

# Everyday experiences of transport and social exclusion

The legacies of COVID-19 and the increase to the  
cost-of-living in the North of England in 2024/25

February 2025



## About Transport for the North

Transport for the North is a statutory sub-national transport body, working with local transport authorities and others across the North of England. We advise central government on the strategic ambitions and priorities for the region's transport system.

Our vision is that by 2050 the North of England will be a thriving, socially inclusive region. Our communities, businesses and places will benefit from sustainable economic growth, improved health and wellbeing, with access to opportunities for all. This is to be achieved through a transformed zero emission, integrated, safe and sustainable transport system, that will enhance connectivity, resilience, and journey times for all users.

For more information, visit: [www.transportfornorth.com](http://www.transportfornorth.com)

## Report authors and acknowledgments

Tom Mace, Social Researcher

Dr Tom Jarvis, Principal Social Researcher

The authors would like to thank the Plus Four Market Research Ltd and FlexMR teams for conducting the fieldwork used in this research.

## Sharing this report



This publication is licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0 except where otherwise stated. Where we have identified any third-party copyright information you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

To view this licence, visit: [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3/](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3/)

This report was published in February 2025. Our preferred citation is:

Transport for the North (2025) Everyday experiences of transport and social exclusion. The legacies of COVID-19 and the increase to the cost-of-living in the North of England in 2024/25. Available at: [www.transportfornorth.com/social-inclusion](http://www.transportfornorth.com/social-inclusion)

For more information relating to this publication, email: [research@transportfornorth.com](mailto:research@transportfornorth.com)

# Contents

<b>Summary .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Research approach.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Phase 1: Evidence review .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Phase 2: Primary research .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Phase 3: Data analysis and consolidation .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Evidence review .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Behaviour change in response to disruption .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Disabilities and long-term health conditions .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Low-paid and insecure work .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Caring and childcare responsibilities.....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Gender, age, and other demographic markers .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Results.....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Summary of key findings .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Interviewing high-risk TRSE groups .....</b>	<b>18</b>
Pandemic-related travel behaviours and lasting legacies.....	18
The cost-of-living and other factors influencing current travel behaviours .....	24
<b>Focus groups with Northern Transport Voices .....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Survey results .....</b>	<b>27</b>
COVID-19, changes to travel, and current travel behaviours.....	27
Transport, affordability, and the cost-of-living .....	31
<b>Discussion and conclusions .....</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>References .....</b>	<b>37</b>

# Summary

Since 2019, Transport for the North have been investigating transport-related social exclusion across England. To date, we have established that 11.2 million people across England are experiencing social exclusion due to inaccessible, unreliable, and poorly performing transport systems.

Our mission to understand social exclusion from transport is being met through an extensive primary research and analysis programme. The purpose of our research is to empower our local authority partners to tackle the issue through inclusive transport planning and strategic investment, targeted to the areas and communities most in need.

In our latest research, we examine the legacies of the COVID-19 pandemic and the sharp increases to the cost-of-living seen in 2022 and 2023 on the travel behaviours of a large sample of residents of the North. This provides an updated contextual understanding to our evidence base on transport-related social exclusion (TRSE).

Between COVID-19 and the cost-of-living, travel behaviours underwent significant change. However, from this research, 59.7% say the pandemic has had a minimal-to-no influence or lasting legacy on 2024/25 travel behaviours. In contrast, the rises to the cost-of-living appear to be having a stronger lasting impact amongst the people we engaged with.

## Other key learnings include:

- **Affordability, accessibility, and reliability** are key influences on travel behaviours. For some, these constraints have worsened due to either the pandemic or the cost-of-living.
- The £2 bus fare scheme is viewed **favourably**. It has been responsible for modal shift for some, moving away from private vehicles to local buses for social and recreational journey purposes.
- Working from home is one of the biggest continued pandemic-related behaviour in 2024/25. **32.5%** work remotely and over **91%** are satisfied in doing so. **1-2 days** a week is the most common remote working arrangement.
- **51.6%** believe the increases to the cost-of-living has had a negative impact on local transport. Conversely, **35.2%** say COVID-19 negatively impacted local public transport.
- **31.3%** struggle to afford essentials due to transport costs. **27.7%** of private transport users spend between £40 and £59. **41.0%** of public transport users spend less than £20 a week on transport costs.

# Introduction

This report explores the lived experiences of people who live in the North of England and how their travel behaviours and perceptions may have changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and increases to the costs-of-living. This report forms part of Transport for the North's (TfN) ongoing work to understand and address the urgent social challenges caused by transport issues in our region.

The COVID-19 pandemic saw travel disrupted in a way that nobody has ever experienced before. A dramatic halt on virtually all journeys across much of the population followed as a result of government public health interventions. However, the pandemic's lasting impact on society is less visible and more difficult to quantify. By carrying out this research, we aim to better understand post-pandemic travel-behaviours across different sections of society. These insights can then be used to inform contemporary policymaking decisions that confront contemporary issues for people across the North.

Transport operators and users were impacted by the pandemic in very different ways. For example, operators were challenged with revenue loss, staffing issues, and navigating unfamiliar operational challenges such as enhanced safety protocols. For service users, there were health worries, stringent travel restrictions, and a shift in travel priorities and needs. For this research report, our focus is transport users, looking to understand what their travel behaviours are in 2024/25, and whether the pandemic changed them or not.

Research on travel behaviours has demonstrated a clear difference between behaviours and patterns exercised pre-, during, and post-pandemic. For example, local bus travel is continuing its trend of long-term decline. However, bus journeys per person have increased over the last two years but have still not recovered to their pre-pandemic levels for any region other than London.<sup>1</sup>

The impact of declining public transport and poorer connectivity is stark. In our previous publication, [Transport and social exclusion in the North in 2023/24](#), we demonstrated how declining and fragmented local bus services are contributing to transport-related social exclusion (TRSE) in local communities across the North of England.<sup>2</sup> This research compliments our previous work by examining two major events; the pandemic and the period of high inflation that followed, to understand their ongoing impact and legacy.

The original scope of this research project was to be an exploration solely into the enduring legacies of the COVID-19 pandemic. As discussed in later sections, we quickly found during the early stages of our primary research phase that the pandemic is having a smaller impact than expected. As such, the scope was widened to include influences more generally. The increases to the cost-of-living became the apparent and more dominate influence.

To understand these changes in travel behaviours, we embarked on a mixed-methods research project. We conducted a set of interviews with population



groups that face a higher-than-average risk of TRSE, conducted focus groups, and deployed a survey amongst a broader sample of people in the North.

## **Explainer: Key terms and definitions used in this report**

### **Transport-related social exclusion (TRSE)**

The inability to meaningfully and productively participate in society due to transport issues.

### **COVID-19 and the pandemic**

Refers to the COVID-19 virus which was declared a 'public health emergency of international concern' on the 30<sup>th</sup> of January 2020 by the World Health Organisation. The global pandemic threat was officially downgraded on the 5<sup>th</sup> of May 2023.<sup>3</sup>

### **Pre-pandemic**

The period prior to the pandemic and associated public health restrictions.

### **Post-pandemic**

A fluid term for a period where there were no public health restrictions in place to travel and a sense of normality resumed in day-to-day life.

### **Cost-of-living**

Used in parallel with 'increases to the costs-of-living' when discussing 41-year high levels of inflation in the UK between 2021 and 2022. The term is used to discuss current times as increases are still being felt in 2024/25.

### **Travel behaviours**

Refers to any behaviours that are engaged with when travelling. This term has been used to refer to mode selection, travel purposes, frequency, and costs amongst other travel-related areas.

### **Lasting legacies**

A term which refers to the lasting impacts of a particular event, in this case the pandemic and cost-of-living. The term is used interchangeably with influence and sometimes impact.

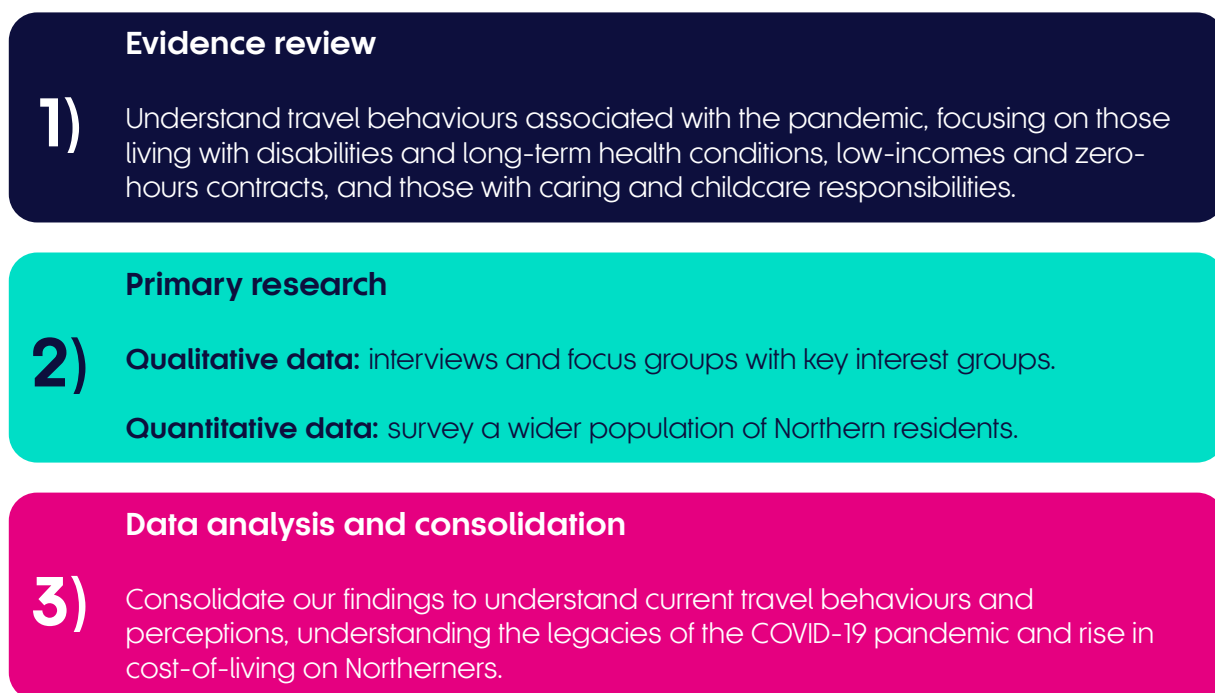
### **High-risk TRSE groups**

Those living with disabilities and long-term health conditions, those with caring responsibilities including childcare, and those in low paid or insecure work are consistently found to be amongst some of the most likely groups to experience TRSE.

# Research approach

As travel disruptors go, the pandemic was probably the biggest and most extensive we have seen since the second world war. For some, the cost-of-living has also been a travel disruptor. To better understand travel behaviours in 2024/25 we embarked on a mixed-methods research project as set out in figure 3.

**Figure 3: Research approach and design**



## Phase 1: Evidence review

As with any of our research projects, we looked at other research before carrying out our own. With this literature review we began looking at evidence that focused on travel behaviours in response to previous disruptions such as previous public health concerns or infrastructure failure. Then, studies looking into travel behaviours pre-, during, and post-pandemic among the three high-risk TRSE populations were explored. We also briefly looked at research with other often marginalised communities and groups.

In addition to COVID-19, the focus of the project is the increase to the cost-of-living. At the point of conducting our evidence review, our research scope was purely focusing on the pandemic. As such, any literature or evidence that has been done into the cost-of-living space has not been directly consulted for this project.

