Transport for the North

Safety and public transport in the North

How safe do people feel when using public transport?

September 2025

Contents

0. Executive summary

Drawing on new data and insights from Northern residents, this report explores how safe people feel when using public transport, the perceptions that shape those feelings, and the steps being taken to create safer, more inclusive networks.

This is the first time Transport for the North have directly researched personal safety and public transport – a topic of clear relevance to the North's strategic aims and objectives, particularly tackling transport-related social exclusion.

Although personal safety on public transport is a well-researched area more broadly, notable evidence gaps (e.g., good quality qualitative data) remain at both the local and pan-regional level. Related issues frequently appear in the media and go on to frame national discourse, reinforcing the importance of developing a robust evidence base that reflects the lived experience of Northern residents.

This research was designed to help address those gaps and establish a clearer picture of how safe the North's public transport network feels, which local policymakers can use to identify and adapt effective safety measures drawn from elsewhere.

The research identified a number of consistent patterns and concerns, captured across survey responses and focus groups undertaken with residents. Key findings include:

Personal safety concerns influence how, when, and whether people use public transport

Nearly two-thirds of survey respondents said safety affects their choice of transport mode, particularly women, younger adults, disabled people, and ethnic minorities. Focus group participants echoed this, with many avoiding travel after dark or changing their routes to feel safer.

Perceptions of safety can often outweigh direct experience

With some participants sharing personal experiences of harassment or antisocial behaviour, many described how media stories, second-hand accounts, and social narratives shape their behaviour. Both survey and policy insights suggest this perceived risk strongly influences feelings of safety, confidence, and travel choices.

Women and ethnic minorities face a disproportionate burden in staying safe

Women report taking additional precautions that men typically do not consider, such as sharing their locations with smartphone apps, avoiding interactions, or modifying their appearance. These behaviours were widespread among ethnic minority and lesbian, gay, and bisexual respondents too, reflecting broader concerns around visibility and targeted harm.

Safety perceptions decline significantly after dark, especially during the first and last mile of a journey

Only 31% of respondents feel safe travelling at nighttime, with women, disabled people, and younger adults consistently reporting lower confidence. This is particularly the case when needing to walk to stops or waiting in unstaffed areas.

Incident reporting is low and confidence in outcomes remains limited

Just over one in five respondents have reported a safety-related incident. Across all groups, trust in the reporting process is low, with many unsure how to make a report in the first place or that any action would be taken.

Trains are seen as safer than buses

Trains were most often viewed as the safest mode, followed by taxis. Buses were consistently seen as less safe, particularly in relation to antisocial behaviour. The presence of staff, lighting, and other passengers strongly influences how safe any mode or setting feels.

There is strong public support for practical, visible safety improvements

Respondents prioritised increased staff presence, improved lighting, discreet reporting tools and flexible travel options such as request-stop policies. These align with the multi-agency, prevention-led approaches being developed by local authorities, though delivery of such measures is affected by resource constraints and operational complexity.

The above findings offer a clear evidence base for policymakers in the North of England and beyond when seeking to improve personal safety on their public transport networks.

1. Background

For some, the decision to board a bus, tram, or train is shaped not just by routes, timetables, or costs, but by a fundamental question surrounding their personal safety.

Whilst the vast majority of public transport journeys go by stress free and without safety concerns, many unfortunately do not. These negative experiences from a small minority can go on to have a broader, significant influence on how people across society engage, use, and perceive public transport.

Negative impacts can range from avoiding a certain mode of travel to paying for more expensive options, and in some cases, not travelling at all due to fears and anxieties. These impacts accumulate and can help contribute to one of the North's most significant social challenges: transport-related social exclusion.

Transport-related social exclusion has become a well-researched outcome in recent years. Academics, think tanks, and transport bodies have all dedicated time and effort to understand how transport is enabling exclusion and entrenching inequalities, reducing a meaningful participation in community life for so many.

Our most recent analysis shows that 2.95 million Northerners face a high risk of social exclusion due to transport issues in their local area.[1] Whilst this is a reduction from our 2019 analysis where we estimated that 3.3 million Northerners were at a high risk, we are still seeing our towns, villages, and cities over represented amongst the worst affected areas nationally. Of the top 10 worst affected areas in England, six are located in the North.

Around half of all residents in Hartlepool, Redcar and Cleveland, Blackpool, County Durham, Cumberland, and Northumberland face a high risk of transport-related social exclusion. Residents of cities and towns on their outskirts also face a higher risk than residents of these same area types elsewhere in England.

As well as researching the extent of social exclusion from transport, we have explored its associated impacts and how other factors are exacerbating the problem. Most recently we published a report considering legacies from the pandemic and increased cost-of-living on travel behaviours.[2] It's here we found our strongest evidence yet indicating that travel behaviours have been re-shaped for so many, and in turn, transport-related social exclusion has intensified.

Throughout our transport-related social exclusion research programme, we have engaged with thousands of Northerners to reveal a diverse set of insights, experiences, and comments on a range of different topics and issues. A central thread throughout these projects has been comments relating to issues around travel and personal safety.

For the first time, we have undertaken primary research to understand how safe passengers feel when using public transport across the North of England. We spoke with passengers who use a range of public transport modes, including buses, trains, trams, and taxis. Importantly, we also consider first and last mile journeys, which refer to the travel required to get to or from

---

[1] Transport for the North (2025) Transport and social exclusion in England in 2024/25. Available here.
[2] Transport for the North (2025) Everyday experiences of transport and social exclusion. Available here.

public transport stations or stops, such as walking through poorly lit streets to a bus stop, which can significantly influence how safe people feel overall.[3]

Personal safety can be defined as an individual's ability to go about their everyday life free from the threat or fear of psychological, emotional, or physical harm from others.[4]

Throughout this research, the terms 'safety' and 'personal safety' are used interchangeably. Personal safety in the context of this research is to be understood distinctly from other forms of safety that may be associated with transport. For instance, issues relating to vehicle safety, dangerous driving, or station accessibility, whilst important, are not within the scope of this research. Instead, this report focuses on the social and psychological dimensions of safety, including fear of harassment, verbal or physical abuse, and the threat or experience of hate crime while using public transport.

