply of accessible services, information asymmetry about accessibility features, and the focus on profitability over social welfare contribute to this failure.

The resulting social isolation can lead to increased feelings of loneliness and mental health challenges, further exacerbating the disadvantages faced by disabled young people in rural settings. Additionally, this lack of reliable transport options isolates disabled individuals from essential services, social interactions, and community participation, compounding their social and economic disadvantages.

The Assistance Paradox

The current system of transport assistance often creates a paradox - while designed to enable travel, it frequently restricts spontaneity and choice. On trains, train and station operators must

provide assistance to disabled passengers, either via a 'Turn Up and Go' (TUAG)[5] approach or the Passenger Assist service. The TUAG approach allows disabled passengers to travel without pre-booking assistance, but its effectiveness is highly dependent on staff availability and travel conditions. Many disabled passengers report that the service is less reliable when they try to 'turn up and go,' leading to inconsistent experiences.

The Passenger Assist service, designed to make rail travel accessible to all, generally receives higher satisfaction ratings. In the most recent market research, **85%** of those aged 16-24 were satisfied with the Passenger Assist service they received, compared to **94%** of all passengers.[6] Despite this, the requirement to book assistance in advance for guaranteed support effectively limits the possibility of spontaneous travel that most people take for granted. This became evident in this young person's comment:

"I can't be spontaneous, and even if you put in all of the fore planning. You email all the companies, you call them, you think you have passenger assistance, you navigate to the station somehow. You've got in a wheelchair accessible ride.

Then you get there and there's no passenger assistance or the lift is broken or there is passenger assistance, but it's not a manned booth. So, you have to go and find them, and especially as a young person, no one sees that you're disabled. If I'm travelling just with my cane, everyone assumes that I'm fine, so they kind of give me side eyes.

So, you can't really go anywhere spontaneously. You can't just decide to take a train.

(Nina, Behavioural/Emotional/Developmental Disability and Sensory Disability, age 17)

Additionally, the system is often hampered by less effective training and biases among staff, which can lead to inconsistent service quality and even discriminatory practices. One respondent remarked:

5 Passenger Assist | National Rail
6 Experiences of Passenger Assist 2023-2024. ORR, July 2024. Available at: https://www.orr.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2024-07/2023-2024-passenger-assist-report-mel-research.pdf

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"I feel like better training would help staff know how better to support disabled people and even just having empathy. I feel like most people know an older disabled person because most people get disabled as they get older. Especially with young disabled people, a lot of people just go through life not knowing a young person who is disabled... And when that happens, people almost don't really register them as people that exist. I feel like better training on people with disabilities, for staff members, could help with that because being told that people like us exist and are normal people could be helpful."

(Avery, Behavioural/Emotional/Developmental Disability and Physical Disability, age 24)

This quote eloquently captures how a lack of training and exposure to young disabled individuals can result in staff failing to appreciate their needs and existence. The respondent suggests that more comprehensive disability awareness training, focusing on empathy and recognising the diversity of disabled passengers, could significantly improve service quality.

This can further discourage disabled young people from using public transport, thereby reinforcing their reliance on more expensive and less flexible alternatives. The combined effect of these factors significantly undermines the intended goal of transport assistance programs, making it challenging for disabled individuals to lead independent and fulfilling lives.

Reliability Concerns

Service reliability, a frustration for any passenger, takes on added significance for young disabled travellers. Unexpected cancellations or delays can have severe consequences, particularly when accessible alternatives are limited or non-existent. The danger and anxiety of being stranded in emergency situations exacerbate the challenges faced by young disabled passengers. When assistance fails to materialise, or when they are left without support in unforeseen circumstances, the impact can be distressing and potentially dangerous.

Safety Considerations

Safety concerns significantly impact transport choices, often in ways that non-disabled passengers might not consider. As one participant noted:

"The amount of people and stuff on the train... does affect when I would want to travel or where I'd want to travel to. It's just the kind of very stressful situations related to that."

(Taylor, Behavioural/Emotional/Developmental Disability, age 17)

Economic Constraints

While alternative transport options like taxis or rideshares exist, their cost often places them beyond regular use for many young disabled people. This economic barrier is significant because disabled young people generally face higher living costs compared to their non-disabled counterparts. Research conducted by Scope further highlights the economic constraints of disabled people as previous research reveals that **57%** of disabled people say their income does not, or only just, covers their bills.[7] Further research indicates that households with disabled members tend to spend more on essentials.[8]

These additional expenses stem from factors such as specialised medical care, adaptive equipment, and personal assistance. Consequently, their disposable income is often lower, making the higher cost of transport options even more prohibitive. This economic barrier further narrows the field of genuine transport choices, especially for those from lower-income backgrounds.

The lack of affordable and accessible transport options limits their ability to participate fully in social, educational, and employment opportunities, thereby exacerbating social inequalities. Addressing these economic barriers is crucial for ensuring that young disabled individuals have equal access to transport, which is essential for fostering independence and social inclusion.

Dependency Impact

Many young disabled individuals find themselves reliant on family members or carers for transport, a situation that fundamentally challenges the concept of independent travel choice. While private cars offer convenience and control, not all young disabled people can drive, creating a forced dependency that limits spontaneity and independence.

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[7]Scope (2023) The Disability Price Tag 2023: Summary report.
[8]Scope (2024) Life Costs More: The extra burden of essentials for disabled people.

During childhood and adolescence, parents or carers often manage and facilitate transportation needs. However, as young disabled individuals transition into adulthood, the expectation and desire for independence grow. The lack of accessible and affordable transport options makes this transition significantly harder, as the reliance on family members or carers persists. This forced dependency can impede their ability to engage in social, educational, and employment opportunities, further limiting their personal growth and development.

The Cumulative Effect

The combined impact of these barriers creates a transport landscape far removed from the choice-rich environment enjoyed by the general population. While most people might choose between multiple viable transport options for any given journey, young disabled people often face severely restricted choices, if any at all.

In urban areas, where transport options should be most abundant, young disabled people frequently find themselves limited to one or two viable choices, often having to prioritise basic accessibility over convenience, cost, or personal preference. In rural areas, the situation becomes even more acute, with some journeys simply being impossible without significant support or expense.

These limitations extend beyond mere inconvenience, affecting education opportunities, employment prospects, social connections, and overall quality of life. While their peers might seamlessly navigate multiple transport options, young disabled people must often undertake extensive planning for even routine journeys, with no guarantee of success.

The stark reality is that while the UK's transport network offers theoretical choice, the practical experience for young disabled people remains far from equitable. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that includes improving accessibility, ensuring reliable services, enhancing safety measures, and providing financial support to make transport more affordable and inclusive for all young disabled individuals.

case study

This case study examines the travel experiences of Michael, a 22-year-old web designer. He regularly travels to and from the University where he currently works but finds himself avoiding trains and buses due to the regular delays so prefers Uber as a trustworthy alternative.

Background

Age: 22
Occupation: Web developer at a local university
Residence: St Helens
Conditions: Arthritis, PTSD, autism, ADHD, dissociative identity disorder, specific learning disorder in math

Daily Travel Routine

Michael commutes 2-3 times a week to the university and attends weekly medical appointments. Often using Uber for its reliability but taking buses when possible, especially for returning home where bus schedules are more dependable.

Key Observations

Familiarity and triggers

Uses Google Maps and real-time train/bus tracking websites to meticulously plan journeys.

Concerns about bus/train delays and ensuring timely arrival cause significant anxiety.

Prefers Uber for its promptness and ease of use, especially for critical appointments and work commutes.

Sensory challenges

Experiences overstimulation on crowded buses and long coach rides, contributing to travel anxiety.

Finds it easier to converse with Uber drivers and appreciates the occasional familiar faces on bus routes.

Unfamiliar journeys cause heightened anxiety, necessitating meticulous planning to mitigate stress.

Interactions and reliability

Uber rides are comfortable and accessible; public transport can be overstimulating and crowded.

Generally positive interactions with Uber drivers and public transport staff, who are often helpful and understanding.

Sparse and less frequent bus services make public transport less reliable.

*A pseudonym has been used to protect the participant's identity.

Feedback and Improvement Areas

Positive Aspects

Google Maps is extremely helpful for planning routes, despite occasional inaccuracies with live bus information.

The Uber app makes travel highly accessible, ensuring timely pickups and drop-offs.

Generally finds UK public transport staff and passengers to be nicer and more helpful compared to other countries.

Areas for Improvement

More frequent bus services would significantly improve accessibility and reduce anxiety about delays.

Better tools or apps for planning complex routes involving multiple modes of transport.

More inclusive signposting, such as Braille for visually impaired passengers, would enhance accessibility.

Role of Technology

Essential for route planning but sometimes unreliable for live bus information, requiring backup checks with other apps.

The Uber app is highly reliable and user-friendly, providing prompt and accessible transport options.

Believes apps tailored for disability needs would be beneficial for real-time support and information.

Future Aspirations

More frequent public transport options to ensure timely commutes.

Enhanced signposting, including Braille and other accessibility features, to support all passengers.

More staff available for assistance, trained to handle a variety of disabilities with empathy and understanding.

Recommendations for Improving Accessible Transport

Increased Bus Frequency: Ensure more frequent bus services to improve reliability and reduce wait times.

Enhanced Route Planning Tools: Develop comprehensive apps that offer detailed guidance for complex journeys involving multiple transport modes.

Inclusive Signage: Implement inclusive signposting, including Braille, to support visually impaired passengers.

Empathy Training: Train public transport staff to be more empathetic and supportive of passengers with various disabilities.

Section 3: Unreliability, Stress and the Cost of Transport

The preference for private transport amongst young disabled people stems largely from significant challenges encountered when using public transport. This research reveals that unreliability, stress, and cost create substantial barriers to efficient and comfortable travel, often forcing reliance on more expensive or less convenient alternatives.

A striking **49%** of young people with a disability experience anxiety or stress when planning journeys via public transport. This figure rises to **57%** amongst women. Whilst more than four in five young disabled people use bus services, merely **16%** consider it the most accommodating transport option—a statistic consistent across different disability needs.