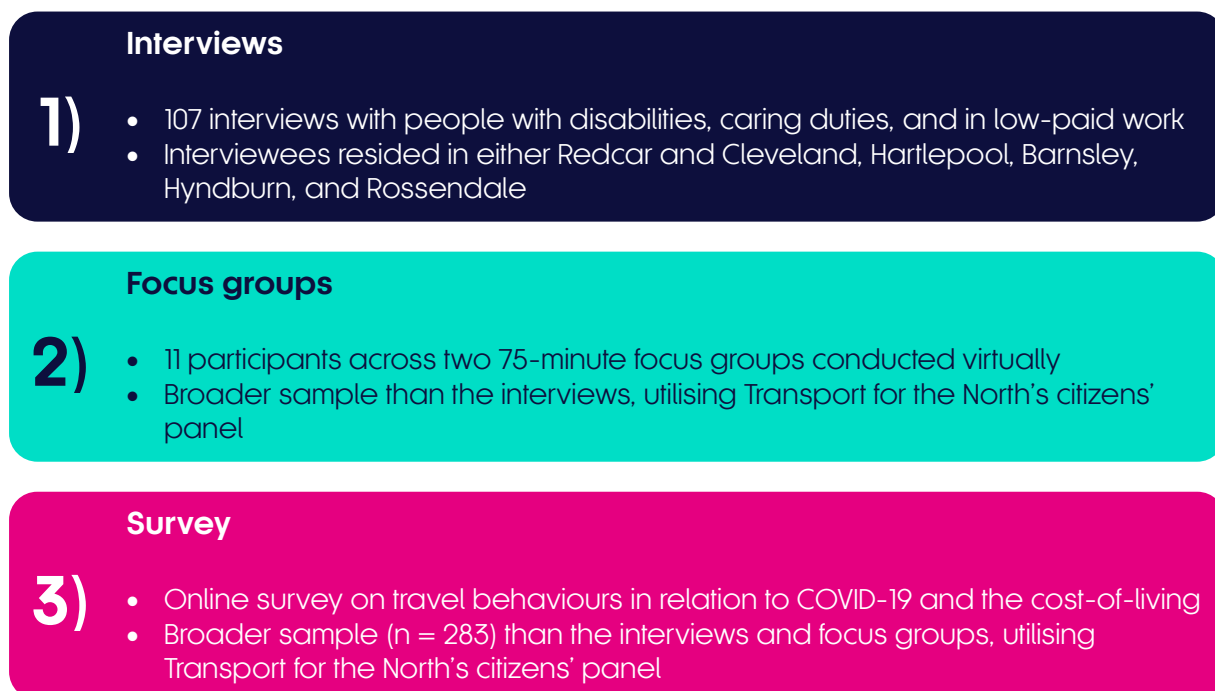
However, previous research conducted by TfN in 2023 looked exclusively at the cost-of-living, in relation to high-risk TRSE groups amongst some Northern Transport Voices members. Thus, that report and the learnings we gathered can be seen as precursor to this project.

As well as giving us a sense of what other research has found in this area, our evidence review enabled us to develop interview and focus group discussion guides as well as inform the questions we used in our survey.

## Phase 2: Primary research

Our primary research was achieved through both qualitative and quantitative methods. The primary research approach is summarised in figure 4.

**Figure 4: Primary research approach**



The first stage of our primary research phase was a series of interviews with key interest groups. For this, we commissioned 107 interviews to be carried out with the three high-risk TRSE groups which are those with disabilities and long-term health conditions, those with caring responsibilities, and those in low-paid jobs. We devised specific quotas for the interviewee sample resulting in the sample presented in table 1. However, one key requirement for interviewees was that they must reside in one of the following areas: Redcar and Cleveland, Hartlepool, Barnsley, Hyndburn, and Rossendale.

These areas represent are some of the most affected local authority districts in the North from TRSE (figure 5). By speaking to high-risk groups who also live in high-risk areas, we hoped to establish a clear understanding of the travel behaviours that were developed due to the pandemic and see if they are still performed in 2024/25.

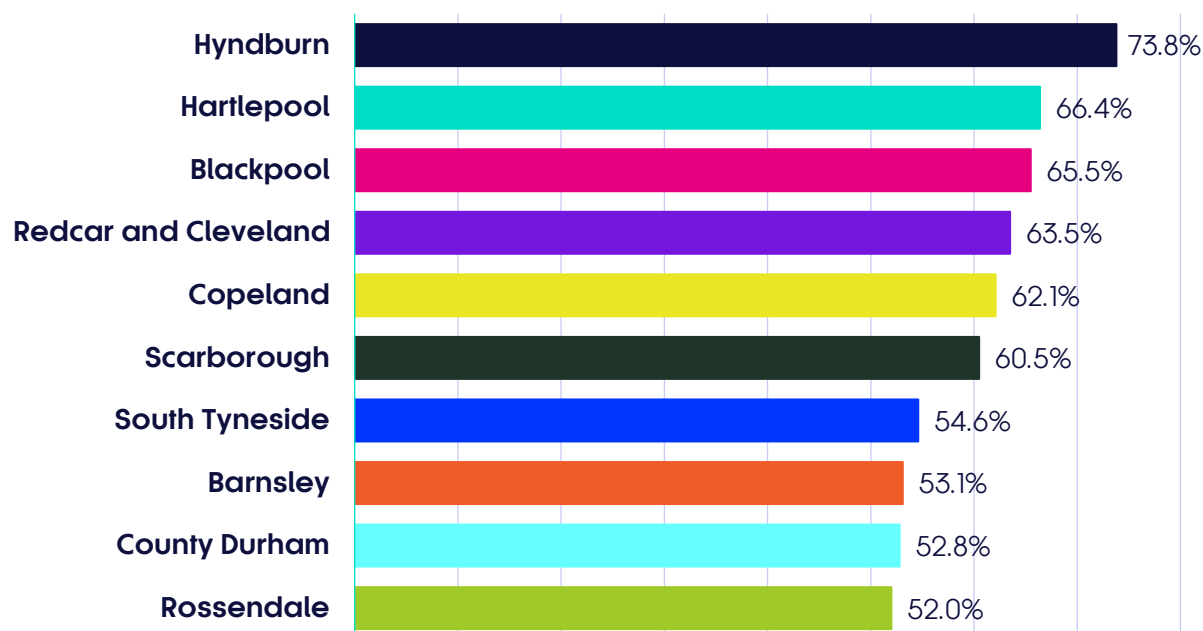


**Table 1: Interview sample composition**

Sample characteristics		Barnsley	Hyndburn and Rossendale	Redcar and Cleveland, Hartlepool	Total
Disability		15.0%	11.2%	9.3%	35.5%
Caring responsibilities		14.0%	12.1%	16.8%	43.0%
Low paid work		27.1%	20.6%	18.7%	66.4%
Gender	Male	18.7%	15.9%	16.8%	51.4%
	Female	15.0%	16.8%	16.8%	48.6%
Age	18 – 29	5.6%	6.5%	10.3%	22.4%
	30 – 49	9.3%	9.3%	12.1%	30.8%
	50 – 64	11.2%	11.2%	7.5%	29.9%
	65+	7.5%	5.6%	3.7%	16.8%
Ethnicity	White	31.8%	22.4%	31.8%	86.0%
	People of colour	1.9%	10.3%	1.9%	14.0%

n = 107. Having a disability in this sample related to people who described their condition as having a significant impact on their daily lives. Being in low paid work was categorised as earning ≤ £24,000 annually.

**Figure 5: Local authority districts in the North of England where over half the population is at a high-risk of TRSE**



Transport for the North, 2022

As mentioned previously, we intended that this research project focused solely on the legacies of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, after assessing an initial group of interviews, it appeared to be a relatively minor concern for the majority of our interviewees in 2024/25.

It became apparent that interviewees were more concerned with the cost-of-living when discussing travel behaviours, along with their perceptions on transport operators and service levels. Instead of a fixed exploration into COVID-19 pandemic legacies, we decided to investigate both the pandemic and the increases in the cost-of-living.

In addition to interviews, we ran two 75-minute focus groups with a total of 11 participants across both sessions. We decided no real sample requirements were needed for the focus groups other than to be a Northern resident (table 2).

**Table 2: Focus group sample composition**

Sample characteristics		Session one	Session two
Gender	Male	50.0%	42.9%
	Female	50.0%	57.1%
Age	30 – 44	25.0%	28.6%
	45 – 59	50.0%	28.6%
	60 – 64	-	28.6%
	65+	25.0%	14.3%
Ethnicity	White / White British	50.0%	71.4%
	Asian / Asian British	25.0%	14.3%
	Mixed / Multiple ethnic groups	25.0%	14.3%
Household income	£15,000 – £29,999	-	42.9%
	£30,000 – £44,999	50.0%	14.3%
	£45,000 – £59,999	50.0%	28.6%
	£75,000 – £89,999	-	14.3%
Employment status	Employed full time	50.0%	71.4%
	Employed part time	-	14.3%
	Retired	50.0%	14.3%
Region	North East	50.0%	14.3%
	Yorkshire and the Humber	50.0%	28.6%
	North West	-	57.1%

Total n = 11; session 1 n = 4; session 2 n = 7

Finally, to support the qualitative insights gathered from interviews and focus groups, we deployed a quantitative-based online survey which was completed by 283 Northern residents. The survey had the same aims as the focus groups and interviews but had the broadest sample out of the three methodologies utilised, aiming to bring a degree of representativeness to this research (table 3).

The survey and focus groups were carried out using TfN's Northern Transport Voices programme. The programme is an online community, comprising more than 1,300 Northerners who take part in various discussions and research activities for TfN.

**Table 3: Survey sample composition**

Sample characteristics		Total
Gender	Male	38.9%
	Female	60.8%
Age	18 – 19	1.1%
	20 – 29	8.1%
	30 – 39	19.1%
	40 – 49	10.6%
	50 – 59	19.4%
	60 – 69	26.1%
	70 – 79	12.4%
	80+	3.2%
Ethnicity	White / White British	90.5%
	Asian / Asian British	4.2%
	Mixed / Multiple ethnic groups	1.8%
	Black / Black British	2.8%
	Other / prefer not to say	0.8%
Employed	Yes	54.4%
	No	45.6%
Region	North East	28.6%
	Yorkshire and the Humber	32.2%
	North West	39.2%
LGBTQ+	Yes	8.1%
	No	91.2%
	Prefer not to say	0.7%
Unpaid, informal carer	Yes	19.8%
	No	80.2%
Disabled	Yes	37.1%
	No	62.2%
Household income	< £10,000 - £24,999	33.0%
	£25,000 - £34,999	19.4%
	£35,000 - £49,999	20.1%
	≥ £50,000	20.8%
	Prefer not to say	6.7%

n = 283

### Phase 3: Data analysis and consolidation

Performing data analysis followed the primary research gathering phase. For the qualitative data, we performed an inductive thematic analysis through a process known as coding. This analysis was conducted using NVivo software. For the quantitative data, survey results were examined in excel.

#### Explainer: Northern Transport Voices

First set up in 2023, Northern Transport Voices (NTV) is a longitudinal research project run in-part by TfN. The programme is an online community made up of over 1,300 diverse Northerners.

The project aims to connect TfN with local people to gain their views and insights on a range of transport-related issues and subjects. We gather insights through a variety of research methodologies including surveys, interviews, focus groups, and online forums.

To date, the project has gathered views travel behaviours, TRSE, last-mile journeys, rail freight, EVs, mobility hubs, rail ticket office closures, and rail accessibility to name a few.

# Evidence review

We began this project by reviewing transport studies literature, focusing on travel behaviours in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, and in particular the behaviours of those from high-risk TRSE groups. This includes those on low-incomes and in insecure work, those with disabilities and long-term health conditions, and informal unpaid carers. We also considered how these three characteristics interact with other aspects of identity, reflecting the intersectional nature of TRSE.

This evidence review was primarily done to understand what current research has been done, its findings, and also for theme generation for our own research. Some of the themes we came across would go on to be incorporated into our discussion guides for both the interviews and focus groups.

As we discuss in later sections, the original scope of this research was solely to focus on the legacies of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, evidence of travel behaviour changes due to the cost-of-living were not considered this evidence review stage. However, a 2023 qualitative project by TfN looking into cost-of-living impacts on high-risk TRSE groups did conduct a review of this literature, and the findings of this are integrated into this report.

## Behaviour change in response to disruption

Disruptions to transport networks are a well-studied topic in transport studies literature. Events such as infrastructure damage, terrorism, natural disasters, and public health emergencies have all been shown to impact travel behaviour and leave lasting effects, thus providing valuable context for our research.

In response to travel disruptions, behaviours have been shown to sometimes shift towards 'avoidance' where people seek alternatives to avoid added burdens, like increased journey times or additional costs.<sup>4</sup> Our research explores issues like the avoidance phenomena and how shifts in travel behaviours as a response can vary based on demographic and socioeconomic factors.

When looking at research changes to travel behaviours due to disruption, we found that, pre-disruption behaviours do not always return, and when they do, it can be a lengthy process. For example, a study of a bridge collapse in Mississippi found that it took six weeks for traffic patterns to normalise, while public transport in Taipei took nearly a year to recover from a SARS outbreak.<sup>5, 6</sup> Understanding avoidance is critical for planners, operators, and local decisionmakers as it informs the demand and needs for local people – both for the short, medium and long term.

In the case of COVID-19, previous research on other disruptions, particularly around public health are useful to note and consider. However, the pandemic's unprecedented nature and extent limits its applicability to previous public health research on travel behaviours, requiring its own full analysis.