Public transport in Britain is generally safe, but troubling trends are emerging. In 2023/24, crime on the rail network rose by 19% compared with the previous year. Whilst the overall risk remains low, at 26.7 crimes per million passenger journeys,[5] incidents of harassment and violence are on the rise, leaving many passengers feeling anxious, unsafe, and vulnerable.

A British Transport Police survey has shown that across the national rail and London Underground networks, reports of violent crimes against women and girls have risen by over 50%, from 7,561 incidents in 2021 to 11,357 in 2023. During the same period, sexual offences also increased by 10%, from 2,246 to 2,475 cases.[6] The increase is largely being attributed to a rise in reporting rates rather than an increase in the number of incidents occurring.

For other modes of public transport, similar statistics are harder to come by. However, Transport Focus have reported that up to 80% of bus passengers feel safe onboard, with 72% feeling safe whilst waiting at bus stops.[7]

Elsewhere, the national travel attitudes study shows that perceptions of safety differ between demographic groups. For example, 79% of women feel that the term personal safety refers to a well-lit station or stop. In contrast, 62% of men feel the same way and believe a low risk of violence defines the term.[8] Differing levels of perceived safety are also found among ethnic minority, LGBTQ+, and disabled communities.

[3] United Nations (2024) Considerations on addressing challenges to first and last mile access to public transport. Available here.
[4] Wales Safer Communities Network. What is Personal Safety? Available here.
[5] British Transport Police Authority (2024) British Transport Police Fund. Annual Report and Accounts. Available here.
[6] British Transport Police (2023) Over a third of women have been sexually harassed on their commute to work. Available here.
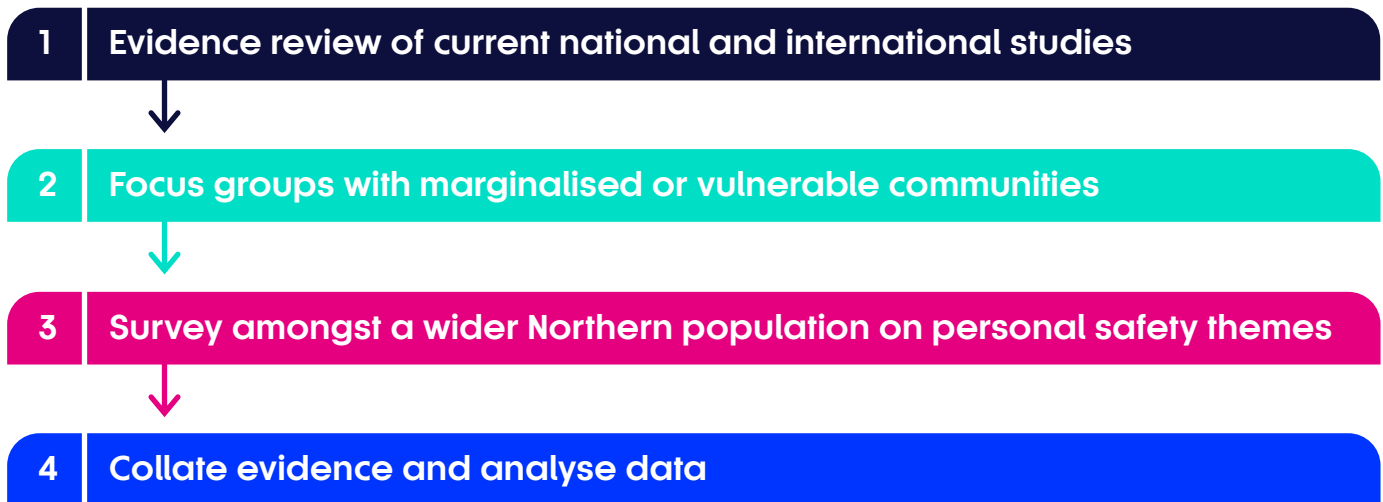[7] Transport Focus (2024) Transport User Voice January 2025 – Feeling safe on buses. Available here.
[8] Department for Transport (2023) National Travel Attitudes Study Wave 8. Available here.

2. Research approach

The core aim of this research is to gain a thorough understanding of how safe Northerners feel when using public transport.

To do this, we developed the following mixed-methods research design:

1	Evidence review of current national and international studies

2	Focus groups with marginalised or vulnerable communities

3	Survey amongst a wider Northern population on personal safety themes

4	Collate evidence and analyse data

After reviewing relevant literature, we conducted seven virtual focus groups to understand how safe Northern residents feel when using public transport. We deliberately selected participants from diverse demographic groups across age, gender identity, ethnicity, disability, and sexuality as these communities often experience disproportionate risks or barriers to safety.[9]

By engaging with people whose identities can shape their experiences in public spaces, we were able to explore both general safety concerns and issues specific to each group, ensuring that our findings reflect a broad and inclusive range of perspectives.

To complement the focus group findings and capture a broader cross-section of experiences, we launched an online survey through Transport for the North's social media channels and select local authority platforms.[10] Between April and June 2025, 861 people responded, providing additional, more representative insights into how safe Northern residents feel when using public transport.

This was undertaken as part of a wider research design, which included engagement with local authority officers and an evidence-matching process. This report focuses on our engagement with residents – setting out the nature of the safety challenges they experience, and the impacts of these on different population groups.

---

[9] Whilst this research includes insights from lesbian, gay, and bisexual respondents and participants, we were unable to include the views of transgender respondents due to a lack of access during sample recruitment. We recognise this as a limitation in this research when looking at marginalised and vulnerable communities, personal safety, and public transport.

[10] Local authority officers who are members of a Transport for the North working group were all invited to share the survey link across their authority's social media channels.

3. How safe Northerners feel using public transport

This section presents the key findings from our focus groups and survey.