Anxiety and stress emerge as particularly acute challenges for specific groups. The gender disparity in journey-planning anxiety reveals significant systemic barriers, with **57%** of women experiencing stress compared to **38%** of men. Some of the detail of this is discussed further in the section on social identity related challenges, but this difference highlights broader safety concerns and societal challenges that women can face when using public transport. As one young person explained:

> *"I'd say every single journey I've taken, there's been at least one point where if I would have gone independently, I would have been stranded in a dangerous situation, stuck on a train [or] stuck on a platform. I don't think I've ever had a single journey that I would [have felt] safe undertaking because it's not like a normal person."*
>
> *(Nina, Behavioural/Emotional/Developmental Disability and Sensory Disability, age 17)*

Figure 2: Personal challenges when using public transport (% selected)

Q9. What do you see as being challenging for you personally when using public transport? Base: All respondents (1,054)
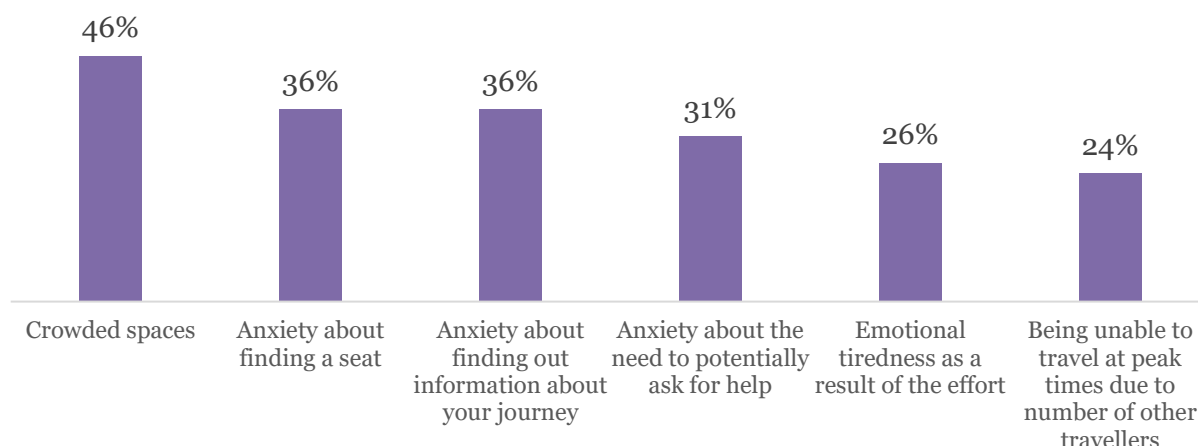
There is evidence that young disabled people who also identify as LGBTQ+ feel particularly stressed on public transport. In particular those who are bisexual and gay young men were particularly anxious about crowded spaces (**60%** and **61%** respectively) compared to **41%** of heterosexual respondents.

Focus group participants vividly described these anxieties. As one young disabled person explained:

> *"People laugh at me... We were both trans... So, things like my gender identity, I get a lot of transphobic stuff, a lot more in rural areas."*
>
> *(Max, Behavioural/Emotional/Developmental Disability, age 19)*

The challenges extend beyond planning to the journey itself. Crowded conditions on public transport create particular difficulties for those with non-visible disabilities such as autism or chronic pain. Limited priority seating availability, combined with sensory challenges from noise and unexpected movements, can make journeys extremely distressing.
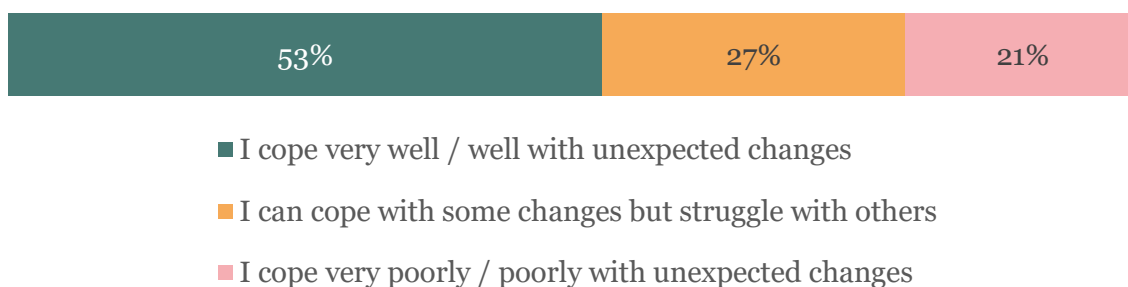
Managing Service Unreliability

Service unreliability emerged as a universal concern across focus groups. Delayed, cancelled, and infrequent services lead to missed appointments and extended journey times. The lack of

prompt, real-time updates through transport apps compounds these difficulties, particularly affecting those with mental health conditions who find schedule uncertainty especially challenging.

Figure 3: Ability to cope when travel plans change due to an expected change while using transport (% selected)

Q11. When you have to change your travel plans due to an unexpected change while using transport, how well are you able to cope? Base: All respondents (1,054)

53%	27%	21%

■ I cope very well / well with unexpected changes

■ I can cope with some changes but struggle with others

■ I cope very poorly / poorly with unexpected changes

The impact of unreliable services varies across different groups, reflecting broader societal inequalities. Only **50%** of women report being able to manage these disruptions effectively compared to **59%** of men, highlighting how their already higher safety concerns and other structural barriers can be compounded by transport unreliability. Similarly, only **30%** of LGBTQ+ young disabled people find managing disruptions something they cope well with, compared to **58%** of heterosexual respondents, indicating significant systemic barriers for certain communities. For instance, one young respondent who is a part of the LGBTQ+ community shared their experience of an unexpected change to their journey,

"What happened was I booked the tickets on the Transport for Wales app, but there was a [Redacted for anonymity] railway strike that wasn't shown on the app. So, I got to Paddington and found out about the strike when I was already there. Obviously, I couldn't do anything. I got on a train and had to change at Reading, Swindon, Trowbridge, and Bristol. I left at around 3 PM and didn't get home until nearly midnight.

At one point, I ended up somewhere near Portsmouth or Bournemouth, and the station had no lift, no toilet, and no indoor waiting area because it was late at night. I ended up in tears because my blood circulation was cut off, and people just walked right past me. I was completely a mess and
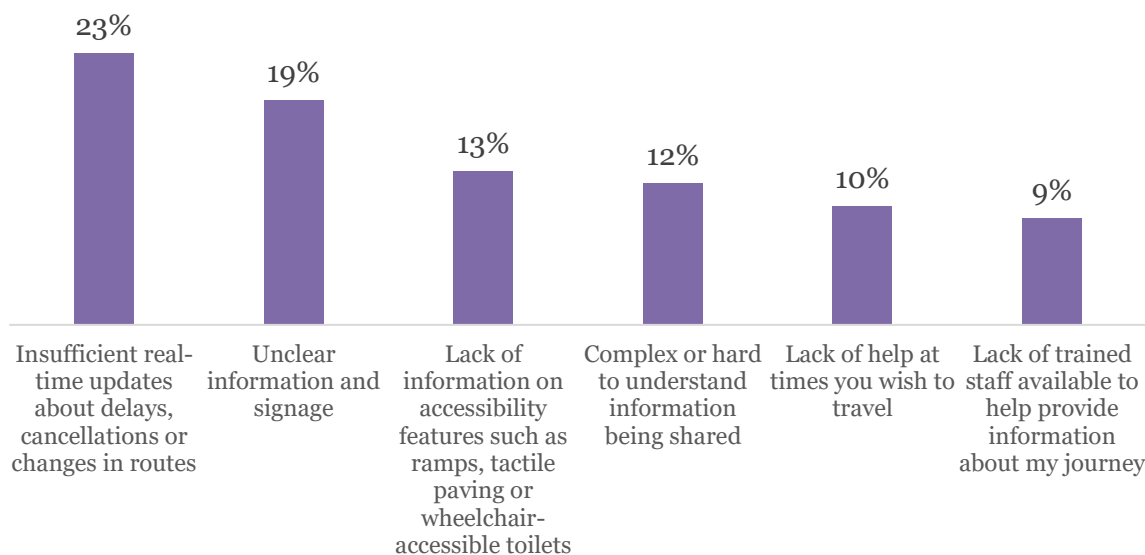
alone, and no one said anything. I complained to [Redacted for anonymity], sent them proof of the tickets, but they wouldn't do anything.

(Max, Behavioural/Emotional/Developmental Disability and Physical Disability, age 19)

Information sharing remains problematic, with nearly a quarter of young disabled people citing insufficient updates about cancellations or route changes.

Figure 4: Challenges when getting the right information for a journey (% selected)

Q15b. Now which of the following do you find to be the hardest when getting the right information for your journey? Base: All except those who don't encounter any barriers (915)

Category	%
Insufficient real-time updates about delays, cancellations or changes in routes	23%
Unclear information and signage	19%
Lack of information on accessibility features such as ramps, tactile paving or wheelchair-accessible toilets	13%
Complex or hard to understand information being shared	12%
Lack of help at times you wish to travel	10%
Lack of trained staff available to help provide information about my journey	9%

Financial Impact

Cost creates a significant barrier to transport access. While **53%** of young disabled people cite cost savings as the main benefit of public transport, the expense of private alternatives often proves prohibitive.

Regular taxi or rideshare usage places substantial financial burden on users. Train travel without concessions can be unaffordable, particularly affecting those from lower-income backgrounds who require accessible seating or assistance. Vehicle ownership, whilst offering independence, presents its own financial challenges through fuel, insurance, and maintenance costs.

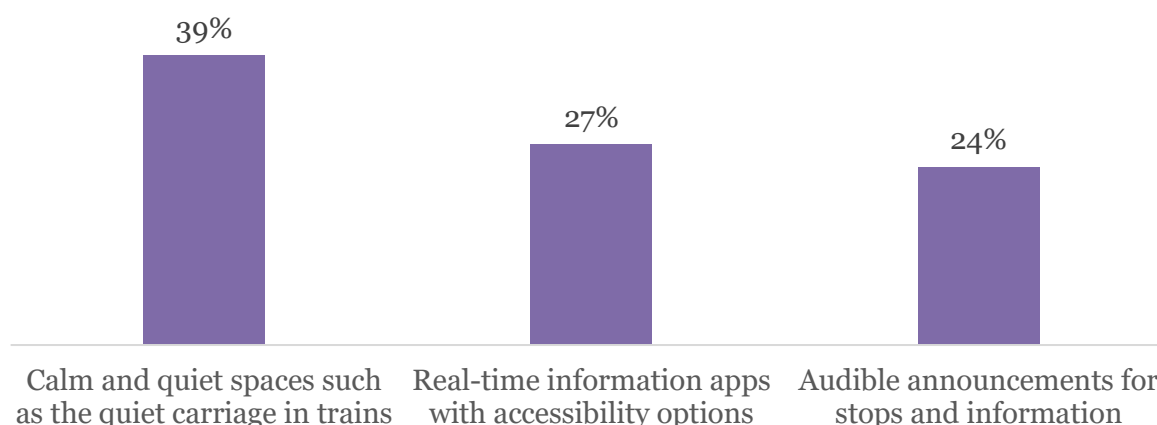The financial strain affects travel behaviour significantly:

- **31%** of young disabled people deliberately reduce their journeys to save money
- **19%** choose more affordable services regardless of accessibility
- **31%** of those with mobility or dexterity conditions use less accessible services due to financial constraints

Current Impact and Future Needs

The combined effect of stress, unreliability, and cost significantly impacts young disabled people's ability to travel effectively. Their primary recommendation for improving public transport centres on providing suitable calm and quiet spaces—particularly important for women and people with learning differences.