## Disabilities and long-term health conditions

Research on transport and social exclusion for people with disabilities and long-term health conditions often reveals significant barriers, including inaccessibility, safety concerns, and higher costs which may not face non-disabled people. Such findings pre-date the COVID-19 pandemic and the rises to the cost-of-living, therefore, updated evidence on travel behaviours is essential to understand how disabled individuals are traveling in 2024/25.

A meta-analysis conducted into travel behaviours during the pandemic found that people with disabilities were spending a significant amount of time indoors compared to others without disabilities. In one study, the average daily amount of time spent indoors for people with certain conditions was nearing 24 hours a day.<sup>7</sup>

Elsewhere, people with visual impairments and those who are neurodivergent, reported experiencing challenges with their spatial awareness when needing to socially distance from others when out in public or on public transport. This was seen to be making this community more at risk from catching COVID-19, or as in other cases, made them travel less.<sup>8</sup>

People with disabilities also reported receiving less help and assistance on public transport and for those who relied on community transport, such as demand responsive transport (DRT), they saw a decrease in availability in service.<sup>9</sup>

## Low-paid and insecure work

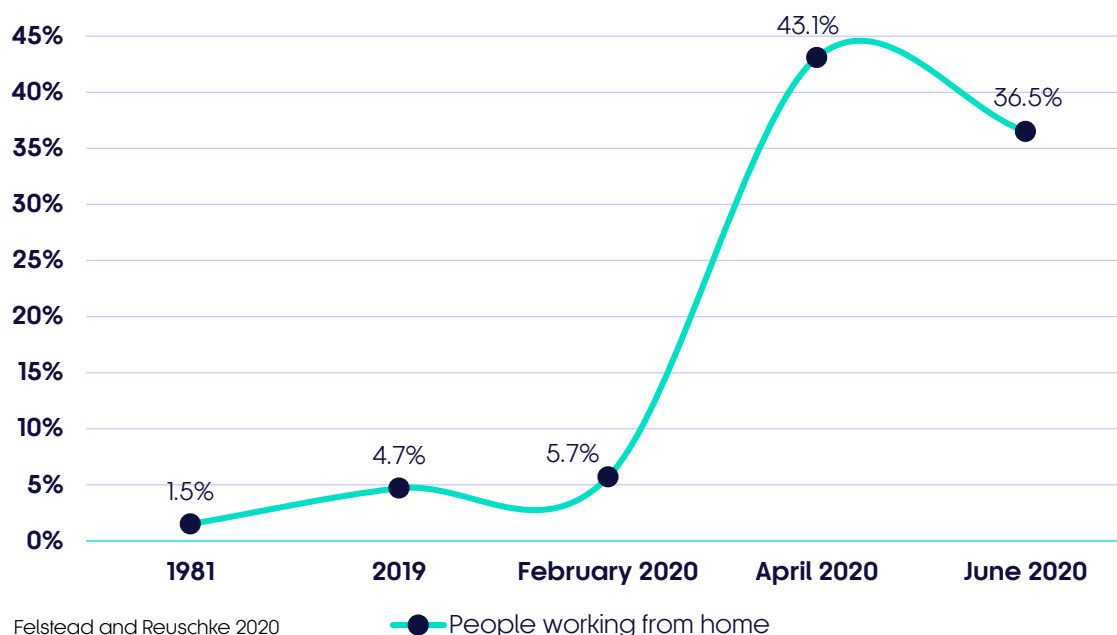
Prior to pandemic, working from home was uncommon. From 1981 to 2019, those reported working from home tripled from 1.5% to 4.7%, with 43.1% reporting that they worked exclusively at home in April 2020 (figure 1).<sup>10</sup> Despite the shift to working from home, whether exclusively or on a hybrid approach, it is higher earners who are more likely have the option and flexibility.

ONS research found 6% of lower income households worked from home between April to May 2022, compared to 12% of middle-wage earners, and 23% of those earning £40,000 or more.<sup>11</sup>

A similar pattern was found when looking at hybrid approaches to working, showing those on lower incomes are five times less likely to be able to work flexibly. Some have gone on to suggest that increases to working from home will increase earnings, primarily benefitting older, highly educated male workers.<sup>12</sup>



**Figure 1: % of UK population working from home prior to COVID-19 and at the start of the pandemic**



In terms of commuting, more recent data suggests there is a surge of people returning to the office. Transport for London noted that the average daily demand on the network is at around 85% of pre-pandemic levels, with cycling exceeding pre-COVID-19 demand by 140% as of October 2022.<sup>13, 14</sup>

Studies conducted during the pandemic found that some workers intended to travel by private vehicles as their primary mode of transport after COVID-19.<sup>15, 16</sup> However, the extent of this finding, as with other findings throughout the evidence review are likely to fall short due to time-period bias, i.e., when respondents were surveyed, public health concerns were greater in relation to public transport.

However, car dependency, particularly for work, is seen across several socioeconomic and demographic groups. With low-income groups, there is also evidence to suggest forced car ownership is the reality for some due to public transport not being a viable option to get to work. The nature of low paid work, often involves irregular shift patterns (e.g., night shifts), long hours, and can be located in out-of-town areas (e.g., industrial estates) which are geographically inaccessible by modes of public transport.<sup>17</sup>

Outside of work-related travel, data from Stockholm showed the largest decreases in public transport were linked to areas where the residents are on average, higher-earners.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, people who lived in more rural areas were the most likely to continue using public transport, followed closely by low-earners. Similar evidence was found amongst US communities that had higher populations of essential workers and marginalised groups such as ethnic minorities, all of which maintained higher levels of public transport usage.<sup>19</sup>

Public Health Scotland noted that a result of the pandemic is that those who are already socially excluded from the transport network, such as those with low-paid jobs and will continue to struggle to travel.<sup>20</sup> They argue that if public transport operators reduce their capacity due to less patronage as a result of the pandemic, this will reinforce exclusion in communities, adding financial difficulties to those on low-incomes who cannot travel via private modes.<sup>21</sup>

## **Caring and childcare responsibilities**

The nature of providing care shifted dramatically as a result of COVID-19, particularly for those caring for children. Research into the impacts of not travelling to work found homeworkers now had the ability to provide some additional childcare due to being at home whilst working.<sup>22</sup> This was seen to be a positive impact as was the fall in commuting times for some surveyed.

Despite this finding, other evidence suggests that working from home, particularly during lockdown measures, created more childcare and increased the amount of unpaid labour. This finding has been reproduced across further studies, with some citing as much as 56% of women and 34% of men having to take on additional childcare and housework whilst working from home, showing a clear gender imbalance.<sup>23</sup>

Elsewhere, analysis into the school run found that in comparison with other journey purposes, such as commuting to work, such trips have seen greater mode shifts. Walking to school in one study saw reductions from 38% prior to COVID-19 to 29% by October 2020.<sup>24</sup> However, the analysis was segmented by looking at parents and child caregivers who had increased their home working by at least 50%.

Amongst this sub-sample, there appeared to be a minimal reduction in school run car journeys from 23% to 21% along with a small drop in dedicated walking journeys from 31% to 27%. There was however an overall increase in multi-modal mobility from 35% to 44% implying greater choice and or flexibility in how some people can take children to school depending on the extent they are able to work from home.

In contrast to parent caregivers, those who provide care and assistance, either formally or informally are consistently identified as being vulnerable to TRSE. For this evidence review, there was an apparent lack of research on this community. However, some research had found mental health amongst carers deteriorated during COVID-19, with 78% experiencing fatigue and exhaustion and a third unable to manage the care they needed to administer.<sup>25</sup>

## **Gender, age, and other demographic markers**

Our primary research did not directly seek out in the sampling activities to engage with respondents and participants based purely on their gender, age, ethnicity, or sexual identity. Despite this, to properly understand social exclusion it is worthwhile to consider travel behaviour evidence of other sociodemographic profiles which are summarised in figure 2.

**Figure 2: Summary of travel behaviour research on other demographic markers**

### Gender

Data revealed a slight increased likelihood in women working from home at the start of the pandemic, compared to men.<sup>26</sup>

For overall mobility, some studies found that because of the pandemic, women are now taking longer trips. For mode choice, women were found in some cases to be walking more along with private car use, declining their public transport use.<sup>27, 28, 29</sup>

Leisure, shopping, and work-related travel were observed to have reduced the most for women during the pandemic, some exploring the idea of women being more compliant with public health measures and restricting their movement.<sup>30</sup>

Elsewhere, studies suggested the travel behaviours of women were increasing their vulnerability of infection from the virus due to the types of work women engage in, and unequal domestic duties that could require increased mobility.<sup>31, 32</sup>

### Ethnicity

Economic disadvantage for non-white communities meant that during the pandemic, many non-white communities remained in low paid and insecure work that they were unable to do from home.<sup>36</sup>

It is also well understood that ethnic minorities rely much more on public transport to get around than white communities, therefore were more likely to travel and work during the pandemic and be at higher risk of infection.<sup>37</sup>

### Age

The travel behaviours of older adults shows that mobility decreased, as it did for all ages, but for some has remained lower than before the pandemic.<sup>33</sup>

Previous TfN research looking into the cost-of-living and travel behaviours found that amongst some older adults, the restrictions from COVID-19 lockdown measures have remained and become a new way of life with less travel.<sup>34</sup>

However, other studies examining smartphone tracked activity in the UK found younger adults engaged in more physical activity prior to COVID-19 lockdowns but the least after lockdown restrictions eased, with those aged over 65 becoming active during lockdowns and increasing their activity further as restrictions eased.<sup>35</sup>

### Sexual orientation

The lockdown placed many younger LGBTQ+ people in extended periods of unsafety due to many younger LGBTQ+ people returning to their familial home where they might not have been out to their family or subjected to prejudice and even violence.<sup>38, 39</sup>

Qualitative data gathered during lockdown found that marginalised gender and sexual identities were likely to have suffered more than their heterosexual counterparts due to LGBTQ+ people reporting lower levels of wellbeing than the general population, and during lockdown almost four in five LGBTQ+ people said their mental health had been negatively impacted.<sup>40, 41, 42</sup>

# Results

A total of 401 people participated in our research activities. The evidence we gathered came from communities living across the North of England including the key groups who are the most at risk from experiencing TRSE. This section highlights the insights we gathered, starting with a summary of key findings.

## Summary of key findings

- Amongst the interviewed high-risk TRSE groups, a **minimal legacy** of the COVID-19 pandemic was found all groups. The cost-of-living appears to be more influential.
- Whilst the influence is extremely small, those with disabilities and long-term health conditions had the **largest overall change in travel behaviours** due to the pandemic. For some, such travel behaviours have remained in place in 2024/25.
- The **£2 bus fare scheme** was rated **positively** in the focus groups. In some cases, the reduced fares have been responsible for **modal shift** amongst leisure and recreational journeys.
- In our survey, we gathered the insights of 283 Northerners. Over **59%** felt the pandemic has had **no influence** on any aspect on the way they travel in 2024/25.
- **32%** of respondents **work from home** and over **91%** are satisfied with their remote working patterns. The most common remote working pattern is **1 to 2 days** a week.
- The biggest associated benefit to working from home is **saving on transport costs** incurred when commuting according to over **75%**. This is closely followed by **67.4%** saying it is **saving time on commuting**.
- During the pandemic, **bus travel** was seen to be the most unsafe mode of travel according to **66.4%**. This is supported by much of the qualitative evidence gathered during the interviews and focus groups.
- **35.2%** felt that the pandemic **negatively affected local public transport**. In terms of the increased cost-of-living, **51.6%** felt local public transport had been negatively affected as a result.
- Over **61%** felt that public transport is **affordable** with **41%** spending **less than £20** a week travelling on such modes. **19.1%** believe seeing **friends and family is the most unaffordable** journey type.

## Interviewing high-risk TRSE groups

Our interviews with high-risk TRSE groups found that on the whole, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a minimal-to-no lasting influence on current travel behaviours. As with other population groups, the pandemic dramatically changed the way our participants lived their lives and how they travelled. However, this change appears to have been largely temporary and not materialised into a lasting legacy.

Instead, the recent increases to the cost-of-living appears to be influencing travel behaviours much more. Despite inflation falling and the prices of some household goods and services dropping, the historic levels of inflation witnessed in the 2020s appears to be having a much more lasting impact and legacy on travel behaviours. As we discussed in the previous section, this overwhelming finding amongst our participants meant the focus of our research broadened from a study looking solely at COVID-19 legacies, to also considering the cost-of-living.