Focus group findings

Across seven focus groups, we spoke with 48 Northerners. They helped us understand how safe communities, sometimes viewed as vulnerable or marginalised in social research, feel when using public transport.

Summary of key focus group findings

→ Public transport feels safer when staff are visible across the network.

→ Personal safety is often perceptual, second-hand accounts and media shape behaviour as much as direct experience can.

→ Many people avoid travelling after dark due to concerns about antisocial behaviour (ASB).

→ Most participants support expanding CCTV at stations and stops, provided privacy and ethical concerns are addressed.

→ Rail is generally viewed as the safest mode of public transport, followed by taxis and then buses.

→ Women report taking additional precautions that they feel men typically do not need to consider.

→ Younger people feel more confident and safer on public transport than older adults.

→ Ethnic minority passengers often experience microaggressions or racialised behaviours that make them feel unsafe.

→ People with non-visible disabilities tend to feel safer than those with visible disabilities.

→ Most LGB participants feel their sexuality does not affect their safety, unless it becomes visible in specific contexts.

Across all focus group sessions, five key themes emerged.

Theme 1: Public transport feels safer when staff are visible across the network

Participants expressed a strong and unanimous desire for more staff visibility across their public transport network. Many reflected on declining staffing levels in recent years and linked this reduction to heightened vulnerability and a worsening travel experience.

They strongly supported increasing the number of Travel Safety Officers (TSOs), particularly during evenings, weekends, and major events. They frequently mentioned football match days as a concern, with some actively avoiding travel due to overcrowding and aggressive behaviour.

> I am now travelling a lot more by train since losing my husband last year who always drove everywhere, so travelling alone and 75 years old so it can make me feel quite vulnerable. There never seem to be any conductors around except after a station change.
>
> **Woman, 65 – 74, East Yorkshire and Northern Lincolnshire**

> I avoid travelling on trains when I know there is a big football match on in the city I am going to.
>
> **Man, 30 – 44, Northumberland and Tyne and Wear**

Theme 2: Perceived safety concerns are just as influential as first-hand experiences

While a few participants shared first-hand accounts of feeling unsafe, most said that second-hand stories, media coverage, and social media shaped their views. They acknowledged that even without direct experience, such narratives significantly influenced their behaviour and attitudes.

These insights highlight how perception plays a powerful role in shaping travel decisions. They also suggest that improving confidence in safety requires addressing both actual and perceived risks.

> Mine are mostly from perceptions, when I see people of a certain age or demographic, I tend to feel less safe, based on what I know about these people or the area in general.
>
> **Man, 30 – 44, Cheshire**

Theme 3: Time of day influences perceptions of safety and patterns of travel

Most participants reported avoiding public transport at night where they can due to safety concerns. They perceived antisocial behaviour (ASB), including alcohol and drug use, as more common in the evening. Some described feeling uneasy when carriages or buses were nearly empty, as they felt reassured by the presence of other passengers.

Concerns about safety also shaped weekend travel habits. Several participants described changing their plans, choosing earlier journeys or indirect routes to avoid riskier situations.

> I'd definitely feel less safe at night because people are more likely to be under the influence of drink or drugs or both. Also, there's more likely to be youths congregating at that time than in the day.
>
> **Man, 45 – 59, South Yorkshire**

Theme 4: Passengers want to see safety improvements on their local network

Participants spoke clearly about the changes they wanted to see. These included better lighting, expanded CCTV coverage, more staff on duty, and increased investment in infrastructure.

While most supported expanding CCTV, a few raised concerns about excessive surveillance. When discussing emerging technologies such as AI and facial recognition, views were mixed. Some saw potential to improve safety, while others feared misidentification and discrimination.

Most participants agreed that safety improvements should be funded by government or operators, not through fare increases or higher taxes.

> Security guards and a visible CCTV presence make me feel safer. CCTV which is not obvious to others is not a deterrent. Posters and signs warning of criminal prosecution when appropriate also make me feel safer – they are likely to deter people. Good lighting and clean stations which are well looked after as well.
>
> **Man, 45 – 59, Lancashire**

> It could help but it depends on how it is used. Knowing that AI or facial recognition is there might make people feel more protected especially if it helps stop or track down serious incidents. But it also raises privacy concerns people might feel watched or uncomfortable.
>
> **Man, 30 – 44, West Yorkshire**

Theme 5: Not all modes are seen as equally safe

Participants described different transport modes as carrying different levels of safety. They generally viewed trains as the safest option, citing staff presence and British Transport Police jurisdiction. However, this confidence dropped when they could not see visible personnel.

They ranked taxis second in perceived safety but highlighted cost as a barrier. While many found taxis reliable, a few recounted negative experiences that reduced their trust.

Participants consistently saw buses as the least safe mode. They reported concerns about intimidating behaviour at stops and disruptive passengers onboard. Several linked bus travel to drug use, alcohol, and verbal harassment, particularly at night.

> I generally feel safe on intercity trains but less so on local trains or buses. I think mainly because it's younger people I perceive as a threat or people heavily intoxicated, and I feel I encounter these less on intercity trains.
>
> **Man, 45 – 59, South Yorkshire**

> I find trains safer because the ones I catch are generally reasonably busy and have conductors passing through or are really quiet and just have the odd working professional on. I feel less safe in taxis because you never know what the driver might do, and there's nobody else around to help you. I know the majority are fine and lovely people, but you never know if you're going to get a bad one.
>
> **Woman, 45 – 59, South Yorkshire**

Most participants believed their sense of safety depended on identity and the interaction of multiple characteristics (i.e., intersectionality).[11]

---

[11] Intersectionality refers to the connectedness of social categories, such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability. The concept of intersectionality recognises that different forms of discrimination and privilege often intersect and create unique challenges for people with multiple identities.

Gender and personal safety: Perspectives from women

Many women described using precautionary behaviours to feel safer while travelling, such as sharing their location or avoiding specific routes. Some recounted distressing experiences of harassment or inappropriate behaviour. Several said these precautions had become routine, reflecting a broader perception that public transport was not designed with women's safety in mind.