Figure 5: Needs when travelling on public transport (% selected, top 3)

Q16. What do you need when travelling on public transport? Base: All respondents (1,054)

Calm and quiet spaces such as the quiet carriage in trains	Real-time information apps with accessibility options	Audible announcements for stops and information
39%	27%	24%

These challenges need addressing to ensure transport becomes truly accessible, safe, and affordable for all young disabled people. Comprehensive reform should encompass:

- Enhanced service reliability
- Improved support systems, including improvement of staff training and assistance
- Strengthened safety measures
- Financial Assistance programmes
- Addressing systemic barriers faced by women and marginalised groups (discussed further in the Social Identity-Related Challenges section)

case study

This case study examines the travel experiences of Emily, a 24-year-old postgraduate student with disabilities, focusing on the accessibility and challenges of public transportation. She's pursuing a PhD at Strathclyde University and primarily relies on bus services for daily commutes.

Background

Age: 24
Occupation: Chemistry PhD student at Strathclyde University
Residence: Lives in Dennistoun, approximately 1 mile from the university
Conditions: Chronic wrist pain, anxiety, depression, and dyslexia

Daily Travel Routine

Emily does not have a fixed timetable but prefers to work full days, which can vary between 9-5 or 11-7. Her primary mode of transport is the bus due to its direct and effective route, although alternatives like walking, car, and train are occasionally considered.

Key Observations

Time Management

Experiences anxiety about crowded buses and close quarters with others, leading to panic attacks.

Plans travel times to avoid peak hours, resulting in later finishes at university.

The anticipation of a crowded journey adds to anxiety, though the short duration (max 15 minutes) is somewhat relieving.

Physical Mobility

Chronic wrist pain complicates carrying items and gripping bus handles.

Cold weather exacerbates wrist pain; carries a flask for warmth and hydration.

Prefers to sit or lean against surfaces when standing to minimise strain.

Seating Challenges

Limited comfortable seating, especially during peak hours.

Prefers the designated disability area but it's often occupied or too crowded.

Feels most uncomfortable standing in the middle of the aisle, close to other passengers.

*A pseudonym has been used to protect the participant's identity.

Feedback and Improvement Areas

Positive Aspects

The First Bus app is useful for checking bus arrival times, though not always reliable.

Walking to university is an option on pleasant days.

Alternatives like car and train have their own challenges, such as parking costs and missed trains.

Areas for Improvement

More reliable live information on bus occupancy to help plan for less crowded journeys.

Enhanced route planning and time management support, especially considering dyslexia.

Better access to comfortable seating or standing areas to reduce wrist strain.

Role of Technology

Uses the First Bus app for real-time updates but finds it occasionally unreliable.

Would benefit from apps providing detailed accessibility information and real-time updates on bus occupancy.

Does not currently use disability-specific apps but sees their potential value for better travel planning and support.

Future Aspirations

Optimistic about the future of accessible transport and increasing societal awareness of disabilities.

Desires more inclusive transport design that accommodates various disabilities, including chronic pain and anxiety.

Envisions technological advancements providing real-time updates on bus occupancy and seating availability to make travel less stressful.

Recommendations for Improving Accessible Transport

Technology Enhancements: Develop apps offering real-time updates on bus occupancy and detailed accessibility information.

Infrastructure Improvements: Increase the number of comfortable seating and standing options to accommodate passengers with disabilities.

Support Systems: Provide better route planning and timekeeping support, particularly for individuals with dyslexia.

Policy Changes: Implement policies that ensure reliable public transport services, reducing anxiety for passengers with mental health conditions.

Section 4: Travelling and Experiences of the Journey

When it comes to travelling on a daily basis, this research reveals that current transport infrastructure, staff training, and information systems frequently fall short of meeting basic accessibility needs, resulting in both physical and emotional barriers that significantly impact independence and quality of life.

Current transport infrastructure challenges

Visual and auditory information systems are crucial for ensuring that disabled passengers can navigate public transport with confidence. However, many participants pointed out that these systems are either inadequate or inconsistently implemented.

"I can't really trust the apps because they'll say, 'Oh, the bus is coming,' and then it just disappears off the map. And I'm like, 'Where is it?' I've had multiple breakdowns over missing a bus or a train, especially recently since I've started taking the bus more."

(Clara, Behavioural/Emotional/Developmental Disability, age 18)

Additionally, visual aids such as clear signage and tactile paving are often missing or poorly designed, making navigation difficult for visually impaired passengers. Auditory announcements are also frequently unclear or absent, leaving hearing-impaired individuals without essential information about route changes or delays. The inconsistent presence and quality of these accessibility features create a pervasive sense of uncertainty and frustration among young disabled travellers. The absence of reliable support mechanisms further exacerbates the stress associated with travel, making it a daunting prospect for many.

Clear and accurate information emerged as the primary requirement, with almost a third **(31%)** of young disabled passengers citing this as key to making transport more accessible. The inconsistent presence and quality of accessibility features create a pervasive sense of uncertainty and frustration among young disabled travellers, and the absence of reliable support mechanisms exacerbates the stress associated with travel, making it a daunting prospect for many.

Figure 6: Factors that would improve transport accessibility and usability (% selected, top 5)

Q19. Which of the following would help make transport more accessible and easier to use for you? Base: All respondents (1,054)
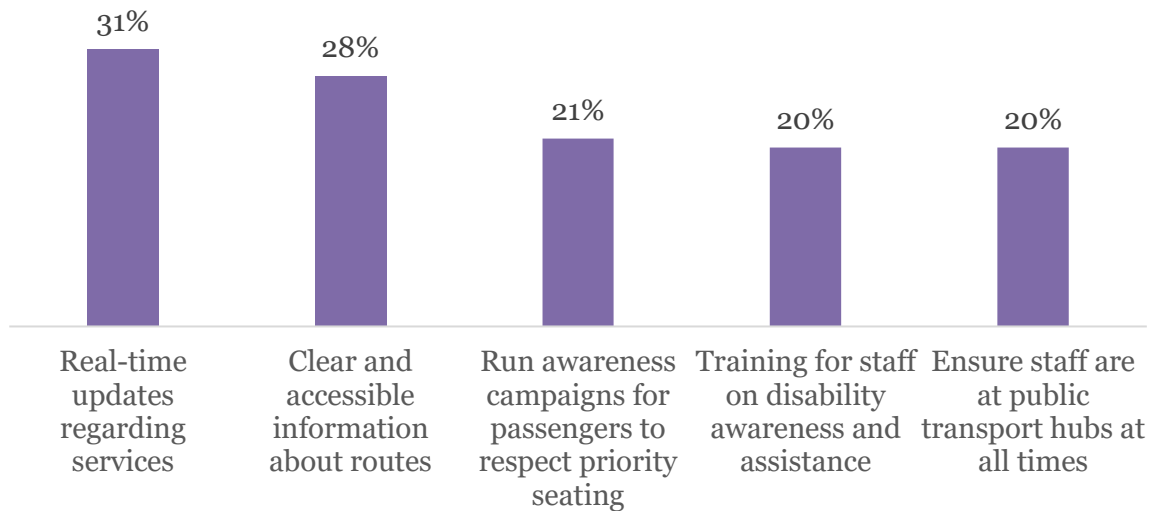
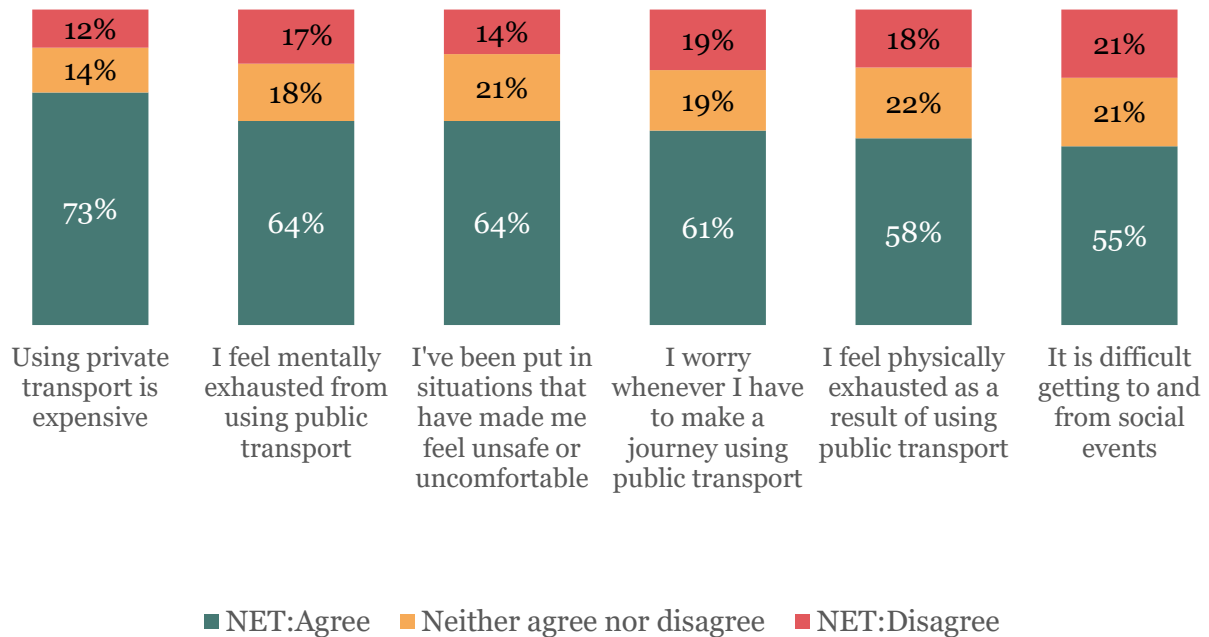**The physical and mental toll of travelling**

The physical and mental toll of travelling is stark. For young people with mental health conditions such as OCD, anxiety, and sensory processing disorders, the experience of traveling can be particularly overwhelming. Nearly two-thirds **(64%)** of young disabled people reporting mental exhaustion and more than half **(58%)** experiencing physical exhaustion.

Figure 7: Agreement statements about using public transport (% selected, top 6)

Q17. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about using public transport? Base: All respondents (1,054)

Statement	NET:Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	NET:Disagree
Using private transport is expensive	73%	14%	12%
I feel mentally exhausted from using public transport	64%	18%	17%
I've been put in situations that have made me feel unsafe or uncomfortable	64%	21%	14%
I worry whenever I have to make a journey using public transport	61%	19%	19%
I feel physically exhausted as a result of using public transport	58%	22%	18%
It is difficult getting to and from social events	55%	21%	21%

■ NET:Agree ■ Neither agree nor disagree ■ NET:Disagree

The unpredictability and chaos of public transport environments—crowded spaces, sudden loud noises, and the overall sensory overload—can trigger significant emotional and physical distress. Participants described feelings of panic and anxiety when faced with these unpredictable elements, which often result in physical symptoms such as panic attacks or dissociation. These figures underscore the considerable energy and effort required simply to navigate everyday journeys using public transport.