## Pandemic-related travel behaviours and lasting legacies

### Disabilities and long-term health conditions

For interviewees living with a disability or a long-term health condition, travel during the pandemic was often felt to be challenging and isolating. For some, there was an outright halt in their travel even when travel was permitted. For others, if travel was exercised, it was often a difficult process due to fear and anxiety. For those who stopped travelling, it was felt as if their condition made them vulnerable to either catching the virus in the first place or if they were to fall ill, they would experience symptoms much worse than non-disabled people.

**“ If I couldn't walk there, I just wouldn't go... I think there was odd times where I'd get a bus if I absolutely had to. But it would generally result in me having a panic attack of some kind, so I just avoided it as much as possible and just walked whenever I could.**

Female, 30-49, Redcar and Cleveland

**“ So, in terms of [the] pandemic... and the social distancing... the fear of being poorly and keeping yourself safe... [meant] that a lot of people, including me, spent less time with others in person. Taking transport just wasn't an option for me. I felt really lonely.**

Male, 30-49, Redcar and Cleveland

In our interviews, the use of facemasks was a key aspect of the pandemic that participants drew upon when discussing travel behaviours. Their usage appeared to divide the group with some feeling that they were necessary and without wearing one themselves, they were not safe. Conversely, some interviewees felt that facemasks were an infringement on their civil rights and was a part of a wider conspiracy often associated with COVID-19.

We also had interviewees cite issues with facemasks which disenfranchised them from travelling. In some cases, facemasks were associated with making their health

condition worse, for example those with respiratory-related problems. Despite all of this, their ongoing use in 2024/25 does appear to have dramatically stopped with those who did have such concerns about others not wearing one, they no longer have such worries or use on themselves.

**“ I felt terrible because you've got to use the bus. I was on there with a mask on and then there was lots of people there without masks on, and I would say, 'Why [are you not wearing a facemask]? Do you want to die?' I wouldn't do that [not wear a facemask], I would just keep mine on.**

Male, 50-64, Redcar and Cleveland

**“ I think I would always feel safer in a room of people who were wearing masks than I would [with] people who weren't [wearing a facemask]. But I'm less strict on that nowadays.**

Female, 18-29, Hartlepool

**“ The only thing I'm sure about is I know for a fact that it was a social experiment to see what they could get away with the government. That's the only thing I'm sure of.**

Male, 30-49, Barnsley

**“ I understood why we had to wear them, but they made it impossible for me to even breathe. I quickly stopped going out when they were making us wear them... I got friends or family to get me the bits I needed.**

Female, 50-64, Barnsley

Elsewhere, many felt their local transport systems did not serve the destinations and areas they need them too and if they do, the services are too long, too infrequent, or too unreliable. Prior to COVID-19, many disabled interviewees travelled by private hire taxis to avoid such perceived issues.

However, the pandemic created a dilemma for people who travelled in this way. For some, there were concerns around the use of private hire taxis and their cleanliness between different passenger journeys, putting them at an increased risk. Some claimed to have no choice but still travel because they either had no other local transport choice, or felt other modes such as bus and rail were more dangerous.

As a result, we saw a split between people saying they still opted for private hire taxis despite such risks and those who did not travel at all. The former brought significant and, in some cases, severe feelings of anxiety and worry, with the latter option leaving some interviewees feeling their independence had been taken away from them.

**“ You couldn't get about anywhere, I had to use taxis. But you'd get in them and the drivers had masks on and clear plastic screens between them and the passenger seats. It made me feel petrified.**

Female, 65+, Redcar and Cleveland



**“ [I'd only use] the car, because at least you're in your own little bubble. I used Dettol every day before I got in or got out. If I was going to the shop or anything like that, I would Dettol the car handles even, wearing gloves before until I got in.**

Female, 30-49, Redcar and Cleveland

The lasting legacy of the pandemic on the travel behaviours for those with disabilities and health conditions in our participants appears to be marginal in 2024/25. Of the three high-risk TRSE groups we interviewed, this group did however appear to connect more of their current travel behaviours with the pandemic than others. Thus, suggesting there are some lasting legacies for parts of our participants, but even in such cases, it's extremely small and relative.

For current travel behaviours as result of the pandemic, or lasting legacies, they appear to centre around long-lasting mental health concerns such as anxiety, depression, obsessive compulsive disorder, and fear. Where this was the case, interviewees cite cleanliness and the behaviours of fellow passengers which influence how they travel now. However, overall, interviewees do appear to be travelling again, with many returning to a resemblance of pre-pandemic travel habits.

**“ I'm not as panicky on the bus. The way I look at it now is if I'm going to get it [COVID-19], I'm going to get it... I had it even just after the injections. I had it perhaps six months ago. And I didn't die. I'm still here, so I'm a little bit more sort of chilled about it.**

Female, 30-49, Barnsley

**“ I'm quite happy to jump on a bus again now, but like I say, I don't really have much of a choice when it comes down to [caring for] my mother.**

Male, 50-64, Hartlepool

**“ With everything that's happened over the past three or four years, it's just knock me for six. I don't put my trust in public transport because there's people on there, [and] I don't know what [illnesses] they've got there.**

Male, 65+, Hyndburn and Rossendale

**“ The only thing now is that I'm mostly just getting the train less. Like I said, the price of that has gone up which influences me more. But it's not a method of transport that I use too much. So, it's not had huge lasting change for me.**

Female, 30-49, Redcar and Cleveland

## Caring responsibilities

For those who have caring responsibilities, virtually none of them felt the pandemic had influenced their current travel behaviours, including when needing to travel to administer care. Instead, interviewees talked in detail about the nature of care they administer, referencing a range of challenges they encounter when travelling, none

of which were pandemic related. However, the insights gathered do support our previous work in suggesting that their need to travel supersedes any challenge or disruption faced and instead, coping strategies are formed which allow them to still travel.

**“ My son's deaf and partially sighted, so he has quite a lot of appointments... in Manchester... And I keep telling him not to make them first thing in the morning because the rush hour traffic on the motorways [is] horrendous. But it's not always possible so we just deal with the consequences if that's the case.**

Female, 65+, Hyndburn and Rossendale

**“ I have one day off, unless he needs me for an emergency. But I can go there a few times a day. I'll go there in the morning, I'll spend a few hours there, come back for dinner time. But like I said, if he has a fall, I could be going there again in the evening... Travel wise, you just make it work. It has to work because the alternative is someone struggles, or you know, worse.**

Female, 30-49, Barnsley

**“ I'd say [we are] there every day for about five, six hours, because she's got arthritis. She's lost her husband, we lost our dad due to [the] pandemic... She's got arthritis on both knees and she's got [a] frozen shoulder. So, it's just like helping her get out and about [or] just around the house, just mobility really. She just struggles. But we must go regardless of our circumstances, we must travel to her.**

Female, 30-49, Hyndburn and Rossendale

We also found that many of our carers have access to private vehicles that they either drove or had someone drive for them. This suggests that amongst our participants, there is a clear need to have access to a private vehicle for caring responsibilities related trips. Therefore, any issues around cleanliness or public health concerns that were associated with public transport amongst those with disabilities are seen much less in our interviewee's experiences.

**“ Well, it was upsetting. We all have our stories to tell, and I found it personally very challenging. I couldn't go in to visit my mum. I had to drive. She sat at the doorway. I followed all the rules. My daughter was pregnant. I had to do shopping for three different people, and making sure that mum always had something... I personally found it very challenging, but emotionally... But travel wise I'd always been doing that. I have to. It was just easier before COVID and after it all because we could go into each other's homes, making life easy.**

Female, 50-64, Hartlepool

For the carers we spoke to, we asked them about their post-pandemic travel. Their responses show that for them, the world has gone back to a sense of normality that you could associate with pre-pandemic times. This sense of normality which is referenced by multiple interviewees is interesting as they also pick up on more recent challenges to travel which in their own words has altered their current travel behaviours, suggesting that they may not actually have gone back to a sense of normality at all. Instead, a new normal has been established.

**“ You'd have to get a later bus if it was full, but it didn't really affect me being late or anything like that because I'd make sure I'd got there early anyway. I've carried that forward and will still turn up early for the bus so I can get the earlier one which is normally less busy and feels a bit safer. Also turning up early helps for when they just never show up so at least I'm not late for work.**

Male, 18-29, Redcar and Cleveland

**“ I suppose I've just become so reliant on the car. I just feel it'll get me there more promptly... And I think sometimes it's not always possible to get a seat [on a bus]. So, with COVID, it actually never impacted how or why I travel because thankfully I drive and probably always will... But yeah now, it's all normal again, minus the price of everything. To be fair, petrol prices are just outrageous. But what isn't?**

Female, 30-49, Hartlepool

**“ I think in that sense, things are back to normal. COVID is still around, but at this point in time, it's no different to the winter flu that goes around. The world has felt pretty normal to me again for a while now.**

Male, 18-29, Hyndburn and Rossendale

#### Low-income, insecure work, or unemployed

In our third and final set of interviews with high-risk TRSE groups we interviewed people who were unemployed, had a zero-hours contract role, and those earning less than £24,000 annually. Overall, this group of interviewees demonstrated a very minimal lasting legacy of the pandemic on current travel behaviours, similarly to those with caring responsibilities.

During the pandemic, many interviewees in this category referenced their use of using local buses more than any other demographic. Based on this alone, it would appear those earning less than £24,000 annually, are unemployed, or who are insecure work relied on public transport more than anyone else. This is a finding which was found during our evidence review.

**“ I was having to use buses during the pandemic... That's when I was pregnant with my youngest daughter, so obviously [I was] having to go back and forth for hospital appointments.**

Female, 18-29, Redcar and Cleveland

**“ I did travel with bus during the COVID. I had too. I had no choice. When you have to go out, because you need to eat, need some toiletries and other important things, you have to take the risk and go.**

Female, 30-49, Redcar and Cleveland

Given the heightened socioeconomic element to these participants, travel behaviours in regard to employment-related matters were raised more frequently amongst this section of our sample. One such topic was that of remote working. Virtually all cases of remote working amongst participants were a by-product of the

pandemic with most being satisfied with the arrangement. A few interviewees mentioned that if they could work from home, it would allow them to either earn money by doing more overtime or they would simply work longer hours due to time savings. Some did have a complete uninterest in remote working.

**“ There's no travel cost... there's no petrol cost, bus cost, [or] train cost. And you're on time as well... Spending two and a half hours of time commuting was my reality. I really couldn't go back to that all.**

Male, 30-49, Barnsley

**“ The only time I will probably work from home is if I do overtime and they give me an option to work from home. But for my day-to-day job, it is in the office. And for example, to get to my place of work, it is two buses. So, it's not ideal. I really do like working from home though, I feel more productive which is a good thing when I'm doing overtime. I'd like a job where I can do more working from home.**

Female, 30-49, Barnsley

**“ If I were able to work from home, I would probably increase my hours because I've got that flexibility there.**

Female, 30-49, Redcar and Cleveland

**“ I don't like working from home because I do like the social side of going to work, the getting out of the house, having a purpose to get up, the routine.**

Male, 30-49, Redcar and Cleveland

In terms of post-pandemic travel, a few interviewees have claimed to have changed the way they now travel. Some mentioned changing the time of day they travel to avoid certain passenger types, to others no longer travelling on busy or crowded bus services. By and large, behaviours appear to not have permanently changed.

**“ It doesn't affect me as much... I am happier to use buses, trains, that sort of thing now. There are the odd times though where I do get the anxious feelings. The pandemic has gone, but the virus isn't gone.**

Female, 18-29, Redcar and Cleveland

**“ Nowadays I barely get on crowded buses. When I do get a bus though, I try to sit away from people.**

Male, 18-29, Redcar and Cleveland

**“ I avoid the bus at certain times of the day, that's probably the [biggest] change. Especially in the mornings, the bus I get goes outside a big GP health centre type place. A lot catch that bus to go see the doctor, so I avoid peak times on that route just in case people are ill.**

Female, 50-64, Barnsley

## The cost-of-living and other factors influencing current travel behaviours

Despite the increases to the cost-of-living and its lasting impact on travel behaviours not being a part of the original scope of this research, we were able to still gather a range of insights from the interviews on this area. The below extracts are taken from all three high-risk TRSE groups we interviewed, demonstrating the impact, influence, and lasting legacy of the cost-of-living.