> Yes, I definitely feel less safe as a woman. Women are a lot more vulnerable, and I think a lot of men just don't realise how different it is for a woman... Men get a different sort of attention though and I know the statistics say you're more likely to be a victim of violence as a young man. I have three adult sons who would never feel afraid, neither would my husband.
>
> **Woman, 60 – 64, West Yorkshire**

Age and personal safety: Perspectives from younger and older people

To explore how age affects perceptions, we held two focus groups. One consisted of participants under 44 (younger group), and the other included participants aged over 65 (older group).[12]

Younger participants generally felt safer and believed older people experienced greater safety concerns. They also identified intersecting characteristics such as gender, ethnicity and physical stature as key influences.

In contrast, older participants expressed greater vulnerability, which they attributed to reduced physical strength, confidence, and concerns about social decline. Some said they felt invisible because of their age, which they saw as both a form of protection and a source of neglect.

> I think us older people have certain concerns, maybe around fragility and the ability to defend ourselves if needed. But younger females, as I am sure we are all aware, are often vulnerable targets.
>
> **Man, 65 – 74, East Yorkshire and Northern Lincolnshire**

Ethnicity and personal safety: Perspectives from ethnic minorities

Participants from ethnic minority backgrounds frequently reported that their skin colour or appearance made them feel unsafe. One participant described how people often grab their bags or change seats when they board public transport. For them, they feel as if people fear their presence or think they will be robbed.

Others raised concerns about travelling after the 2024 Southport riots. They spoke about changing how they dressed on public transport to avoid attention.

> I definitely avoid travelling through certain areas because of how I look. I'd rather take more circuitous route or a different mode of transport or just not go at all.
>
> **Man, 45 – 59, Northumberland and Tyne Wear**

---

[12] Individuals aged 45 – 64 were not included in the age-based focus groups but were included in other focus group sessions looking at different identity markers.

Disability and personal safety: Perspectives from those living with disabilities

Participants with non-visible disabilities generally said they felt safe, citing the invisibility of their condition. In contrast, those with visible disabilities expressed greater concern, particularly during the first and last mile of their journeys. They felt most exposed and unsupported at these times. Several also noted that the transport system often failed to accommodate their needs, which compounded feelings of vulnerability and exclusion.

> People have vulnerabilities that are both visible and not visible, but it can potentially make them both targets... I'm hard of hearing and the impact is huge as it affects me psychologically knowing I can't necessarily hear all danger so I'm on alert.
>
> **Woman, 45 – 59, East Yorkshire and Northern Lincolnshire**

Sexuality and personal safety: Perspectives from lesbian, gay, and bisexual people

Most lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) participants said their sexuality only affected their safety when it became visible, for example, when travelling with a same-sex partner or attending a Pride event. Some adopted precautionary strategies, such as changing clothes en route to blend in. Many expressed a shared understanding that expressions of identity, which felt ordinary elsewhere, could carry risk to personal safety on public transport.

> I'm bisexual but this isn't obvious to people unless I say it, so I don't feel like it impacts my safety. I definitely think those in same sex relationships or those holding hands are more unsafe which is sad.
>
> **Woman, 22 – 29, North Yorkshire**

> Being from LGBT community I do feel I can be a target. I tend to wear a jacket if I go to pride events, so I don't to show off colourful clothes.
>
> **Man, 45 – 59, Greater Manchester**

During the focus group sessions, participants described what a safe public transport system should look like.

For them, public transport should be…

"

…inclusive, friendly, and welcoming to all. It would be a service where safety is paramount, and every journey is comfortable, enjoyable, and stress-free from start to finish. The network will be fully accessible, removing physical and social barriers through step-free access, integrated travel options, and direct connections to key destinations like hospitals.

Public transport will be the first choice for everyone, thanks to clean, punctual, and reliable services powered by electric vehicles. With frequent buses, even on weekends, and fewer cancellations, passengers can travel with confidence and ease.

Stations and vehicles will be well-lit and equipped with modern facilities, including CCTV, alarm buttons, and bigger screens for information. Staff will be visible, approachable, and supported by onboard conductors and travel safe officers, creating a civilised atmosphere where everyone is treated with dignity and respect, and free from abuse and discrimination.

This system will not be driven by shareholders but by public value, offering affordable fares and putting people first. We will have adopted the best practises from other countries that have better transport and safety outcomes than we do.

There would no longer be the need to modify your appearance or clothing for safety concerns, everyone will feel truly protected, looked after, and part of a thriving, connected society.

Focus group participants

Survey findings

Between April and June 2025, 861 people completed our survey. The sample broadly reflects the demographic profile of the North of England, with differences of up to ±8.5% across characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, and region.

In this section, we explore key survey findings from five different thematic areas:

1. General perceptions of safety when using public transport

2. Coping strategies and precautionary behaviours when using public transport

3. Reporting incidents, response, and awareness

4. First and last mile journeys

5. Improving personal safety in the North of England for the future

The accompanying appendix report 1 details all survey results in further detail.

Summary of key survey findings

→ Personal safety concerns influence public transport mode choice for nearly two thirds (65%) of respondents, particularly among young women who report higher concerns.

→ Safety perceptions drop sharply after dark. Just 31% feel safe when travelling at night with women and young adults (18-34) feeling this way more than any other group.

→ Trains are considered the safest mode of public transport by over 65% of respondents. 64% believe some modes of travel feel safer than others.

→ Media and personal accounts strongly shape safety perceptions, particularly through the reporting of rare yet severe incidents over more common issues like ASB.

→ Half of those who regularly travel with children cite crowded vehicles and disorder as significant safety concerns.

→ Women report consistently higher exposure to harassment and ASB, especially those aged 20 to 39.

→ Precautionary behaviours like avoiding interaction with others (63%) or changing seats (63%) are widespread, particularly among women and ethnic minorities.

→ Incident reporting is low (22%), with limited confidence in outcomes, especially among women, those living with disabilities, and ethnic minorities.