Substantial barriers affecting different groups

In addition to the physical and mental toll, there are substantial barriers affecting different groups of young disabled people. Overall, only half **(51%)** find public transport relatively straightforward to use. For more than one in ten **(14%)** of those with a physical disability, they are unable to travel at off-peak times due to a lack of support staff on hand. More than a quarter **(28%)** of respondents with both physical and mental disabilities experience persistent anxiety about being able to find an accessible route. Nearly a quarter **(22%)** of wheelchair users encounter uneven surfaces between platforms and/or buses, creating significant obstacles to smooth journeys. Additionally, almost a quarter **(24%)** of young disabled people find that the information provided is overly complex or difficult to comprehend.

Inconsistent availability and maintenance of access features

The inconsistent availability and maintenance of essential access features, such as ramps and lifts, creates further significant obstacles. When these facilities fail, wheelchair users often find themselves stranded, forced to rely on others and stripped of their independence. As one participant described:

"My parents are retired, so it's not like they can afford to take taxis more than once a week. So, my disability means that I'm stuck. I can't do anything. I don't have any purpose in life. I can't learn anything. I can't go anywhere. I can't speak to people."

(Max, Behavioural/Emotional/Developmental Disability and Physical Disability, age 19)

This unreliability fundamentally undermines the right to independent travel.

Practical solutions and recommendations

Improved staff training

To address these challenges, the young people suggested several practical solutions that could enhance their travel experiences. One key recommendation is the implementation of improved staff training programmes. Notably, two in five respondents **(20%)** identified staff training and presence as crucial factors for improving accessibility. This need is particularly acute for those with multiple disabilities, with a quarter **(25%)** of people with both physical and mental disabilities emphasising the importance of consistent staff presence, compared to **18%** of those with learning disabilities alone.

"I just think that when there's as many staff around as possible, there is someone to ask for help. I think that can be really helpful, or if there's just anyone around who is part of the transport team, I think that makes such a massive difference."

(Ruby, Physical Disability, age 19)

Well-trained staff can provide timely and effective assistance, significantly reducing the anxiety and stress associated with travel for disabled passengers. While disability awareness training exists for all transport modes, and in the case of rail, mandated by the Office for Rail and Road, this insight suggests that training is not reliably resulting in long lasting behaviour change of staff. Such training should encompass disability awareness, sensitivity training, and technical skills for operating accessibility equipment.

Approach to improving travel experiences

Young disabled individuals identified several key areas for enhancing their travel experiences. One critical need is for enhanced real-time information systems that provide up-to-the-minute updates on service disruptions, lift/ramp availability, and other accessibility features. These systems must be designed to be compatible with assistive technologies, such as screen readers, to ensure they are accessible to all users. Providing real-time updates on delays, cancellations, and accessible facilities can help disabled passengers plan their journeys more effectively.

Ensuring sufficient priority seating and accessible spaces on public transport is essential. Participants frequently mentioned the lack of available seating, particularly in crowded conditions, which forces disabled passengers to stand for long periods, exacerbating their health conditions. Clearly marked and enforced priority seating can alleviate this issue and make the journey more comfortable for those who need it. However, this remains challenging due to a lack of enforcement, crowded services, and negative public attitudes.

Discreet indicators and reliable assistance

Participants highlighted the value of discreet support indicators, such as lanyards or cards, that could signal the need for assistance without requiring repeated disclosure of their disability. For instance, the "Sunflower Lanyard Scheme" is an initiative that was first launched in the UK to help people with non-visible disabilities. The scheme provides sunflower-themed lanyards, badges, or other accessories that individuals can wear to discreetly signal that they have a non-visible disability and may require additional assistance, understanding, or patience. However, it is noteworthy that the young disabled participants in this research did not mention or discuss this type of discreet indicator scheme, suggesting a potential gap in awareness and promotion of these accessibility tools.

This lack of awareness highlights the need for greater promotion and education about the discreet support indicators that are available among both young disabled passengers and

transport staff. Even if these indicators are well-intentioned, they cannot effectively create a more supportive environment or ensure passengers receive the help they need if travellers are unaware of their existence.

Moreover, the availability of assistance at stations and stops must be consistent and reliable. While some participants have had positive experiences with pre-booked assistance, others noted that support is not always guaranteed. A robust system that ensures the presence of staff to assist disabled passengers at all times can significantly enhance their travel experiences.

Comprehensive approach to addressing barriers

The evidence demonstrates that journey experiences extend far beyond simple physical accessibility. The combination of unreliable infrastructure, inadequate support systems, and overwhelming environments creates substantial barriers to independent travel. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach encompassing:

- Improved staff training programmes
- Implementation of consistent visual and auditory information systems
- Development of reliable, real-time accessibility information
- Integration of discreet support mechanisms
- Enhancement of basic infrastructure reliability

These improvements are essential not merely for comfort but for ensuring young disabled people can exercise their fundamental right to independent travel within our transport network.

The journey experiences of young disabled people are fraught with challenges that extend beyond mere accessibility issues. The emotional toll of navigating public transport, compounded by the unpredictability and inadequacy of support systems, creates significant barriers to comfortable and safe travel. Addressing these issues through better staff training, discreet support indicators, and enhanced visual and auditory aids can lead to a more inclusive public transport system. These improvements would not only alleviate the emotional and physical stress associated with travel but also empower young disabled individuals to navigate their journeys with greater confidence and independence.

case study

This case study examines the travel experiences of Sam, a 24-year-old PhD candidate at Kingston University. They rely heavily on travel apps to plan journeys ahead of time and often find themselves anxious and stressed about the lack of wheelchair accessible options available to them.

Background

Age: 24
Occupation: PhD candidate and photographer
Residence: Currently lives in Surrey but often travels in and around London
Conditions: Ambulatory wheelchair user, Ehlers-Danlos syndrome and chronic fatigue.

Daily Travel Routine

Sam regularly commutes to Kingston University, attends photography jobs, and travels to central London for research at the British Library. They also travel around the UK and Europe, emphasising the need for meticulous planning to navigate accessible routes.

Key Observations

Planning and stress

Meticulously plans journeys, especially unfamiliar ones, using TFL Go and Passenger Assistance apps.

Initial fear and worry about potential conflicts, delays, and lift availability.

Stressful not knowing if lifts will work or staff will be available to assist with ramps.

Staff Interactions

Previous journeys involved being stuck on trains due to lack of staff or inaccessible stations, requiring lengthy detours.

Frequent judgmental looks and occasional unhelpful staff, though the travel-along's staff were exceptionally friendly.

Common barriers

Major stress points include non-working lifts, uncooperative passengers, and unhelpful staff.

Difficulty traveling with other wheelchair users due to limited space on buses.

*A pseudonym has been used to protect the participant's identity.

Feedback and Improvement Areas

Positive Aspects

TFL Go and Passenger Assistance apps provide essential information and assistance.

Positive experiences when staff are available and willing to assist.

Functional lifts and accessible ticket gates greatly improve the travel experience.

Areas for Improvement

Need more staff to assist with ramps and boarding.

More space for wheelchair users on buses to accommodate multiple users.

Ensure lifts are consistently in working order.

Role of Technology

The TFL Go app provides lift status and travel planning which is appreciated, though sometimes unreliable.

The Passenger Assistance app helps book assistance and taxis, but communication with taxi companies is lacking.

Limited awareness and use of other disability-specific travel apps.

Future Aspirations

Make all stations wheelchair accessible.

Implement solutions such as automatic ramps and moving (escalator-type) ramps.

Train staff to be more empathetic and approachable.

Recommendations for Improving Accessible Transport

Technology Enhancements: Develop more reliable apps that provide real-time updates on lift status and staff availability.

Infrastructure Improvements: Ensure all stations are wheelchair accessible and lifts are consistently operational.

Policy Changes: Mandate automated ramps on buses and trains to reduce reliance on staff.

Training Programs: Implement comprehensive training for staff to improve empathy and support for disabled passengers.

Section 5: Disability and Intersectionality

Navigating public transport poses unique and significant safety challenges for young disabled individuals, particularly when their disabilities intersect with their socio-demographic identities such as gender, ethnicity, and class. This section delves into the heightened risks faced by young disabled women, who are frequently targets for harassment and violence, especially in isolated or unfamiliar environments. By examining gender-based safety concerns and the proactive measures taken to mitigate these risks, we highlight the profound impact on their mental well-being.

Additionally, we explore the compounded challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals and those from ethnic minority backgrounds, alongside the persistent struggle for recognition faced by individuals with non-visible disabilities. Through quantitative data and powerful personal testimonies, this section unveils the complex, intersecting barriers to safe and independent travel for young disabled people. The findings underscore the urgent need for a comprehensive, intersectional approach to transport accessibility, aiming to create a safer, more inclusive environment for all.

Navigating safety: The intersection of gender, sexuality, and disability

Gender and safety concerns

Safety concerns related to gender and sexuality significantly impact the lives of young disabled individuals, particularly women. The intersection of gender, disability, and societal perceptions creates unique vulnerabilities, making them targets for harassment and violence, especially in isolated or unfamiliar environments. This section explores the heightened risks faced by young disabled women, the proactive measures they take to protect themselves, and the profound impact these challenges have on their mental well-being.

One significant challenge among young disabled individuals is ensuring safety while traveling alone. **40%** of young disabled women identify this as a top safety concern, compared to only **21%** of young disabled men. This disparity underscores the unique vulnerabilities faced by women due to the intersection of gender and disability. One in five young disabled people feel vulnerable to physical and/or verbal attacks, and the proportion of women feeling vulnerable to unwanted advances jumps to **24%,** significantly higher than men at **14%.** When asked if they had been put in situations that made them feel unsafe or uncomfortable while using public

transport**, 69%** of young disabled women strongly or somewhat agreed, compared to **56%** of young disabled men. This was further noted in the focus groups when one participant shared:

"…As a woman it makes you seem like a vulnerable person in certain ways. Asking for help from someone puts you in an even more vulnerable position, and I've experienced sexual harassment and things like that when I've asked someone just to help me with my bag and it's been misinterpreted."

(Ruby, Physical Disability, age 19)

Another young woman shared her feelings on the topic:

"I'm not very good at social situations or even dangerous very dangerous social situations.

I will always find that on the bus, if you're on your own. There's like loads of other spaces for someone else to sit. Yet, they [men] decide to sit right next to you for some weird reason, and it's very awkward. And it's really hard to try and say, 'can you get up?'. It's really difficult and a lot of the time they're doing it in a way to sort of make advances and it's a bit a bit weird.