**“ I feel like things have gone up so quickly and it's hard... you're thinking, “Christ, this is how much money I've just spent on shopping.” You get home and you feel like there's not much there. I see that the cost of petrol [has] gone up. I don't feel like I'm getting as much out of a tank of fuel as what I would normally get.**

Carer, Female, 30-49, Hartlepool

**“ [The price of everything] It is literally double... I've got my own car, so I travel to different supermarkets such as Lidl and Aldi all the time, I used to just shop in one place. It probably makes no sense because I'm using fuel to get to these different shops.**

Carer, Female, 30-49, Hyndburn and Rossendale

**“ I don't do any driving unless it's to work or to school unless I really, really need to. So, you do have to think about it a lot more than what you did before.**

Disabled, Female, 30-49, Redcar and Cleveland

**“ Socialising is out of the window. I suppose if they were cheaper, I probably would use taxis more. But the way it is at the minute with cost of living, price of taxi first, no chance.**

Disabled, Male, 65+, Redcar and Cleveland

**“ I don't think COVID is changing the way me and my family travel, it's almost ancient history to us. But the cost-of-living crisis has changed it all. We do less as a family, we see our friends less, it's all miserable. Everything is considered now, there's no get up and go. You have to calculate and consider every pound and that's the same up and down the country.**

Low-income household, Male, 50-64, Barnsley

## Focus groups with Northern Transport Voices

For our focus groups which involved 11 participants over two sessions, a nominal lasting legacy from the pandemic on current travel behaviours could be found in 2024/25. Participants in both sessions were asked which had a more significant impact on the way they travel now, all but one participant said the cost-of-living and cited the pandemic.

**“ I think as I said earlier, probably COVID-19 has had the biggest impact just in the fact that I travel to work less now. Prior to COVID-19 [it would be] 5 days a week and probably more trips to Leeds and York. But now, [it's] 2 to 3 days a week in the office and once a month to York or Leeds.**

Male, 45-59, Northumberland and Tyne and Wear

**“ Probably the cost-of-living for me... the cost-of-living... definitely impacted not only on us, but everybody. And I think a lot... I might be wrong, but I personally think a lot of [transport] companies have used COVID-19 to hide behind as an excuse for [a] lack of service. Lack of people answering the phones and to some extent, I think some companies are still using it today.**

Male, 65-74, Northumberland and Tyne and Wear

The key influence for our participants appears to come from affordability, accessibility, availability, and reliability. Many directly link these influences to the cost-of-living. For example, some make the connection between the cost-of-living and increases to car prices and rail prices.

**“ For me it's more about the cost-of-living because I know we've had to go without buying a new car. Without... all these increases, maybe we could have replaced our ancient little Yaris a few years back when we really needed to, but we've had no choice but to hold off, and that's had an impact on us. I think we're going to have to bite the bullet and do it anyway... its last legs. But no, the pandemic didn't really make any difference in our household.**

Female, 65-74, East Yorkshire and Northern Lincolnshire

**“ Rail fares aren't exactly cheap, either. Even with a disabled rail pass. I wouldn't say it's affordable on a regular basis. If I'm planning to do a daily commute, it's not a [viable] option. So, [the cost-of-living] has affected my choice.**

Female, 45-59, Lancashire

**“ I'm not overly impressed [with public transport in the North]... and that's not really me comparing it back to the trains down south, per se, but they do seem quite infrequent and quite unreliable as well, especially in terms of accessibility. I do have a disability as well. I'm a wheelchair user... It's not great. I think perhaps it's also to do with the labour force and, you know, striking everything, there's no staff to run the services we need. It's not really helped a lot. So, yeah, [I'm] relying on the car a lot for most of my journeys. In my brief experience of living up North, I fear it has got worse following COVID-19 and the cost-of-living is absolutely a key factor as to why.**

Female, 30-44, South Yorkshire



However, some acknowledge these were issues for local transport prior to any severe increases to the cost-of-living, particularly around cost of transport.

**“ I'm the person who budgets because I'm a home carer whilst the child is getting through secondary [school]. I fill up my car, the tank for about £50 and it lasts me a month. And then I look at buying train tickets if I'm going to go to pick up my child... and bring him back and just buying the tickets... will probably cost me £6 a day. That's my budget. Gone, not even in a week. So, for me, tickets are expensive, but they always have been. The railways in this country are in a terrible state, I think it's sad.**

Female, 45-59, West Yorkshire

**“ Well, to a certain extent, buses are affordable. So, like if I'm going out into Leeds or Halifax, I can get a day rider or a family saver and that's affordable for me. But the only downside would be that they all work before 9am. So, I've got to wait till 9am, 9:30am, 10am... then... waiting for the bus... It eats into the day. With the train, it's trying to find the timings, [and] which are the cheapest [services]... because you can get some that are really cheap and then 10 or 20 minutes later, they like double the price. So, it's always about finding like the cheapest one but I think it's been like before the cost-of-living crisis.**

Female, 30-44, West Yorkshire

Within the theme of affordability and the cost of transport, the £2 bus fare scheme was raised by both groups of participants who were positive of the scheme, and in some cases, became bus users as a result. This modal shift was made by some participants as a result of the cost-of-living and increases to other modes of travel.

**“ I go to concerts at [the] Bridgewater Hall [in] Manchester. I always go on the bus because it's such a great service and it's only £2 there and £2 back at the moment. If we didn't have these discounted things I would not really consider going as I don't like driving into Manchester. I find driving in a city a bit overwhelming now. I've enjoyed using the bus again for the first time in years, it's so much easier and more relaxing to go by bus.**

Male, 45-59, Greater Manchester

**“ Actually, our [buses] are capped at £2 too and I've noticed that the bus people use the bus more so if my husband and I are to go out, say to the next village, or say two villages on, we'll take the bus now and not the car because it's worth doing at that way at the moment. I'm not sure we'll continue if it goes up though, but at the moment it's actually cheaper to go on the bus to two villages down than it would be to take the car.**

Female, 45-59, Lancashire

## Survey results

In our survey we, explored current travel behaviours in 2024/25 with our largest and broadest sample for this project. In total, we surveyed 283 people who are on our Northern Transport Voices programme, asking them all about their everyday travel behaviours, perceptions, and patterns, focusing on themes linked to the pandemic and cost-of-living.

### COVID-19, changes to travel, and current travel behaviours

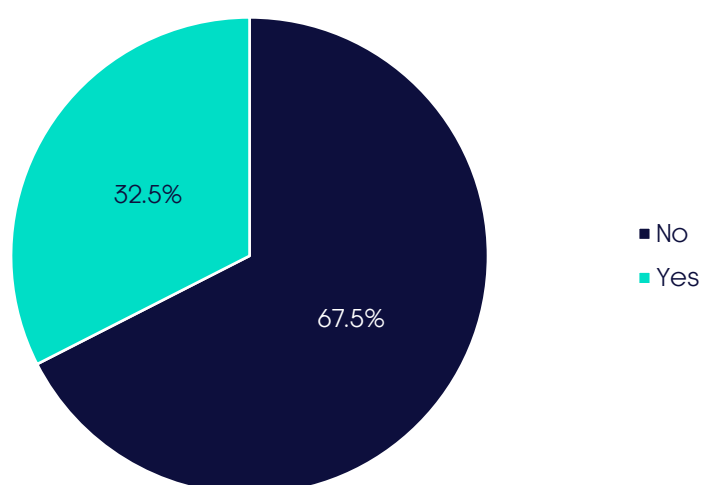
We began asking respondents to what extent they felt the COVID-19 pandemic had changed the way they travel. 36.6% of respondents felt that to some extent, the pandemic does influence how they currently travel, with a majority of 59.7% stating the pandemic has little-to-no influence.

To explore this further, we surveyed respondents on a variety of topics relating to travel behaviours and perceptions that were likely engaged with during the pandemic, e.g., working from home. By asking such questions, we were able to understand whether the perception of the pandemic having little influence today's travel behaviour still stands when discussing isolated behaviours.

Working from home was a key change in the way many people lived their lives during the pandemic and for some, the arrangement has remained in place to varying extents. For our respondents, 67.5% said they do not currently work remotely in 2024/25 with 32.5% still doing so (figure 6). Given the chance, 46.1% of respondents said they would like to work from home if they could. 53.9% expressed no interest in working from home. Among those who do work from home, an overwhelming 91.2% expressed satisfaction with the arrangement (figure 7).

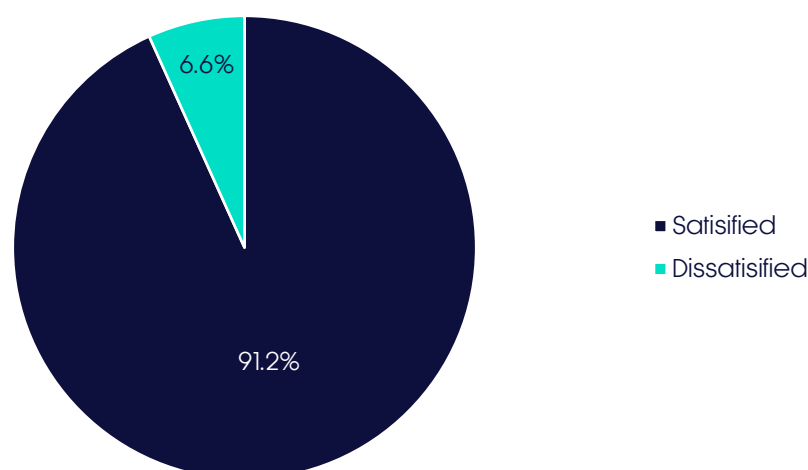
On this question and throughout the survey, we sought out responses on a 10-point Likert scale, allowing us to gain a granular understanding of sentiment. For remote working satisfaction rates, there was an average of 8.1 for this question.

**Figure 6: Works from home in the North of England in 2024/25**



n = 283

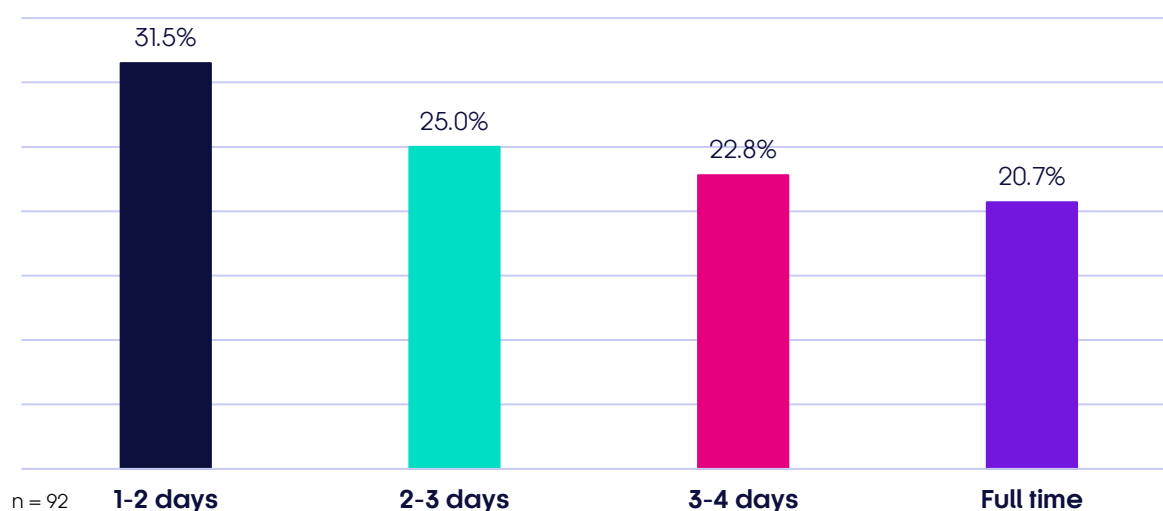
**Figure 7: Satisfaction amongst those who currently work from home**



n = 92. Respondents were asked 'How satisfied are you with how frequently you currently work from home on a scale of 0-10? 0 being completely dissatisfied, 5 being neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, 10 being completely satisfied'. 0 to 4 were totalled to show dissatisfaction and 6 to 10 were totalled to show satisfaction.

In terms of frequency of working from home, one-to-two days was the most common with 31.5% of respondents opting for this arrangement. 25.0% opt for two-to-three days (figure 8).