→ Safety perceptions during first and last mile journeys vary significantly. Women and younger adults consistently feel less safe.

→ Improved lighting, CCTV coverage expansion, increased staff presence, and flexible travel options are the most supported safety interventions and measures.

→ Willingness to pay higher fares or taxes for safety measures varies notably, with younger adults, those living with disabilities, and LGB respondents the least supportive of such measures.

## General perceptions of safety when using public transport

Personal safety is a major influence on how people choose to travel. Nearly two-thirds of respondents (65%) said it affects their transport mode decision making, with 28% identifying it as a major factor and 37% noting some influence. One third (34%) reported that it plays no role in their decision-making.

Gender differences are particularly notable. Over one third of women (36%) reported that safety strongly influences their travel behaviour, compared with 11% of men. Men were almost twice as likely as women to say that safety has no impact (21% compared with 12%). Age also plays a role, with younger adults more likely to prioritise safety than older respondents. Only 2% of those aged 70 to 79 described safety as a strong influence.

Ethnic background further shapes perceptions. Respondents from Mixed (20%) and Asian (16%) backgrounds were more likely to rate safety as highly influential compared with White respondents. Disabled participants were less likely than non-disabled respondents to prioritise safety (9% compared with 18%).

Most participants (64%) believed that some modes of transport feel safer than others. This view was more common among women (34%) than men (29%), and particularly prevalent among those aged 30 to 39. Trains were rated as the safest mode overall, with 66% selecting them as their safest mode of public transport.

Figure 1: Extent to which personal safety influences mode selection by gender

■ Yes, to a great extent ■ Yes, somewhat ■ No ■ Don't know
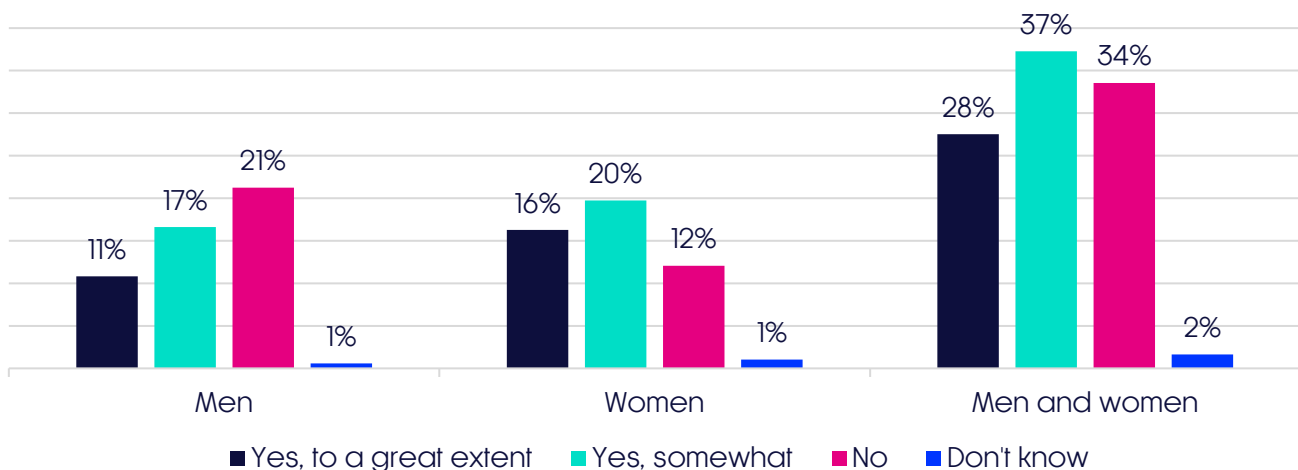
Figure 2: Modes of public transport ranked in terms of how safe they feel

■ 1 ■ 2 ■ 3 ■ 4
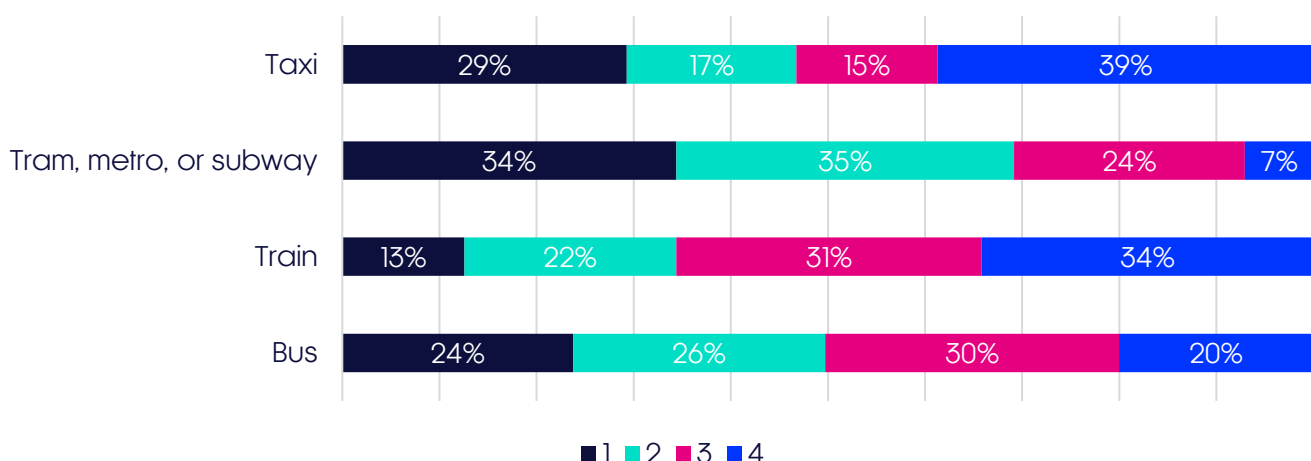
Note: Rank 1 is the least safe and rank 4 is the safest.

Perceptions of safety decline sharply after dark. While 79% of respondents felt safe during the day, only 31% said the same about travelling at night. Almost half (48%) reported feeling unsafe after dark, with concern highest among women and younger adults. Over half of women (56%) said they feel unsafe at night compared with 38% of men. Respondents aged 18 to 34 recorded the steepest drop in confidence.