That's another thing I have is mixing disability and being a female.

(Leah, Behavioural/Emotional/Developmental Disability, age 18)

Figure 8: Vulnerability barriers encountered when using public transport: arrival, travel, and departure (% selected)

Q14. When using public transport, which of the following do you encounter when arriving, travelling and departing from transport? Base: All respondents (1,054)
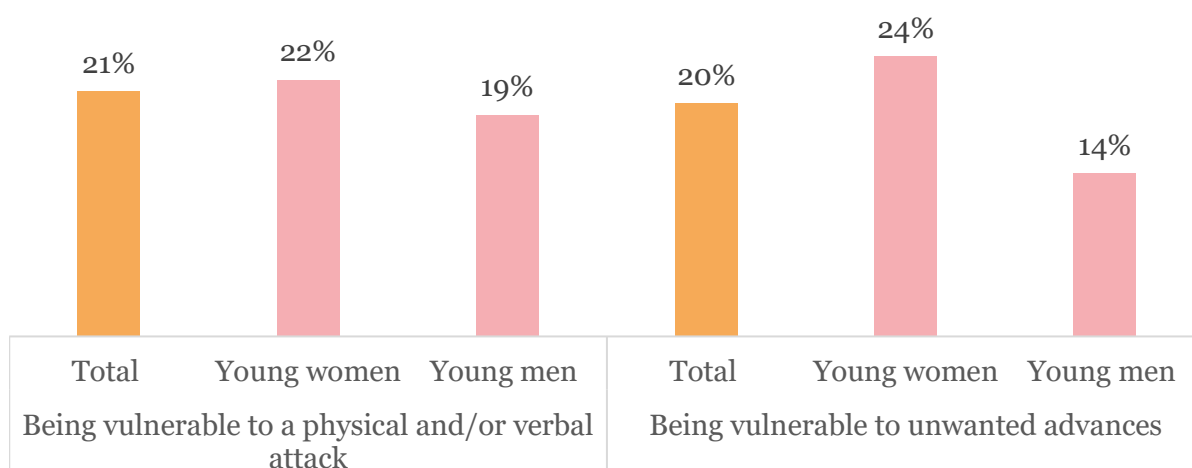
To mitigate safety risks, nearly a third **(30%)** of young disabled women take proactive measures such as choosing well-lit routes, avoiding isolated areas, and seeking paths with a greater security presence. In contrast, only **17%** of young disabled men adopt similar precautions. Additionally, **27%** of individuals with both physical and mental disabilities take these steps, compared to **23%** with only mental disabilities and **19%** with only physical disabilities. Among those with mental health disabilities, the heightened sense of vulnerability often exacerbates anxiety and stress, compelling them to take extra precautions. These statistics highlight the significant gender disparity in actions taken to ensure personal safety and the additional mental health burdens faced by individuals with mental health disabilities.

Figure 9: Carefully planning certain aspects of the journey - I choose routes that are well lit, less isolated or have more security to ensure my safety (% selected)

Q12. In what ways does your disability mean you have to carefully plan certain aspects of your journey? Base: All respondents (1,054)
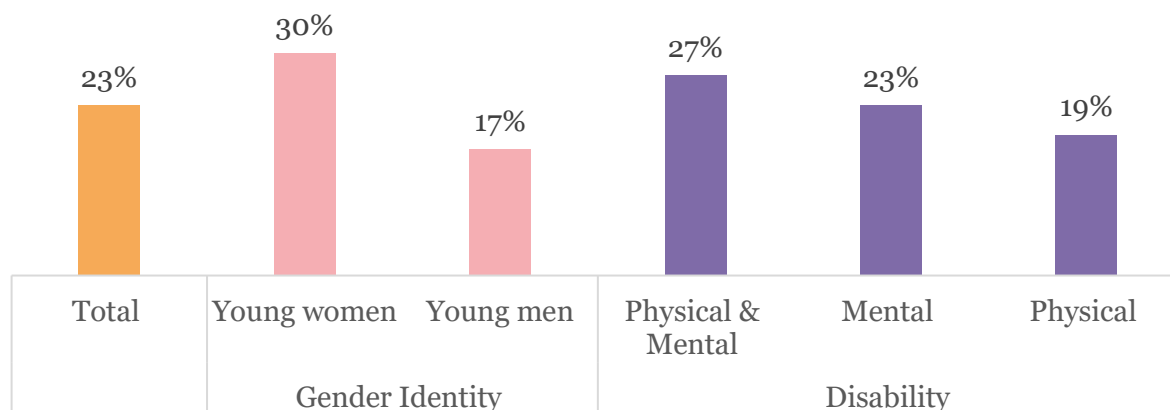
Young disabled women's concerns about personal safety were heightened when traveling alone, especially at night. They expressed that being both young and female made them more susceptible to unwanted attention and harassment, adding another layer of stress to their travel experience. **57%** of women reported higher levels of anxiety and stress when using public transport, compared to **38%** of men. These heightened levels of stress are compounded by the frequent exposure to potentially dangerous situations.

The constant need to be vigilant can have a profound impact on the mental well-being of young disabled women. One participant shared her experience:

> *"And obviously, being a girl coming back home late at night can be scary to be on a bus or a train with people that are drunk or people that have been out. And then when you feel really vulnerable you can't just be like you'd rather get a cab. Then even that can be a bit scary."*
>
> *(Maria, Behavioural/Emotional/Developmental Disability, age 20)*

This powerful testimony underscores the pervasive fear and anxiety experienced by young disabled women, leading to increased stress and a reduced sense of independence. Addressing these safety concerns is not only a matter of physical security but also crucial for mental health and overall quality of life.

Suggested improvements

Specific improvements to make transport more accessible and easier for young disabled women can be implemented. Notably, these women are more likely to support measures such as:

- Offering discounts on taxi and ride-hailing services (**30%** of women vs **20%** of men)
- Ensuring that public transport hubs are always staffed (**22%** of women vs **17%** of men)
- Secured seating areas, and well-lit, supervised transport stations (**23%** of women vs **21%** of men)

These targeted strategies can help create a safer and more inclusive transportation environment for young disabled women.

Intersectional identities and public transport challenges

LGBTQ+ identities

Participants highlighted that their LGBTQ+ identities intersected with their disabilities, further complicating their use of public transpor. LGBTQ+ young disabled people report particularly high levels of safety concerns, with 51% feeling vulnerable in crowded spaces. Some LGBTQ+ participants shared experiences of homophobic or transphobic harassment while traveling, which compounded the challenges they already faced due to their disabilities. This intersection is further complicated by regional differences, as one respondent shared:

"...things like my gender identity, I get a lot of transphobic stuff, a lot more in rural areas.

I find that other aspects of my identity don't factor in nearly as much in Wales as they did in Devon because Wales is a lot more trans friendly than Devon, where I used to get harassed in the streets."

(Max, Behavioural/Emotional/Developmental Disability and Physical Disability, age 19)

The fear of being targeted because of their sexual orientation or gender identity often made them feel even more vulnerable and less likely to use public transport or express their true selves while traveling. **36%** of young disabled people who identify as bisexual indicated they feel vulnerable to unwanted advances when using public transport, significantly higher than the **16%** of those who identify as heterosexual. One respondent shared:

"I don't really present as non-binary in public or use pronouns that much or wear badges or anything like that. [I] just sort of fear for being picked on..."

(Jordan, Behavioural/Emotional/Developmental Disability and Physical Disability, age 18)

Additionally, nearly half **(48%)** of those who identify as bisexual reported experiencing anxiety or stress when planning journeys, compared to **33%** of heterosexual young disabled people. This heightened anxiety is particularly acute for those with physical disabilities, who face the terrifying prospect of being unable to quickly exit or escape harassment situations on buses or trains, effectively leaving them trapped when experiencing hate-motivated abuse.

Ethnic minorities identities

Racial identity also emerged as a factor influencing the travel experiences of young disabled people. Participants from ethnic minority backgrounds reported instances of racial profiling and discrimination, which, when combined with the challenges posed by their disabilities, made public transport a particularly hostile environment. The combined effect of racism and ableism often left these individuals feeling marginalised and unsafe with **59%** of young disabled people from an ethnic minority agreeing they had been out in situations that have left them feeling unsafe or uncomfortable.

For those with mobility impairments or physical disabilities, this created an additional layer of anxiety - the knowledge that if subjected to racial abuse or harassment, they may be physically unable to remove themselves from the situation. The confined nature of public transport spaces, coupled with limited mobility options, meant that what might be an unpleasant experience for others became a potentially dangerous situation where they felt trapped and powerless. One respondent shared their experience of racism on public transport,

"Because I'm East Asian, I'm like minority here. I barely see any East Asians around. Because of that, I prefer to take the bus [in certain places]. There are always these kids...being really mean to me in general...they'll just start looking me and start laughing.

I get really anxious about that.

I don't know when they're laughing at me or just laughing at something else. So, I just try not to take the train by myself."

(Clara, Behavioural/Emotional/Developmental Disability, age 18)

Socioeconomic status

Additionally, socioeconomic status further intersected with disability to impact the travel experiences of participants. Those from lower-income backgrounds spoke about the financial strain of using public transport, especially when additional costs for accessible services were involved. The expense of taxis or needing a companion for assistance added financial burdens that were difficult to manage, limiting their ability to travel independently and frequently, and for more than a third (**34%**) of young people with a disability from a lower-income background, reduced cost of travel for carers would make a significant impact. This was highlighted in this response:

"I'll trip because I can't see [and] no one gives up their seat for a young person. So, you have to pay for a carer and you'd think, after all the paperwork, everything you'd finally get a third off. But you're paying for two people, minimum.

In actuality, it's like double the money to just go on the bus or on a train to go to an appointment that you need."

(Nina, Behavioural/Emotional/Developmental Disability and Sensory Disability, age 17)

Several participants discussed how their intersectional identities required them to navigate multiple layers of discrimination and stigma simultaneously. They felt that transport providers often failed to recognise the complexity of their experiences, leading to inadequate support and services. This often resulted in an over-reliance on trusted friends or family members for support that public transport services should be providing. Nina illustrated this point:

"I can't just take a train or public transport. If I need to go somewhere quickly, for example, to go home, to university, or because something has broken down, there is no way I could take a train or bus. If it was a familiar route and I had someone with me, I might be able to, but a taxi would likely be the only option.

This means having to pay a lot of money and hoping that your wheelchair will fit and that everything will be fine, all while trusting a stranger. Essentially, if you're disabled and autistic, you're already quite vulnerable to any sort of danger."