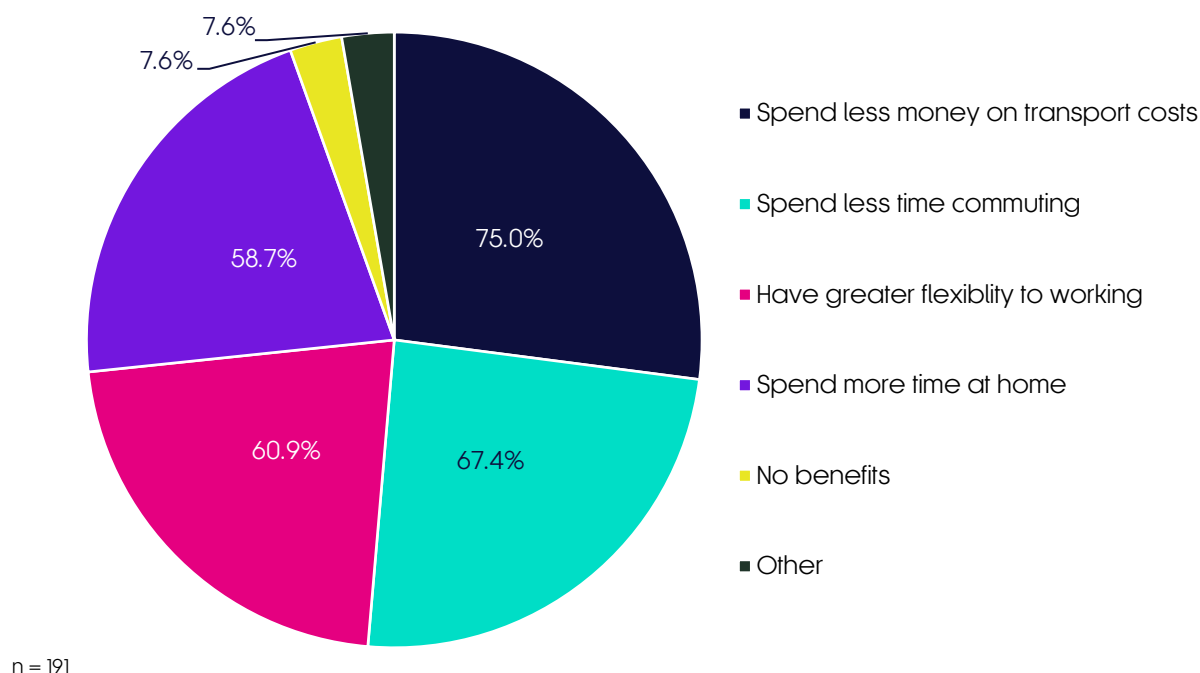
**Figure 8: Frequency of remote working patterns**



Working from home is often engaged with as it can provide benefits such as greater flexibility and work life balance, or perhaps an employer has gone fully remote and virtual. We found that with our respondents, 75.0% felt the biggest associated benefit of working from home was spending less money on transport costs. This was followed by 67.4% believing it is spending less time commuting, 60.9% felt it provides greater flexibility to working and 7.6% report that working from home has no benefits (figure 9).

A final aspect of remote working we explored was its importance when seeking out new employment opportunities. Specifically, we asked respondents whether roles appear more attractive when they allow you to work from home compared to roles which require being on designated premises. 37.8% felt that roles which allow remote working are more attractive versus 15.5% who do not think it makes them more appealing.

**Figure 9: Associated benefits to working from home**

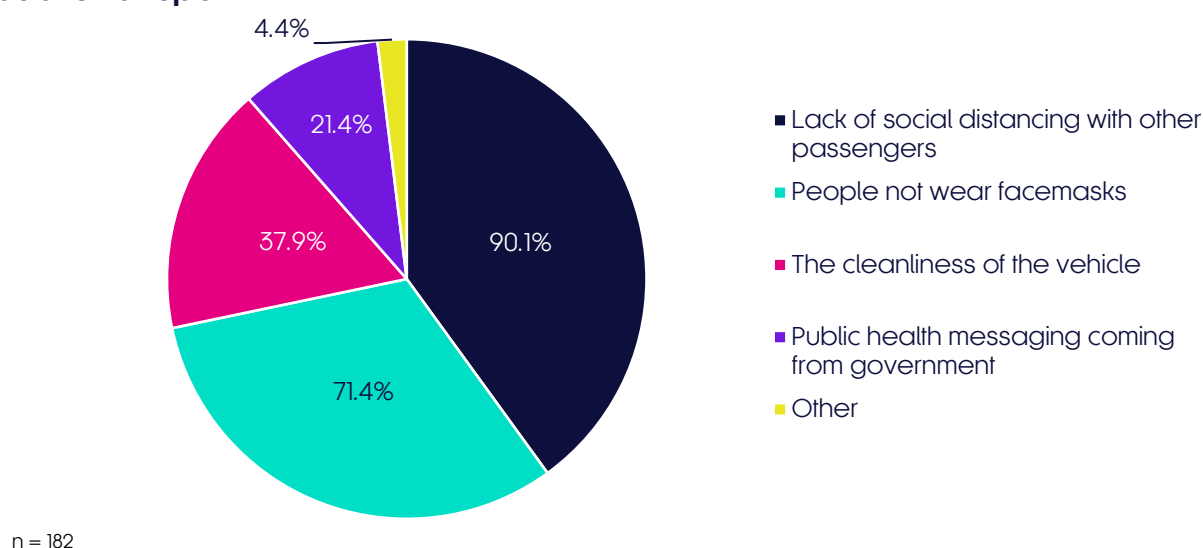


As discussed at the very start of this section, the pandemic's lasting legacy on travel behaviour appears to be small and could even be dwindling as time passes by. In the survey we gathered insights around the perceptions of different modes and safety in terms of catching COVID-19 as well as facemask use. In 2024/25, just 14.8% of our respondents wear facemasks in public environments including when using public transport, 83.4% do not.

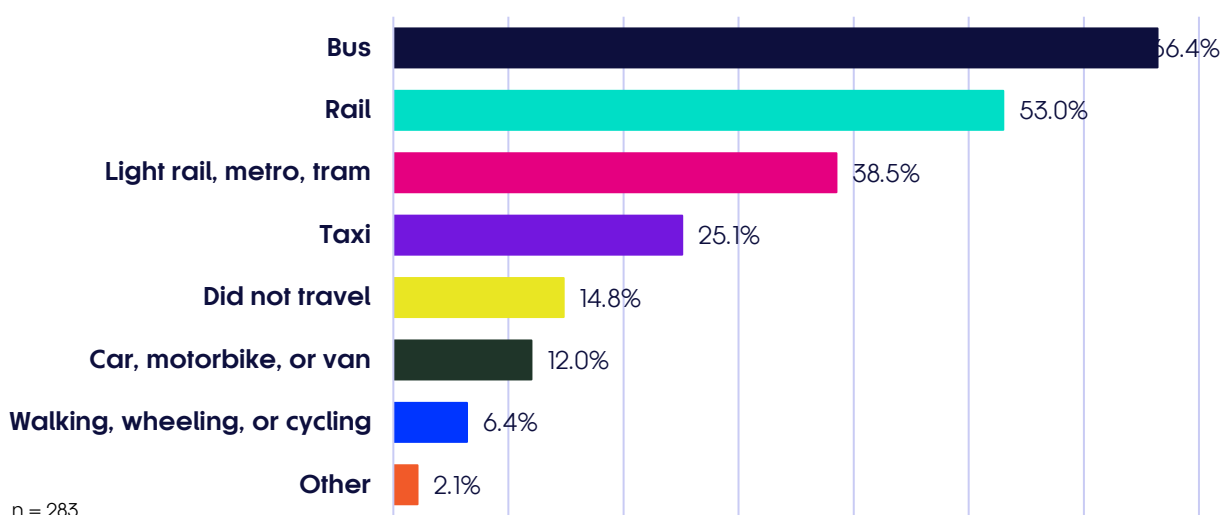
66.4% felt that bus travel posed the biggest risk of catching the COVID-19 during the pandemic. This was followed by 53.0% who feel that rail posed the greatest risk. Private modes such as car, motorbikes, or vans and active modes of travel were among the safest modes during the pandemic according to 12.0% and 6.4% of respondents, respectively. 14.8% of respondents did not travel as they felt all forms were too risky for them at the time (figure 11).

Public transport and the risk associated with catching COVID-19 appears to have shifted with 52.7% of respondents saying they feel safer when using public transport now than compared to during the pandemic. However, 40.3% of respondents feel the exactly the same as they did in pandemic, and 7.1% feeling less safe than during the pandemic.

**Figure 10: Reasons behind perceived likelihood of catching COVID-19 from public transport**



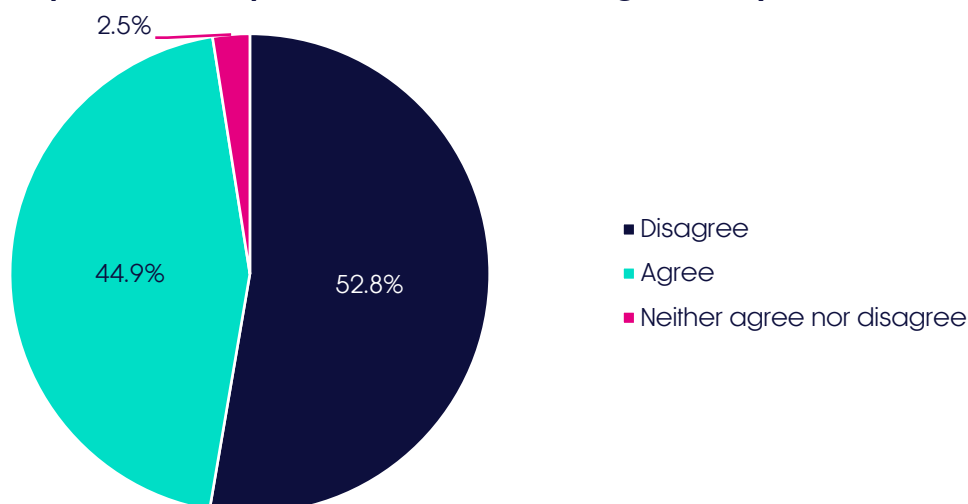
**Figure 11: Perceived risk of catching COVID-19 from different modes of travel**



As expected, the mental health of our respondents came up consistently throughout our research activities. For our survey, we asked respondents whether they felt their mental health had been negatively impacted by the inability to travel during the pandemic. Interestingly, 52.8% of respondents do not feel as if their mental health had been negatively impacted. 44.9% felt that their mental health had been affected negatively by not traveling (figure 12). For this 10-point scale question, an average of 4.4 is found, indicating a slight disagreement-to-neutral sentiment amongst respondents.

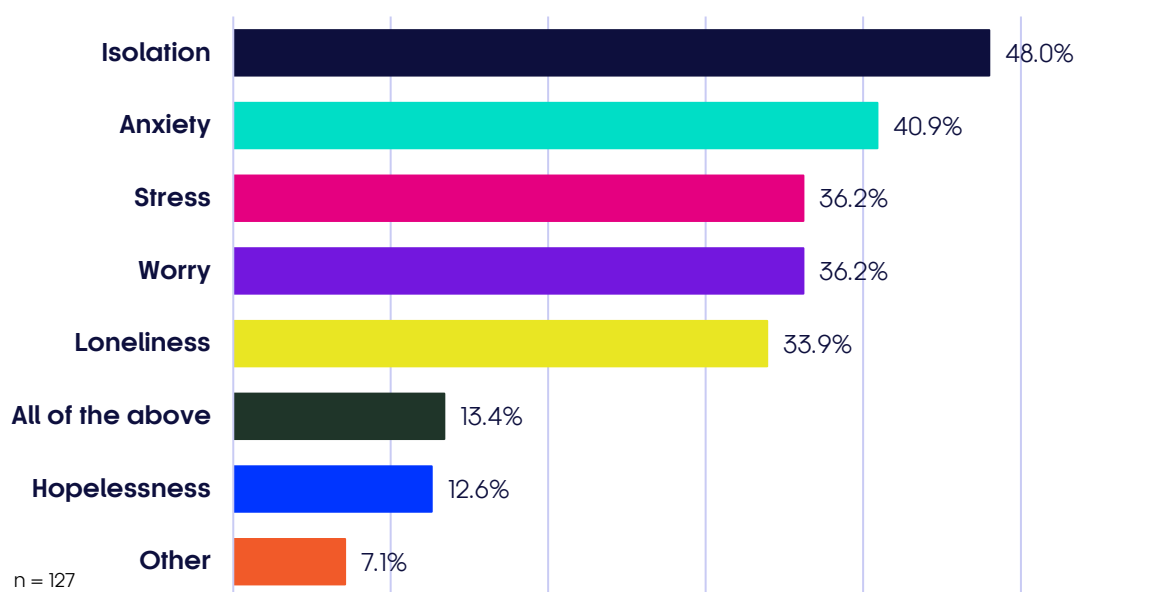
For those who felt their mental health had suffered during the pandemic, we asked respondents some of the feelings they had experienced during this time. 48.0% had experienced isolation and 40.9% experienced anxiety, making these the two most common feelings during the pandemic (figure 13).