Experiences and perceptions are strongly shaped by external narratives. More than half (56%) said accounts from people they know influence how they view safety on public transport. A further 42% cited media stories. One third (33%) encounter such stories weekly or more. Content analysis suggests that media coverage often focuses on rare but serious offences, such as knife crime or sexual assault, while underreporting more common forms of ASB.[13] This imbalance may reinforce public concern, particularly among already vulnerable groups.

Those travelling with children expressed specific safety concerns. Half (51%) reported issues with overcrowding, while 46% cited fears of violence, disorder or separation. Harassment (24%) and limited staff presence (25%) were also highlighted.

Direct experiences of feeling unsafe are widespread. Almost 30% of respondents reported verbal harassment, and over half had witnessed it. ASB was even more common, with 40% experiencing it and 56% witnessing it. Women consistently reported higher exposure to both verbal abuse and sexual harassment. Women aged 30 to 39 recorded the highest rates overall, while those in their twenties more frequently experienced theft and threatening behaviour. Men reported fewer incidents overall, though those aged 40 to 49 were slightly more likely to report violent crime (1%). The lowest levels of reported experience came from respondents aged 60 and over.

Coping strategies and precautionary behaviours when using public transport

Perceptions of risk often lead individuals to modify how they travel. Almost half of respondents (44%) reported avoiding specific modes of transport due to safety concerns. Among them, most completed their journeys using alternatives (63%), but nearly one third (33%) chose not to travel at all. Women, younger adults, and disabled respondents were more likely to change their travel plans in response to safety concerns, underscoring the broader implications for transport-related social exclusion.

Precautionary behaviours were common across the sample, though their form and frequency varied by demographic group. The most widely reported actions included avoiding eye contact (63%) and changing seats (63%). These behaviours were particularly prevalent among women and among respondents aged 60 and over, suggesting a combination of caution and experience. Appearance-related strategies such as altering clothing or adjusting posture were less common overall (9%) but more frequently reported by White and heterosexual respondents.

Mobile phone use emerged as a key tactic, though approaches diverged. Some respondents reported appearing busy on their phones to deter unwanted interaction (37%), while others avoided phone use altogether (30%) to remain alert. These behaviours were most commonly reported by women aged 30 to 39, who also frequently shared GPS locations with others while travelling. Younger women in particular used phone-related strategies more consistently than men of the same age group.

Ethnicity, sexuality, and disability status also shaped behavioural responses. Respondents from ethnic minority backgrounds often reported modifying their behaviour in more socially or

---

[13] This finding draws on a content analysis of 89 UK news articles published between January 2024 and July 2025, covering transport-related safety incidents on Google News under the search criteria of "bus crime".

culturally specific ways, including adjusting body language or avoiding speaking languages other than English. By contrast, White respondents were more likely to avoid certain locations or change their appearance. LGB respondents were generally less likely to alter their appearance, although they did report modifying routes and interactions in other ways.

Disabled respondents faced distinct constraints. While many expressed a desire to adopt similar safety strategies, they were less likely to use measures that required physical mobility, financial flexibility or access to personal transport. This group was significantly less likely to pay for faster travel options or to take detours, due to either cost or accessibility barriers.

The data also revealed variation in how frequently precautionary behaviours were adopted. Some actions, such as changing seats or staying alert in crowded spaces, were described as routine. Others, including sharing GPS location data or adjusting personal appearance, were more situational and often linked to previous experiences of risk or harassment. Women across all age groups were more likely to report using these behaviours consistently, particularly in relation to managing social interaction and physical proximity to others.

Table 1: Frequency of key coping strategies and precautionary behaviours among respondents when using public transport to feel safer

Coping strategies	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Don't know
Appear busy by using a mobile phone	12%	21%	18%	8%	0%	0%
Avoid eye contact or verbal communication	24%	31%	29%	16%	0%	1%
Avoid travelling at certain times or routes	17%	18%	25%	13%	0%	1%
Avoid using a mobile phone	10%	14%	16%	8%	0%	0%
Change mannerisms	4%	7%	8%	2%	0%	1%
Move to a different seat or area of the vehicle	9%	15%	41%	34%	0%	1%
Pay for more expensive, quicker modes of travel	4%	12%	20%	6%	0%	0%
Share your GPS location with someone else	14%	5%	8%	2%	0%	0%
Take a safer but longer or slower route	4%	9%	15%	7%	0%	0%
Travel to certain places only	4%	5%	7%	2%	0%	0%
Travel with a companion	7%	14%	14%	3%	0%	0%

Note: Darker teal and blue colours indicate a higher % of respondents who engage in various coping strategies or behaviours to differing extents.

Reporting incidents, response, and awareness

A relatively small proportion of respondents had reported a safety-related incident on public transport. Only 22% said they had done so, while 72% had not. A further 4% preferred not to say, and 2% were unsure. Women, disabled respondents, and those from Black, Asian or Mixed ethnic backgrounds were less likely to report incidents, despite also being among those who reported higher levels of exposure to risk. This under-reporting points not only to differences in experience but potentially to wider issues of trust and confidence in the system.

Knowledge of how to report a safety concern was uneven across the sample. Just over half of respondents (57%) said they knew how to report an incident, but 35% said they did not and 8% were unsure. Awareness was notably lower among Asian and Black respondents, and

slightly lower among disabled participants. These gaps suggest that reporting channels many not be accessible or communicated effectively to those who may be most in need of them.

Among those who had reported an incident, most turned to formal mechanisms. More than half (55%) contacted the police or British Transport Police, and 47% reported incidents to station or onboard staff. Fewer contacted the transport provider directly (32%), and very few used informal or alternative channels, such as social media (10%) or other methods (6%). These patterns were consistent across most demographic groups, although younger respondents and women were slightly more likely to use informal channels.