(Nina, Behavioural/Emotional/Developmental Disability and Sensory Disability, age *17)*

Reform is needed, but it must not solely focus on disability. Policy interventions, training, and improvements must also consider gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity. Furthermore, these efforts must be conducted in a way that acknowledges and addresses intersectionality. By addressing these intersecting issues through comprehensive policy and training, and improving transport accessibility, the overall social connections and well-being of young disabled individuals can be significantly enhanced.

Navigating invisible barriers: The recognition of non-visible disabilities in transport

Young disabled individuals, particularly those with non-visible disabilities, face unique challenges in the realm of public transportation. Despite advancements in accessibility, many transport providers, staff, and fellow passengers often fail to recognise or take seriously the non-visible nature of these disabilities. This lack of understanding and proper accommodation significantly impacts their travel experiences, leading to frustration, anxiety, and vulnerability. Through a combination of quantitative data and personal testimonies from focus groups, this section delves into the profound effects of these issues on young disabled people. We explore the emotional toll, the specific incidents highlighting these challenges, and propose actionable measures to create a more inclusive and supportive transport environment.

A recurring theme across all seven focus groups was the concern that disabilities, particularly non-visible disabilities, are frequently not recognised or taken seriously by transport providers, staff and other passengers. This issue significantly affects the travel experiences of young disabled people, leading to feelings of frustration, anxiety and vulnerability.

Participants from various focus groups shared their experiences of being overlooked or dismissed due to the non-visible nature of their disabilities. For instance, one young person highlighted the issue when recounting an experience with passenger assistance in London:

> *"I said [to] someone in a TfL uniform, 'Hi I'm autistic and I'm hard of hearing. I need someone to help me'. I had 6 bags with me, which I did my best to carry. They basically said, 'you do know we're not a bag carrying service?'. I was insanely self-conscious already about the fact that I didn't look disabled enough... and then I nearly fell down an escalator."*
>
> *(Olivia, Behavioural/Emotional/Developmental Disability, Sensory Disability and Physical Disability, age 21)*

Similarly, another participant shared a disheartening encounter with an Uber driver, who questioned why a blind person would be using a cab. This comment reflects a profound misunderstanding of the needs and rights of disabled individuals, reinforcing the stigma and creating additional barriers to independence.

The lack of proper training for transport staff particularly affects those young people with non-visible disabilities. Participants highlighted how staff often struggle to provide appropriate support when disabilities aren't immediately visible. One young person, who alternates between using a wheelchair and a walking stick depending on their condition, described facing scepticism and poor treatment from staff who couldn't comprehend the variable nature of their disability. They explained how staff would be helpful when they used a wheelchair but dismissive when they used a walking stick, despite their support needs remaining constant.

The challenge becomes especially acute during unexpected situations. Participants with non-visible disabilities, such as anxiety disorders or sensory processing conditions, explained how during disruptions like train delays or breakdowns, the lack of clear communication and appropriate support can be overwhelming. One participant described how during a service disruption, their anxiety became severe, but staff dismissed their requests for assistance because they "looked fine." This highlights how the invisible nature of some disabilities can lead to inadequate support during critical moments, potentially compromising passengers' safety and well-being.

The type of disability significantly influences how seriously it is taken. Non-visible disabilities, such as mental health conditions, chronic pain, or learning disabilities, are often met with scepticism. For instance, **17%** of young disabled people with non-visible disabilities report being judged for using priority seating on public transport. One participant shared:


"I think [when] having an invisible disability...there's a bit of a lack of understanding and also...I find it difficult...sitting in like a seat that's designated for a disabled person because I feel like people would pull me up on it and be like, 'oh, you know, you can't sit there'."

(Anna, Behavioural/Emotional/Developmental Disability, Sensory Disability and Physical Disability, age 23)

This judgment leads many young disabled individuals to feel like they cannot use the priority seats available or that they must constantly prove their disability status to use them. **47%** of young disabled people report feeling this way while on public transport, and among those with non-visible disabilities, nearly half **(49%)** strongly or somewhat agree with this sentiment. Furthermore, **61%** of young disabled people with a hearing disability feel like they can't use the priority seats and/or have to prove their disability status.

Figure 10: I feel like I can't use the priority seats available and/or have to prove my disability status to use them (% selected)

Q17_8. I feel like I can't use the priority seats available and/or have to prove my disability status to use them: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about using public transport? Base: All respondents (1,054)
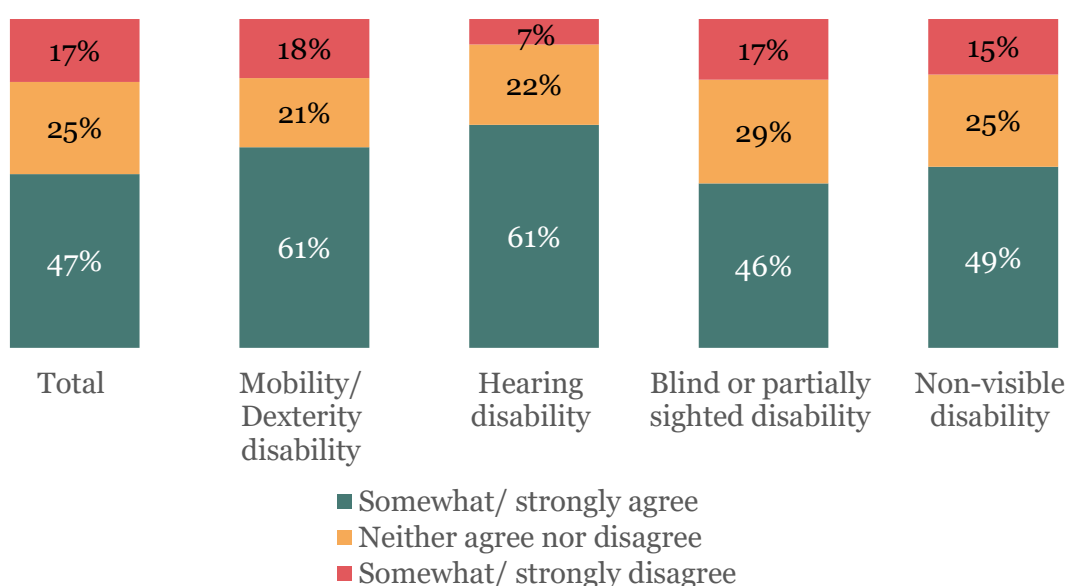

The lack of recognition and understanding of their disabilities can lead to significant mental health challenges. This need for self-advocacy can be exhausting and demoralising, further

impacting their mental well-being. The statistic showing that **67%** of those with non-visible disabilities feel mentally exhausted from using public transport underscores the severe toll issues like this can have on the mental health of young disabled people.

Figure 11: I feel mentally exhausted from using public transport (% selected)

Q17_4. I feel mentally exhausted from using public transport: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about using public transport? Base: All respondents (1,054)
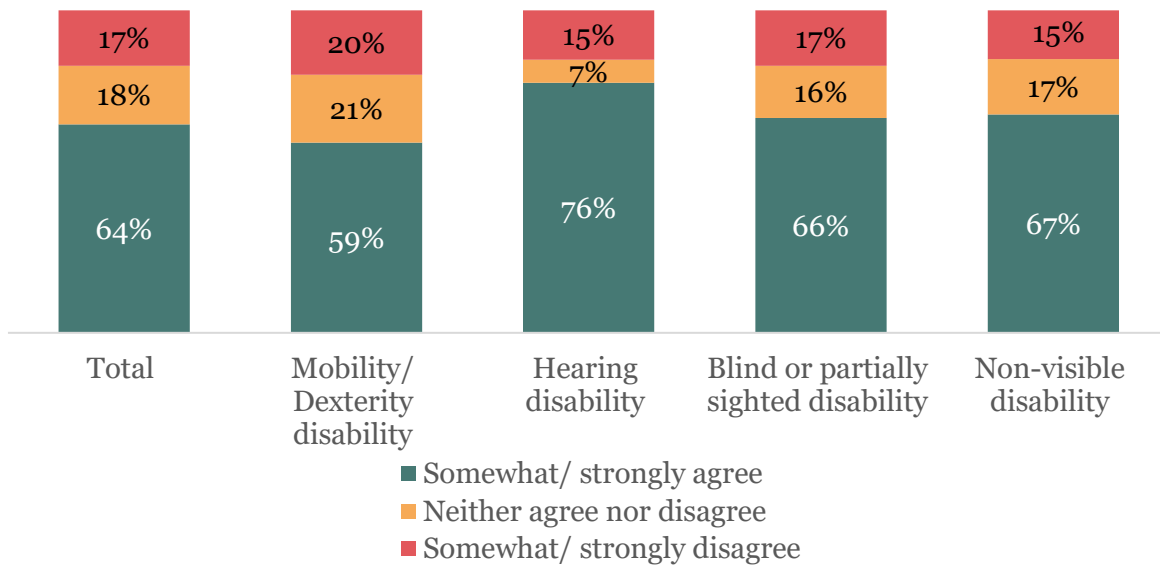
To address these concerns, several measures can be implemented:

- **Education and awareness programs:** Increasing awareness and understanding of various disabilities among the general public, educators, and employers can help reduce stigma and improve recognition. One in five **(21%)** of all young disabled respondents believe running awareness campaigns for passengers to respect priority seating, better understand disability, and foster a more considerate and inclusive environment would make transport more accessible and easier to use. This figure increases when you look at it by disability. Three in ten **(29%)** of those who have both a physical and mental disability feel this would improve their transport experiences.

- **Training for staff:** Providing training for transport staff to better recognise and accommodate both visible and invisible disabilities could significantly enhance accessibility. **20%** of all young disabled respondents indicated that staff training would make transport more accessible and easier to navigate. This sentiment is even

stronger among those with both physical and mental disabilities, with a quarter **(25%)** expressing that it would make travel easier.

- **Policy changes:** Advocating for policy changes that mandate better recognition and accommodations for all types of disabilities in transportation settings. **47%** of young disabled people report feeling they cannot use priority seats without proving their disability status, highlighting the need for clear policies that ensure accessible and inclusive practices.

- **Addressing intersectional safety concerns:** Implementing targeted safety measures to address the unique vulnerabilities faced by young disabled people. Measures such as offering discounts on taxi/ride-hailing services **(25%),** reducing the cost of travel for disabled individuals through subsidies or discounts **(23%),** and implementing safety measures such as secured seating areas, straps and handles, well-lit and supervised transport stations, as well as clear audio and visual announcements **(22%)** can significantly enhance their sense of safety and independence.

The findings in this section reveal the intricate web of challenges that young disabled people face when navigating public transport, particularly when their identities intersect with gender, sexuality, race, and socioeconomic status. The compounded experiences of discrimination and vulnerability underscore the urgent need for a more nuanced, intersectional approach to transport accessibility. Addressing these issues requires comprehensive solutions that consider the complex interplay of these intersecting identities. By implementing targeted measures such as enhanced real-time information systems, discreet support indicators, consistent and reliable assistance, and comprehensive staff training, we can create a safer, more inclusive, and supportive transport environment. These improvements are not only essential for physical accessibility but also crucial for the mental well-being and independence of young disabled individuals.