**Figure 12: The pandemic impacted mental health significantly**



n = 283. Respondents were asked 'How much do you agree or disagree with this statement? "Being unable to travel during the pandemic affected my mental health significantly" 0 being strongly disagree, 5 being neither disagree nor agree, 10 being strongly agree'. 0 to 4 were totalled to show disagree and 6 to 10 were totalled to show agree.

**Figure 13: Mental health feelings experienced during the pandemic**



## Transport, affordability, and the cost-of-living

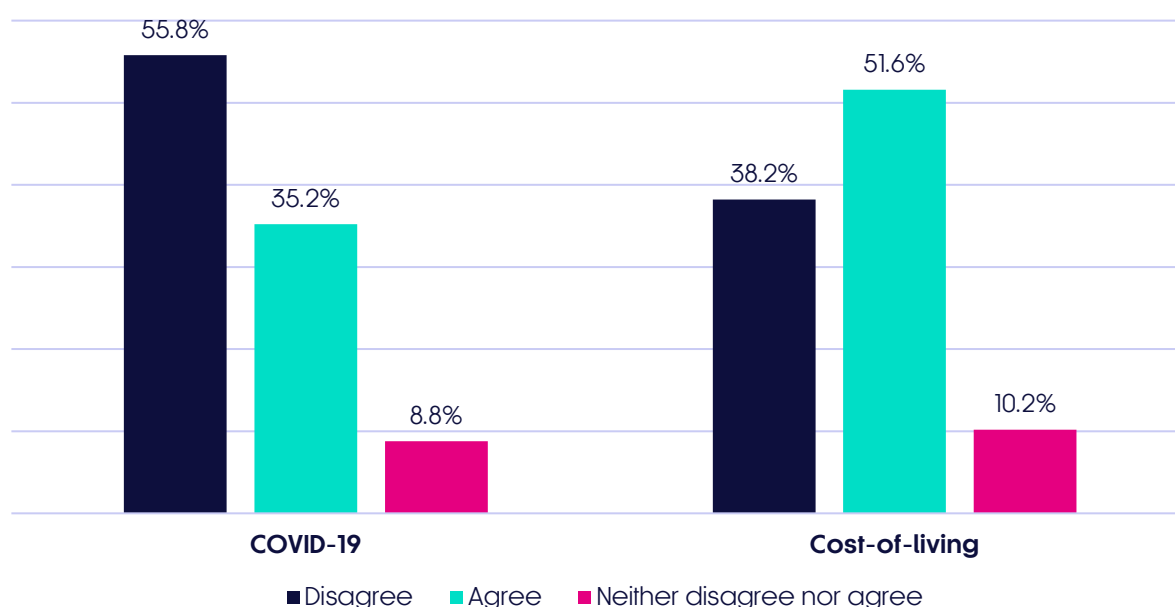
As we found with our interviews and focus groups, there appears to be a consensus that the cost-of-living has a bigger, more enduring legacy than COVID-19. To this point, we asked respondents whether the pandemic has had a lasting, negative impact on local public transport and 35.2% agreed to varying extents, while 55.8% disagreed (figure 14). There was an average of 4.1, showing a slight disagreement for this.

In terms of the cost-of-living, 51.6% feel that public transport has been negatively affected by recent increases to the cost-of-living, with 38.2% not feeling this is accurate. The average response to this question was 5.2.

Due to the apparent lack of influence from COVID-19 on current travel behaviours, and the bigger influence from conditions such as the increases to the cost-of-living, we explored affordability in the survey. For a small number of our participants, the pandemic did create brand new financial hardships (e.g., losing jobs, sustained unemployment, and receiving less in salaries due to furlough schemes) but for the majority in our research, the pandemic did not negatively or severely affect the amount spent on travel. In some cases, savings were made.

For this point, we asked respondents whether the pandemic had a smaller impact on transport affordability compared to times where we saw a rise in the cost of living. An overwhelming majority of 78.0% agreed and 15.9% disagreed, with an average response of 7.1 showing strong support for idea.

**Figure 14: The extent to which COVID-19 and the cost-of-living has had negative lasting impacts on local public transport**



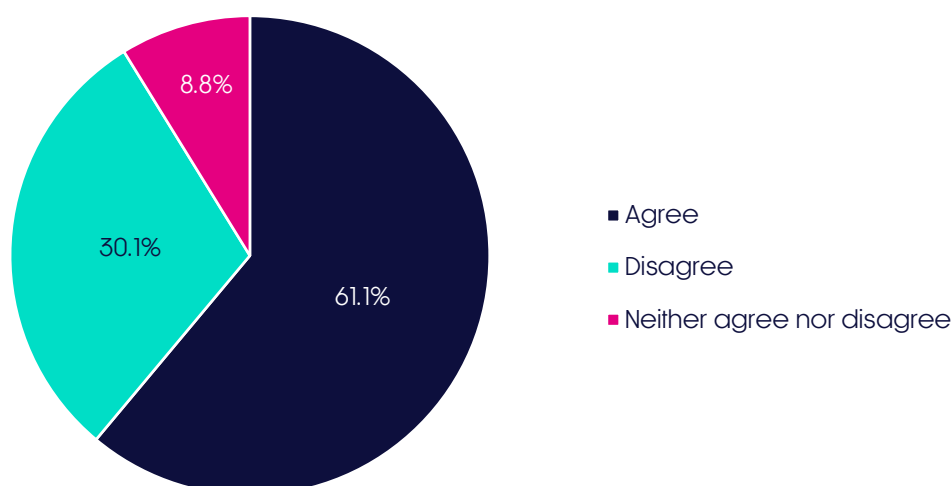
n = 283. Respondents were asked 'How much do you agree or disagree with this statement? "The public transport options in my local area continue to be negatively impacted as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic" 0 being strongly disagree, 5 being neither disagree nor agree, 10 being strongly agree" 0 to 4 were totalled to show disagree and 6 to 10 were totalled to show agree.

Respondents were also asked 'How much do you agree or disagree with this statement? "The increase in the cost-of-living continues to negatively impact the public transport options in my local area" 0 being strongly disagree, 5 being neither disagree nor agree, 10 being strongly agree" 0 to 4 were totalled to show disagree and 6 to 10 were totalled to show agree.

To make more sense of current travel behaviours in response to the cost-of-living and any lasting legacies, our survey looked at the general affordability of both public and private forms of transport as this could help establish why the cost-of-living appears to have a greater impact and legacy on our respondents. When asked specifically whether local public transport was affordable, 61.6% agreed that it is and 30.1% disagreed (figure 15).



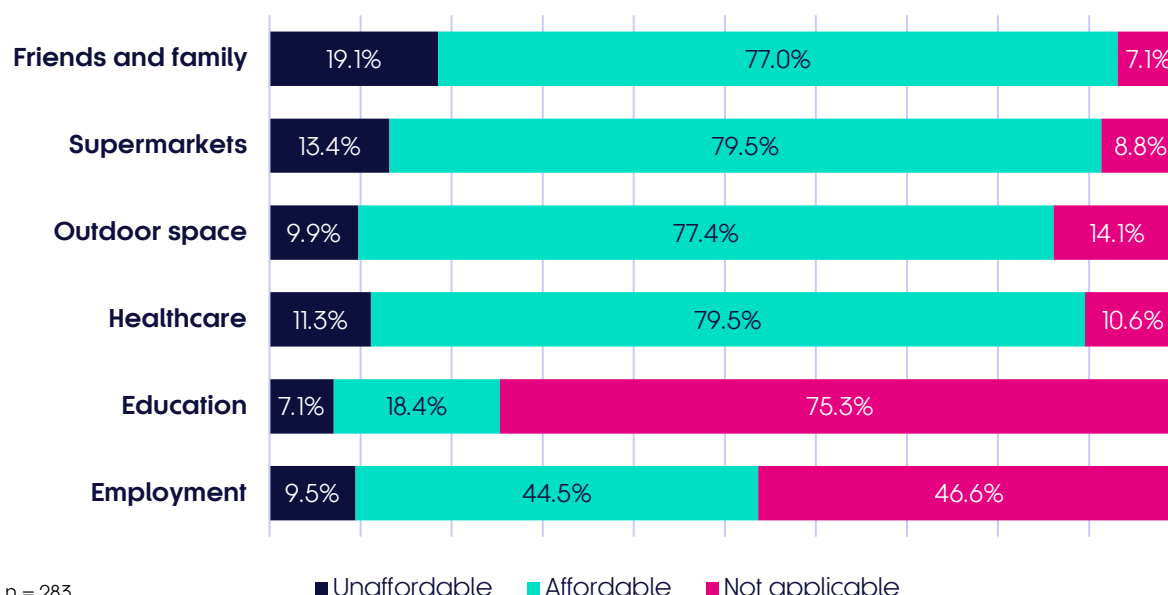
**Figure 15: Local public transport is affordable**



n = 283. Respondents were asked 'How much do you agree or disagree with this statement? "The transport in my local area is affordable" 0 being strongly disagree, 5 being neither disagree nor agree, 10 being strongly agree" 0 being strongly disagree, 5 being neither disagree nor agree, 10 being strongly agree" 0 to 4 were totalled to show disagree and 6 to 10 were totalled to show agree.

79.5% of respondents felt that healthcare services and supermarkets were the most affordable destinations, respectively (figure 16). Outdoor or green spaces were rated as the second most affordable destination or service type by 77.4%, closely followed by visiting friends and family by 77.0%. Accessing educational and employment destinations are the most unaffordable services to access according to 75.3% and 46.6% of respondents, respectively.

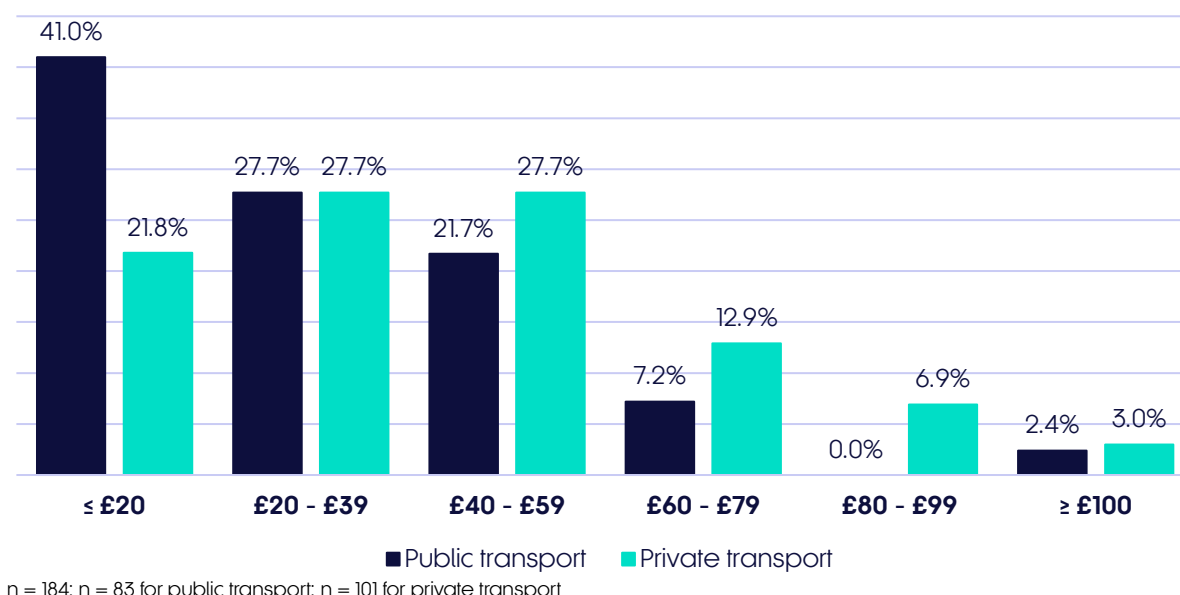
**Figure 16: The affordability of accessing different destinations and services**



For those who do use public transport including private hire taxis, on a normal week, the cost is typically less than £20 for 41.0% of our respondents (figure 17). 27.7% of respondents were found to be paying between £20 and £40 and 21.7% were paying between £40 and £60.

27.7% of respondents who exclusively travel by private car, motorbike, or van are predominantly paying between £20 and £40, with 27.7% also paying between £40 and £60 on a weekly basis. This is closely followed by 21.8% who are paying less than £20 per week.