Satisfaction with the reporting process varied. Fewer than half (48%) of those who reported an incident said they were satisfied with the experience, while one third (33%) were dissatisfied. Women reported higher dissatisfaction than men (19% compared with 14%), and confidence in outcomes was lower still. Only 15% of all respondents said they felt very confident that reporting would lead to action, while 49% felt somewhat or very unconfident. Among disabled respondents, only 10% expressed strong confidence in outcomes, compared with 19% of non-disabled participants.

Awareness of safety campaigns was also uneven. Fewer than half of all respondents (47%) recalled seeing or hearing about a safety-related campaign linked to public transport. Campaign recognition was lower among minority ethnic groups and disabled respondents. Perceptions of staff preparedness followed similar patterns. Only 29% of respondents believed staff were adequately trained to respond to safety incidents. Confidence in staff was lowest among groups who reported feeling most vulnerable while travelling, particularly disabled and female respondents.

Figure 3: Experiences and perceptions of reporting safety incidents
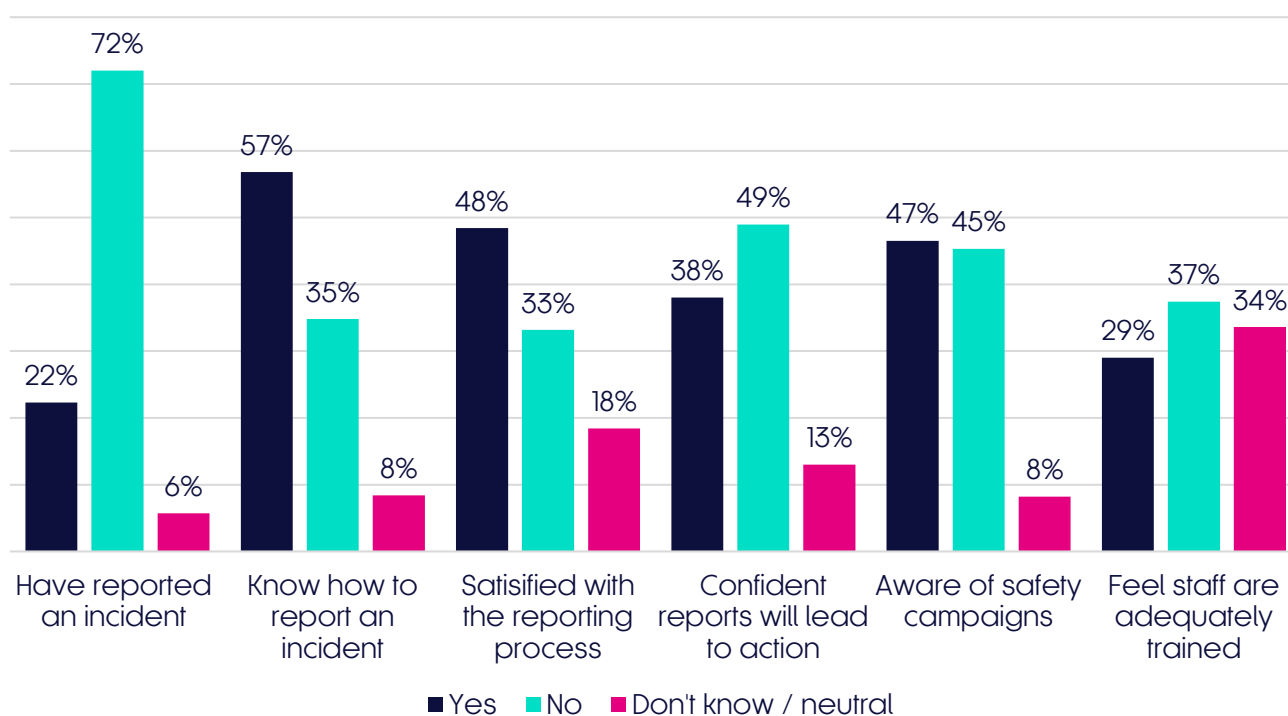

Note: Response groupings have been adjusted for clarity. 'Somewhat' and 'very' responses have been combined to either 'yes' or 'no' where appropriate.

First and last mile journeys

Perceptions of personal safety shift notably during the first and last mile of public transport journeys. While the majority of respondents (66%) felt safe walking to their local stop or station, levels of safety declined when waiting at stops or stations. In total, 34% said they felt very safe while walking and 33% felt somewhat safe. By contrast, only 29% felt very safe while waiting, with 32% somewhat safe. The proportion feeling unsafe rose from 14% while walking to 18% while waiting, indicating that stationary periods, often in unstaffed or exposed settings, present greater perceived risk.

Gender was a key factor influencing these perceptions. Women consistently reported feeling less safe than men during both walking and waiting stages. Just 12.3% of women said they felt very safe walking to their stop, compared with 21.1% of men. When waiting, 8.1% of women reported feeling somewhat or very unsafe, compared with 5.1% of men. Time of day also had a strong effect, especially among women and disabled respondents. Over half (55%) of all respondents said they felt least safe after 10 pm, but this figure rose to 29% for women and 15% for disabled participants. Among non-disabled respondents, the figure was higher at 38%, likely reflecting different travel patterns or greater exposure during nighttime hours.