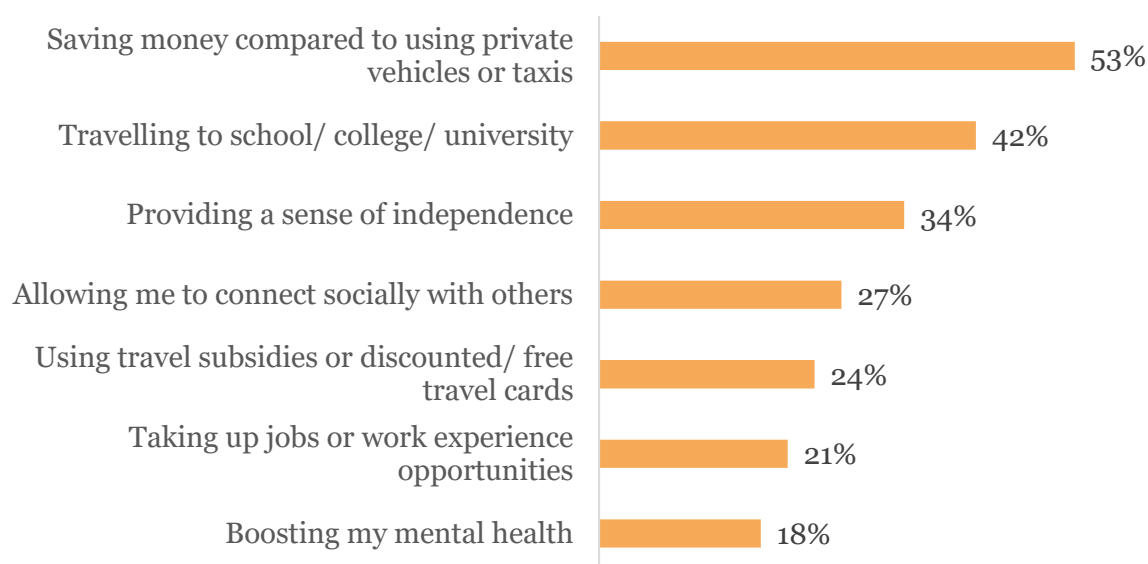# Section 6: Impact on Social Connections and Wellbeing

Access to reliable transport is a fundamental aspect of independence and social wellbeing, especially for young disabled people. However, transport accessibility remains a significant challenge, impacting not only their autonomy but also their ability to maintain social connections and overall mental health. This analysis delves into how transport options—or the lack thereof—affect the lives of young disabled individuals, drawing on survey data and focus group discussions to highlight the profound consequences of transport accessibility on their independence, social interactions, and emotional wellbeing.

Reliable transport options: A key to independence

Reliable transport options are essential for fostering independence, but their inconsistency often leaves young disabled people feeling dependent and isolated. According to the survey, **34%** of respondents indicated that public transport provides a sense of independence, compared to **21%** who felt the same about private transport. This sentiment is even more pronounced among respondents with physical and mental disabilities, with **44%** acknowledging the benefits of public transport in enhancing their independence.

Figure 12: Benefits of using public transport (% selected)

Q8. What do you see as being the benefits of using public transport? Base: All respondents (1,054)

Benefit	%
Saving money compared to using private vehicles or taxis	53%
Travelling to school/ college/ university	42%
Providing a sense of independence	34%
Allowing me to connect socially with others	27%
Using travel subsidies or discounted/ free travel cards	24%
Taking up jobs or work experience opportunities	21%
Boosting my mental health	18%

However, the lack of accessible and reliable transport options can severely impact the autonomy of young disabled people. They often find themselves more dependent on others, particularly when they rely on cars for travel. A significant **26%** of young disabled respondents

reported that if they cannot drive, they must rely on others to schedule and manage their transport.

Focus group discussions further highlighted this issue, with participants frequently expressing feelings of isolation, loneliness and dependence due to unreliable transport. One participant shared:

"I'm housebound and out of education, thanks to the messed-up way the transport works here. I don't leave the house except for once a week to go to a class and that is just an informal club.

Apart from that, and when my parents drive 3 hours to get me to leave the house, I don't actually remember the last time I left the house.

(Max, Behavioural/Emotional/Developmental Disability and Physical Disability, age 19)

Very young participants from the focus groups (those aged 15 and 16) suggested that they often heavily rely on their parents for support, with both parent and child not aware of the transitional challenges that accompany growing independence. The need for reliable transport is not at the forefront of their minds, and they don't know how to prepare for these changes or where to seek information, significantly limiting their choices. One participant discussed the benefits of some education she did receive:

"My school, they have a set lesson for travel training so that they're teaching you how to take public transport like by your... by yourself, which is quite helpful."

(Mia, Behavioural/Emotional/Developmental Disability and Physical Disability, age 16)

The reliance on parental support was a recurring theme in the focus group discussions. Young participants frequently mentioned that their parents are their primary source of transportation. For example, one young person shared:

"My mom or dad will take me, or I'll try and learn to drive. I'm getting assessed by Motability to see if I can drive safely, and if I can, I'll hopefully drive to school."

(Zoe, Physical Disability, age 16)

The reliance on parents for transportation not only affects the young individuals but also places a significant burden on the parents themselves. They must constantly be available to provide transport, which can interfere with their own schedules and responsibilities. This dependence can also lead to feelings of guilt and frustration for the young individuals, as they recognise the impact their needs have on their parents.

"I was with my mom [on the train] going to London … [If I was by myself, I would feel] terrified, I would be very, very terrified and very nervous of how I'm going to get home."

(Mia, Behavioural/Emotional/Developmental Disability and Physical Disability, age 16)

Moreover, this reliance on parents often limits the spontaneity and freedom that young people crave. They must plan their activities around their parents' availability, which can be restrictive and isolating. The lack of affordable and accessible transport options further exacerbates this issue, making it difficult for young disabled people to envision a future where they can be independent and self-sufficient.

Not only does unreliable transport cause young disabled people to feel stripped of their independence, but the lack of accessible and reliable transport options often leads to cancelled plans and missed opportunities to connect with friends and family. This adds another layer of social isolation and frustration for individuals who already face numerous challenges in their daily lives.

Navigating social hurdles: The true cost of limited transport accessibility

The impact of transport accessibility on social connections and wellbeing is profound. **27%** of respondents recognise the benefits of public transport in facilitating social interactions. Despite

this, over half **(55%)** of young disabled people somewhat or strongly agree that it is difficult to get to and from social events. This difficulty is even more pronounced among those with both mental and physical disabilities **(65%),** compared to those with only mental disabilities **(56%)** and those with only physical disabilities **(47%)**.

Moreover, **42%** of young disabled people indicated that they benefit from public transport to travel to school, college, or university—places where social connections are commonly made for this age group. However, **39%** somewhat or strongly agree that it's challenging to get to and from their college or university using public transport. For those who rely on cars, the challenges are compounded, particularly when attending events where alcohol is involved, as they must drive home earlier **(18%),** making it difficult to fully participate in social activities.

One participant highlighted this when he said:

> *"But [at] our age, a lot of what people do is…going out and drinking and doing all these sorts of things. I'm unable to do that because I always have to drive everywhere, so everyone else might be going out and I'll say, 'oh, I can't go because I can't drink because I can't get home if I drink'. I'm fortunate in that my car has allowed me the independence to be able to get out, but it still doesn't really mean I can do lots of things with my peers."*
>
> *(Marco, Physical Disability, age 18)*

Additionally, participants often mentioned that the high costs and unreliability of transport make it difficult for them to connect with friends and family, which in turn leads to social isolation. Younger participants, in particular, found it challenging to maintain social connections due to limited transport options and the financial burden of transportation. One young person from the focus groups highlighted the financial constraints faced by low-income households when she said:

> *"I'm from a very low-income household, and it affects my ability to access buses sometimes. I can't really afford that. Sometimes I can't afford taxis, and I can't really go out of Cambridge because the trains are quite expensive. So, it just means it affects how much I can go places."*

(Grace, Physical Disability, age 18)

These financial constraints were echoed by another participant:

"It's quite expensive for young people considering. Even in London, even though for London they get…half price train fares, but if they're going to go further afield, unless you've got a [discount card], then you don't get the discounts, you pay quite a high price to travel."

(Leo, Behavioural/Emotional/Developmental Disability, age 15)

The survey results further underscore the financial constraints young people face. When asked what would make transport more accessible and easier to use, a quarter **(25%)** suggested offering discounts on taxi/ride-hailing services, **23%** recommended reducing the cost of travel for disabled individuals through subsidies or discounts, and a further **15%** proposed subsidizing driving lessons. These changes would make travel more affordable for young disabled people, potentially making it easier for them to get where they need to go and establish social connections.

The emotional impact of limited social interactions is significant. Social connections play a crucial role in mental health, and being unable to connect with others due to transportation barriers can lead to feelings of isolation and frustration. One young person shared:

"It does take a toll on your mental health when you live in areas like that, and it just is so expensive to travel to get to other places, to see people and such. Like I wanted to go see my cousin who wanted to go to a theme park. We couldn't do it because it was just too expensive, and he lives all the way over in Essex. I mean, it's not far, but for a train to catch, a train to get there, it's extortionate."

(Leah, Behavioural/Emotional/Developmental Disability, age 18)

This highlights the profound impact that transport accessibility can have on the social connections and mental wellbeing of young disabled people.

In conclusion, the evidence demonstrates that transport accessibility profoundly shapes the lives of young disabled people, with far-reaching implications for their independence and social wellbeing. The data reveals concerning statistics: **55%** of young disabled people struggle to access social events, whilst **39%** face difficulties reaching educational institutions via public transport. Financial barriers compound these challenges, particularly for those from low-income households, with many young people advocating for targeted subsidies and discounts. The heavy reliance on parental support, especially amongst those aged 15-16, highlights a critical gap in transport transition planning. These findings underscore the urgent need for policymakers and transport providers to develop more inclusive, affordable, and reliable transport solutions that enable young disabled people to maintain their independence, preserve vital social connections, and protect their mental health.

case study

This case study explores the daily bus travel of a 22-year-old woman called Ayesha. She relies on Google Maps for navigation, struggles with time management and anxiety on crowded buses, and faces physical challenges standing without support.

Background

Age: 22
Occupation: Personal care assistant
Residence: Newport, Wales
Conditions: Dyspraxia and anxiety

Daily Travel Routine

Ayesha travels by bus daily to visit and care for her grandparents, who live not far from town. She knows the route well and typically uses Google Maps for convenience but struggles with time management and crowded buses.