**Figure 17: Average weekly amounts spent on transport**



66.4% who take public transport disagreed with the idea that public transport costs make it harder to afford other household essentials items with just 29.2% feeling as if costs do (figure 18). For this question, there was an average of 3.3 showing the moderate level of disagreement.

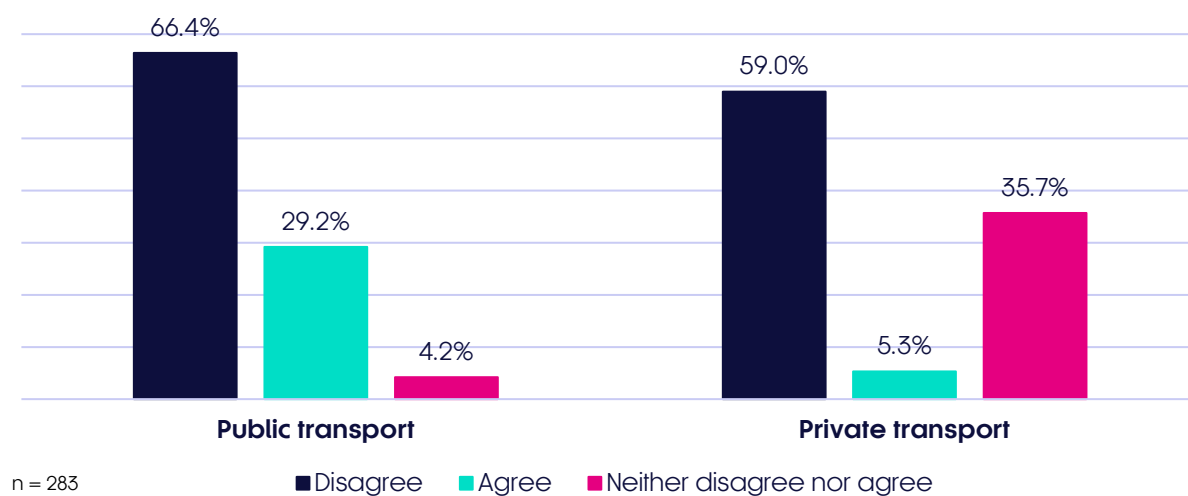
Among those who take private forms of transport, 59.0% disagreed that their transport costs makes it difficult to afford other essentials, with 35.7% agreeing that they do. An average of 3.7 was seen on this question, again showing a moderate level of disagreement.

For those who do take public transport and feel as if there is an economic difficulty in affording to do so, 43.4% report cutting back on social and leisure activities to allow them to still travel as required (figure 19). This is closely followed by 31.3% who report they have to cut back on basic essentials. 18.1% claim to not need to make any cut backs to afford public transport.

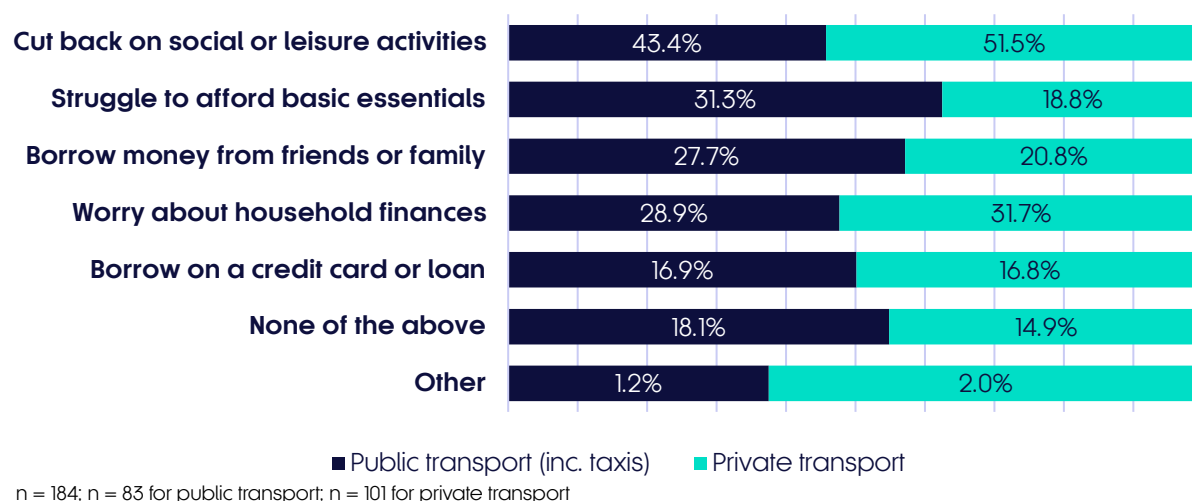
Household cuts made by private transport users included cutting back on social or leisure activities which was reported to be the case by 51.5% of respondents. 31.7% of private transport users claim to be actively worrying about the household finances.

Overall, the importance of transport costs appear to be placed higher than other household outgoings such as housing costs, utility bills, and other outgoings. 52.0% of respondents felt this was true for them with 40.6% disagreeing, and overall, 54.4% of respondents said that mode cost influences whether or not they travel by that particular mode of travel (figure 20).

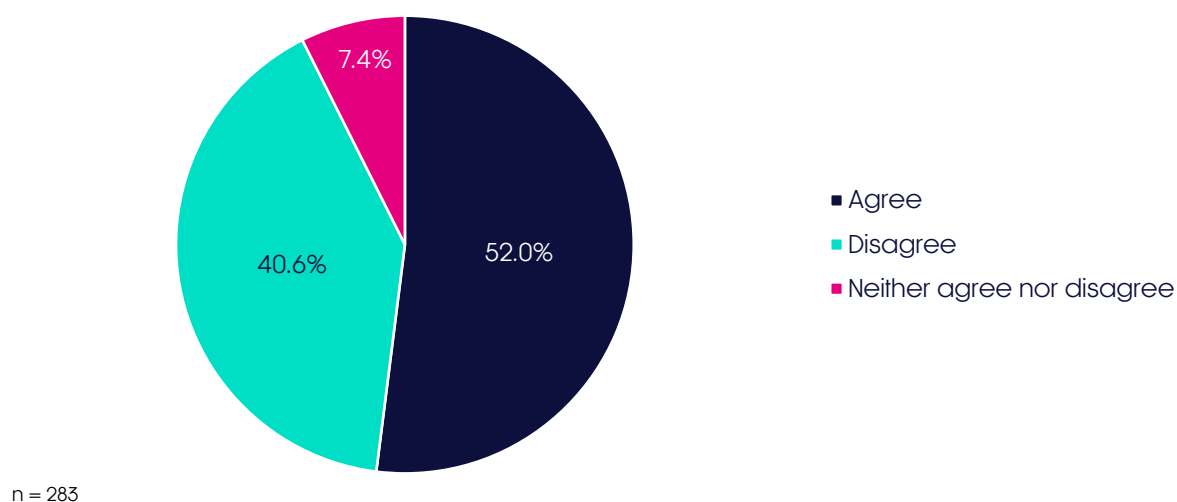
**Figure 18: The costs of transport make it hard to afford other household essentials**



**Figure 19: Coping behaviours to afford transport costs**



**Figure 20: The importance of transport costs versus other household outgoings**



# Discussion and conclusions

The purpose of this report was to provide our local authority partners and others with current insights into TRSE and travel behaviours across the North of England. As the North's statutory sub-national transport body, we are firmly committed to reducing the high levels of TRSE we have found across our region since 2019.

To do this, we developed Connecting Communities, our TRSE reduction strategy, laying firm a commitment to conducting research on how social exclusion from transport is impacting the North. This evidence can then empower local policymakers to engage in inclusive transport planning practices and make strategic investment decisions.

One such research commitment was to gain an insight into the legacies of the COVID-19 pandemic on travel behaviours and perceptions, particularly for the most at risk TRSE groups. To do this, we embarked on a mixed-methods research project, commencing with interviews, followed by focus groups, and a survey.

In our interviews we quickly established that the pandemic is no longer having a significant influence on the way people in the North are travelling in 2024/25. Instead, the increase in costs-of-living from record high levels of inflation seems to be having a bigger influence. This finding was also found in the focus groups and survey.

Within the focus groups and survey, the cost-of-living and transport affordability themes were raised in greater detail. For example, in the focus groups participants spoke about the £2 bus fare scheme. Participants were generally supportive of the scheme, and for some it had generated mode shift, moving away from private cars to using local buses. The focus group sessions were held prior to the 2024 Autumn Budget, which confirmed that the scheme would continue but with a rise to £3 for a single journey. Future research may be beneficial to understand the impact of changes since the Autumn Budget.

Our survey was our largest and broadest research activity for this project. Whilst we continued to see a minimal lasting legacy of the pandemic on travel behaviours, we arguably found more representative insights relating to travel behaviours. From the survey, we found that 59.7% of respondents do not feel that the pandemic has affected how they travel in 2024/25.

Whilst in general, this research has found that ultimately COVID-19 is influencing travel behaviours very little in 2024/25. It is key to mention that this is not to say that COVID-19's overall impact, influence, or legacy on society at large is minor and to be downplayed. Throughout our research, particularly the qualitative insights, COVID-19 is referenced heavily and is done in a way to mark a period of time, i.e., create a differentiation between a pre-pandemic and post-pandemic world. It is extremely likely that in some areas, the pandemic and COVID-19 is still having a huge impact and possible lasting legacy. In the case of travel behaviours, it appears not to be.

# References

- 1.) The Health Foundation (2024). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/4x98ctbb>
- 2.) Transport for the North (2024). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/tpfdmrr5>
- 3.) Reuters (2023). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/5n7v3dwy>
- 4.) Danczyk et al., (2017). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/yhhkz2sy>
- 5.) Kattan et al., (2013). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/4y8v92ku>
- 6.) Wang (2014). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/bdexx2pd>
- 7.) Beukenhorst et al., (2020). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/2xwcfw3b>
- 8.) Eskytè et al., (2020). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/u4z9tvzm>
- 9.) Chen et al., (2020). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/y2r95ju>
- 10.) Felstead and Reuschke (2020). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/2w3v2zum>
- 11.) Office for National Statistics (2022). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/re4kxbvc>
- 12.) Bonacini et al., (2021). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/5fwjfrkm>
- 13.) Transport for London (2023). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/bddjc6vt>
- 14.) Transport for London (2022). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/uw6tkpse>
- 15.) van Wee and Witlox (2021). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/kdht4jtz>
- 16.) Kar et al., (2021). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/9tz394ek>
- 17.) Curl et al., (2018). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/mwhf4fk>
- 18.) Almlöf et al., (2021). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/mtebs9hb>
- 19.) Liu et al., (2020). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/87k4bsuz>
- 20.) Teuton et al., (2020). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/427uuxwb>
- 21.) Vickerman (2020). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/2s43fcnz>
- 22.) Chung et al., (2020). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/4c5s8zpa>
- 23.) Lott et al., (2022). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/3f97jj3n>
- 24.) Anable and Marsden (2021). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/y7m4wzsm>
- 25.) Carers UK (2021). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/3n2zatpm>
- 26.) Office for National Statistics (2022). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/jmb64uuv>
- 27.) Abdullah et al., (2020). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/4f7kjmuv>
- 28.) Shakibaei et al., (2021). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/4c8k6nm9>
- 29.) Thombre and Agarwal (2021). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/4epb9d53>
- 30.) Bhaduri et al., (2020). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/3rptx32j>
- 31.) Borkowski et al., (2021). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/bdzhstdxh>
- 32.) Ella (2020). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/pbcyrs33>
- 33.) Daoust (2020). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/yc455a86>
- 34.) Transport for the North (2023). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/2epuwpzm>
- 35.) McCarthy et al., (2021). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/yn6a63tu>
- 36.) Byrne et al., (2020). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/y6mx2c9f>
- 37.) Aslan et al., (2020). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/3rv67v5p>
- 38.) Gato et al., (2021). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/p3s83xae>
- 39.) Grant et al., (2021). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/wnatfkrn>
- 40.) Baker et al., (2020) Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/5nb8ynjf>
- 41.) Banerjee and Nair (2020). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/57n9xsbn>
- 42.) Davidson et al., (2017). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/bmjfzrau>



**Transport for the North**  
Level 6, Town Hall Extension  
Lloyd Street  
Manchester  
M2 5DB

✉ Postal address

**Transport for the North**  
C/O Manchester City Council  
PO Box 532  
Manchester  
M60 2LA



0161 244 0888



info@transportforthenorth.com



transportforthenorth.com