



Northern Transport Voices

How freight awareness shapes public views on rail priorities

Summary



Context

Our rail network is congested, serving the needs of both passengers and freight. While many people rely on rail for travel, everyone benefits from the efficient movement of goods. That's why Transport for the North's Strategic Transport Plan aims to increase the amount of freight moved by rail.

Currently, passenger services account for around 94% of total rail kilometres. Achieving the right balance between passenger and freight use is essential. Increasing rail freight can help ease road congestion, improve air quality, create jobs, and drive economic growth across multiple sectors.

Understanding public views on how this balance should be achieved is crucial. Improving freight awareness (often referred to in the industry as freight blindness) is needed to drive better understanding of the importance of freight and its benefits to the North.

This research was undertaken to:

1. Determine public preferences regarding the balance between passenger and freight use of rail.
2. Better understand how freight awareness influences these preferences.

Method

- Members of Northern Transport Voices (TfN's online research community comprising a cross-section of the Northern public) were invited to take part in an online survey in summer 2024.
- Members were asked a series of questions to gather their views on the right balance of passenger and freight use of rail in the context of limited capacity.
- After the questions, members were then shown information about the benefits of freight rail services to society. They were then asked the same questions again.
- This before vs after comparison helps us to determine whether having more knowledge about the benefits of rail freight services impacted members' views on the prioritisation of passenger and freight use of rail.



402 people
responded

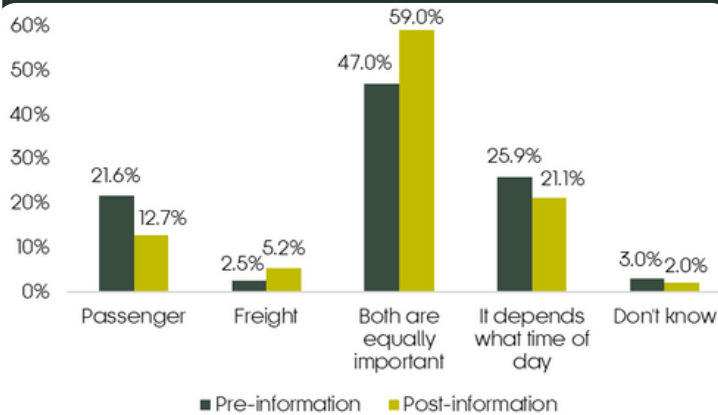


33% of these use
passenger services
once a month or more



There were a mix of
ages and locations
throughout the North

“In the timetabling of rail services, which type of service do you think is the most important to prioritise railway use for?” (all respondents)



- **Equal importance recognised**

Before and after receiving information on rail freight benefits, most participants viewed passenger and freight services as equally important.

- **Shift in priorities**

Providing more information reduced the emphasis on passenger services alone and increased recognition of sharing the rail network with freight.

- **Building the evidence base**

The findings offer insight into public perceptions of rail freight and demonstrate how awareness campaigns can help build support for necessary service adjustments.

Key findings

i Freight awareness (or lack of) influences public preferences but can be effectively tackled with bite-sized, relatable facts.

↑ Public recognition of rail freight importance is strong. Before receiving information, 22% of respondents viewed passenger services as more important than freight; after receiving information on rail freight benefits, this fell to 13%, showing increased recognition of freight's importance relative to passenger services.

✓ Support for adjustments to passenger services exists. Regular rail passengers may accept changes to accommodate freight growth.

🕒 Preferences vary by time of day. Although rail demand has changed post-COVID, the overall public view was that the passenger/freight balance should remain unchanged during peak commuting times, while there is support for freight growth during off-peak periods.

💡 This research contributes to the evidence base, helping policymakers understand public perceptions of rail freight and highlighting how awareness-raising campaigns can increase support for adjustments to passenger services to accommodate freight growth.

What next?

Transport for the North works with mayoral combined authorities, county combined authorities, local transport authorities and national partners to support transport improvements, unlocking sustainable and inclusive growth. We have a number of ways that we can help partners to achieve their aims.

Survey and Results

Download the report presenting the context, survey, and research findings.

For more information, contact us at research@transportfornorth.com

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Balancing passenger with freight rail services



TRANSPORT FOR THE NORTH



Fact Pack

Download the [freight fact pack](#) provided to respondents to better understand the benefits rail freight brings to society.



TfN Offer

The TfN Offer is our data and evidence resource hub. Available to constituent authorities and other partners in the north, we can provide technical services, advice, analysis, modelling and planning tools.

For more information on how we can help to support our Local Authority partners, please contact us at tfnoffer@transportfornorth.com

Bronze: Self-serve

Free access to tools, dashboards, and data you can use right away.

Silver: Tailored help

Free custom analysis and insights specifically for your projects.

Gold: Bespoke support

Dedicated one-to-one help from our experts for your complex projects.