Key Observations

Relies on predictability

Knows the route well and finds the nearby bus stop comforting.

Struggles with time management, often missing the bus.

Worries about bus drivers setting off unexpectedly before she sits down, crowded buses, and balancing while standing.

Physical challenges

Dyspraxia affects her movement and coordination, making standing on crowded buses difficult.

Becomes anxious when routes change unexpectedly (e.g., closed footpaths).

Prefers disabled seats but finds the limited number isolating, especially when traveling with someone.

Comfort and isolation

Crossing roads without crosswalks and standing on busy buses increases anxiety.

Does not feel comfortable asking for a seat if occupied, leading to increased stress.

Feels isolated with single disabled seats and lacks social interaction during travel.

*A pseudonym has been used to protect the participant's identity.

Feedback and Improvement Areas

Positive Aspects

Google Maps is extremely helpful for planning her daily routes, providing real-time updates and ensuring she knows the exact path to take.

The proximity of the bus stop to her home is reassuring and reduces anxiety.

Finds the tap-to-pay system very convenient for bus fare as it simplifies the process.

Areas for Improvement

Increasing the number of disabled seats and spreading them throughout the bus would be beneficial.

Better support for planning unfamiliar routes, including apps or services that offer detailed guidance, especially for journeys involving multiple changes.

Safer road crossings near bus stops would significantly reduce stress.

Role of Technology

While useful for everyday travel and providing real-time updates, Google Maps can be challenging for more complex journeys that require multiple buses or changes, necessitating better route planning tools.

Although she hasn't used any disability-specific apps, she believes they would be helpful in providing tailored support and information for travelers with disabilities.

Technology that offers live assistance or virtual support during travel could be invaluable.

Future Aspirations

Hopes for increased societal awareness and understanding of hidden disabilities.

Desires better accessibility features on buses and more empathetic public attitudes.

Wishes for more comprehensive support, including additional financial support, for people with disabilities in public transport.

Recommendations for Improving Accessible Transport

Seating Distribution: Increase the number of disabled seats and spread them throughout the bus.

Route Planning Support: Provide apps or services to help with planning complex routes and navigating multiple bus changes.

Road Safety Enhancements: Implement safer road crossings near bus stops, especially in high-traffic areas.

Empathy Training: Train bus drivers and transport staff to be more empathetic and understanding of hidden disabilities.

*A pseudonym has been used to protect the participant's identity.

Recommendations

Identified by Young Disabled People

We have organised these recommendations thematically, focusing on the key areas identified by young disabled people themselves: safety and security, accessibility and infrastructure, financial accessibility, and staff training.

Importantly, these recommendations recognise that responsibility for improving transport accessibility and inclusivity extends across a spectrum of stakeholders. The UK's public transport landscape presents a complex stakeholder ecosystem that encompasses various tiers of governance, including the UK government, devolved administrations and their respective agencies, as well as regional and local authorities. Additionally, it involves both public and private transport operators, along with various industry groups and their representative bodies. This diverse array of stakeholders reflects the multifaceted nature of transport modes across the UK, each with its own interests and responsibilities. Success will require coordinated effort and commitment from all these stakeholders.

To genuinely meet the needs of young disabled people, accessibility and inclusivity policies should be informed by their lived experiences via direct engagement with disabled people and their representative groups, such as Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs). That way, policymakers can better understand the challenges faced by disabled people in accessing and using public transport services. As well as the opportunity to provide practical insight into the barriers faced, these approaches also foster a sense of ownership and trust amongst those who are and will be users of services.

A fundamental point to make in designing accessible and inclusive transport policy is to ensure the inclusion of all disabled people. As our research illustrates, young disabled people are not a homogenous group. Young disabled people have a diverse range of impairments conditions, and identities that affect their experiences and needs, which must be considered to create and implement effective inclusive transport policies. Taking an inclusive approach, should not just improve access for disabled people, it should also bring improvements for the wider transport user community too.

These recommendations, developed from the views and opinions of young disabled people, could help pave the way towards a transport system that enables young disabled people to travel independently, safely, and with dignity - not as an aspiration, but as a fundamental right.

Safety and Security

Our research reveals deeply concerning patterns around safety and security, particularly for young disabled women, of whom 69% feel unsafe or uncomfortable using public transport compared to **56%** of men. These challenges are amplified for those with multiple marginalised identities, including LGBTQ+ individuals and those from ethnic minority backgrounds. The issue extends beyond general transport anxiety to specific concerns about personal safety, harassment, and lack of support in vulnerable situations.[9]

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[9] Q21. Overall, what would help make transport more accessible and easier for you to use? (Open text box)

"More security." (Survey Respondents)

"More staff around to help." (Survey Respondents)

- Expand and upgrade existing CCTV coverage at transport hubs and on vehicles, ensuring comprehensive monitoring of all key areas
- Establish and enforce minimum staffing levels during evening hours
- Install well-lit safe waiting areas with emergency help points at all major stations and transport hubs
- Increase the presence of British Transport Police and transport staff generally
- Develop and implement safety awareness campaigns highlighting young disabled people's experiences, by working with young disabled people
- Provide support and information to young disabled people on how they can be safe whilst traveling and advocate for safety and security improvements

Accessibility and Infrastructure

The research shows that only **51%** of young disabled people find using public transport relatively easy, with broken or unreliable equipment creating significant barriers. The impact of infrastructure failures is severe, often resulting in lengthy detours, missed appointments, or cancelled journeys. The current reactive approach to maintenance and repairs is particularly problematic, with young disabled people unable to rely on essential equipment being available when needed. This led to many survey respondents highlight the need for better accessibility and improved infrastructure,[10]

"More accessible transport." (Survey Respondents)

"More toilets available, more tactile paving, more well-lit and safe areas to wait." (Survey Respondents)

"Making buses arrive on time." (Survey Respondents)

- Implement a comprehensive lift and accessibility equipment management system to include:
  - Real-time monitoring and reporting systems
  - Mandatory repair response times
  - Regular preventative maintenance work
  - Clear accountability measures for failures
- Establish rapid response maintenance teams for critical accessibility infrastructure

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[10] Q21. Overall, what would help make transport more accessible and easier for you to use? (Open text box)

Financial Accessibility

Our findings highlight a concerning 'disability premium' in transport costs, with **31%** of young disabled people reducing their journeys due to financial constraints. Furthermore, **53%** are forced to use less accessible transport options because they cannot afford suitable alternatives. This creates a damaging cycle where financial barriers compound accessibility challenges, particularly affecting those in rural areas or those needing to make essential journeys for education, employment, or healthcare. According to survey respondents, improving financial access to transport would improve accessibility and the ease of travel by doing the following, [11]

"Lowering costs." (Survey Respondent)

"Cheaper prices and subsidies." (Survey Respondent)

*"Cheaper tickets and more carriages to help with overcrowding and gives people more space."
(Survey Respondent)*

- Review with a view to expanding existing concessionary fare schemes
- Create targeted support for rural transport users
- Develop flexible payment schemes for young disabled people
- Create hardship funds for essential journeys for young disabled people facing transport emergencies or financial barriers to essential journeys
- Implement fare capping for accessible routes where appropriate

Staff Training and Support

Two in five respondents identified staff awareness and support as crucial factors in transport accessibility. The research reveals significant inconsistencies in staff understanding of disability issues, particularly around hidden disabilities and young people's specific needs. Current training approaches often fail to address the intersectional nature of barriers faced by young disabled people, while smaller transport operators struggle to access high-quality training programmes. Specifically, survey respondents mentioned the following as what would make transport more accessible and easier to use, [12]

"More helpfully handed staff are needed on public transport." (Survey Respondent)

"Friendly, well-trained staff." (Survey Respondent)

"More staff available, more easy access toilets, quieter routes, hydration stations, less litter, more clean areas." (Survey Respondent)

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[11] Q21. Overall, what would help make transport more accessible and easier for you to use? (Open text box)
[12] Q21. Overall, what would help make transport more accessible and easier for you to use? (Open text box)

- Develop high-quality disability awareness training covering:
  - Intersectionality
  - Young people's specific needs
  - Hidden disabilities
  - Communication preferences
  - Crisis management
- Develop training materials, co-produced with young disabled people

Conclusion

The publication of this report takes an important step toward addressing significant gaps in our understanding of young disabled people's transport experiences. To date, the intersection of youth, disability, and transport has been largely overlooked. To build on this work, researchers and policymakers should consider undertaking further research about how intersecting identities —such as race, gender, disability, and socioeconomic status—shape transport experiences. Such research will enhance understanding, guide the development of inclusive policies, and support the creation of practical solutions that address the transport needs of young disabled people.

This comprehensive research has revealed the profound impact that transport accessibility has on the lives of young disabled people across the UK.

The findings paint a picture of a transport system that, despite legal requirements and existing improvements, does not meet the priorities of young disabled people including safety, affordability and reliability needed for independent living and full social participation. There is a pathway to meaningful transformation which requires strong collaboration and engagement with young disabled people and DPOs.

The evidence highlights that **55%** of young disabled people struggle to access social events due to transport barriers, while **49%** experience anxiety when planning journeys. These challenges are further amplified for those facing multiple forms of marginalisation, with young disabled women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and those from ethnic minority backgrounds facing additional barriers and safety concerns.

The finding that **26%** of young disabled people must rely on others for transport management represents a significant barrier to their personal development and autonomy. Comprehensive transport design would enable young disabled people to travel with the same independence, freedom of movement and spontaneity as their nondisabled peers.

The voices of young disabled people are clear, they do not want to, and cannot rely on expensive private alternatives to public transport, but often have no choice when transport options are inaccessible. This is illustrated by the finding that **31%** of young disabled people reduce their travel due to cost. This places an additional burden on group already facing higher living costs due to their disabilities. Young disabled people requested strategic subsidies and inclusive transport pricing to fully access all transport options.

Ultimately, fully accessible transport has the potential to positively support young disabled people's mental and physical health which would have long reaching impacts on social connections, education and employment. As we look to the future, the implementation of these recommendations should be considered with care. With proper investment, commitment, and collaboration across sectors, we can create a transport system that connects and empowers young disabled people across the UK.

Motability Foundation

We fund, support, research and innovate so that all disabled people can make the journeys they choose. We oversee the Motability Scheme and provide grants to help people use it, providing access to transport to hundreds of thousands of people a year. We award grants to charities and organisations who provide different types of transport, or work towards making transport accessible. We also carry out ongoing research, in partnership with disabled people and key stakeholders in the industry, to inspire innovations that continue to champion accessible transport for all.

Savanta:

Savanta is a fast-growing data, market research and advisory company. We inform and inspire our clients through powerful data, empowering technology and high-impact consulting, all designed to help our clients make better decisions and achieve faster progress.