Figure 4: Feelings of safety when walking to a local bus, tram, or train station or stop and then waiting at a local bus, tram, or train station or stop, by gender
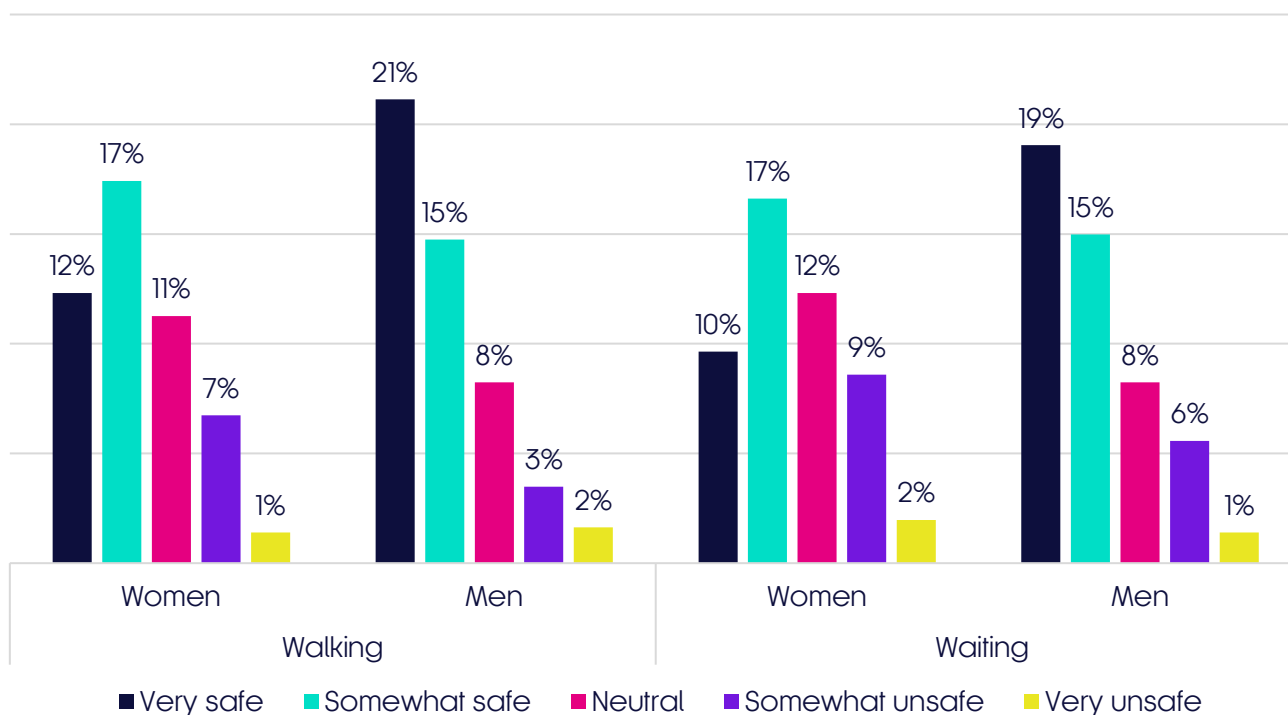
Age also shaped perceptions. Respondents aged 60 to 69 reported the highest levels of safety when walking, with 15% saying they felt very safe. In contrast, only 7% of those aged 20 to 29 said the same. While all age groups reported lower confidence while waiting, older adults remained more likely to describe themselves as feeling safe overall.

While most respondents (65%) reported no difference between the first and last mile stages, one in five (20%) said they felt safer at the beginning of their journey. Only 10% reported feeling safer during the final stage. This imbalance suggests that the final mile can carry heightened perceptions of vulnerability, particularly for those already concerned about safety.
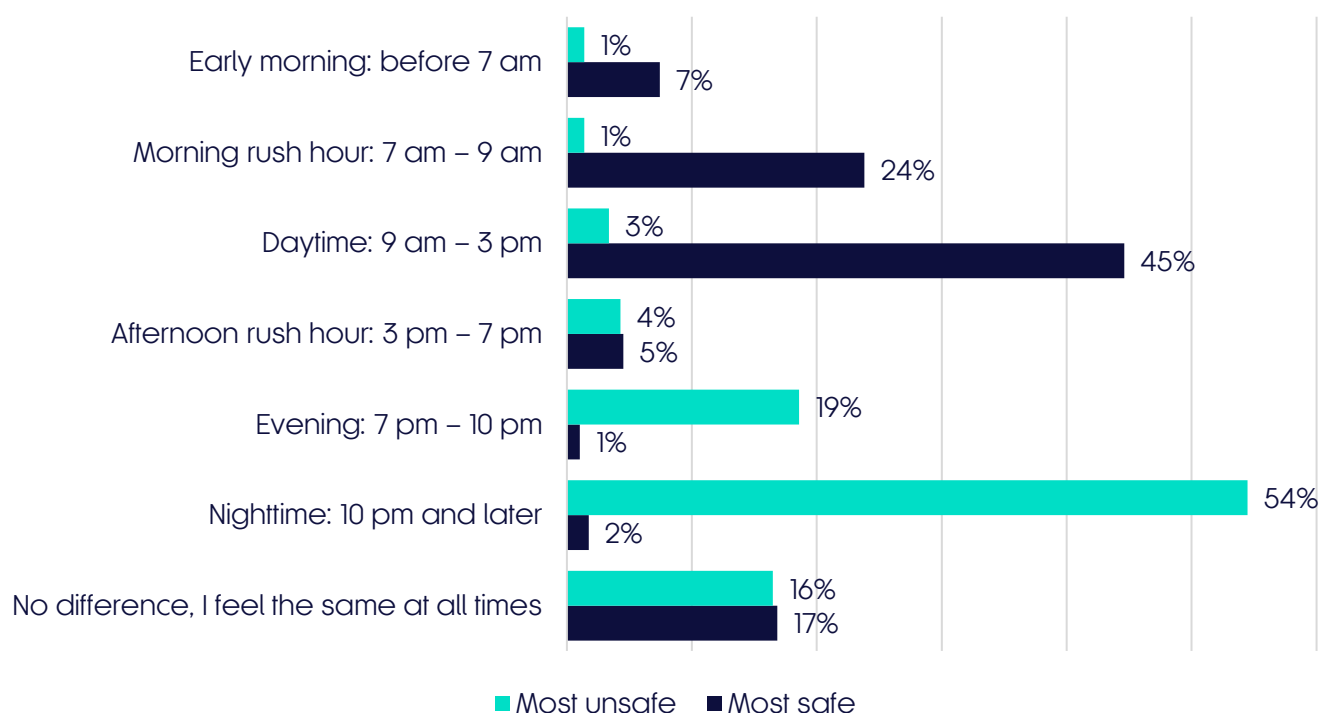
These perceptions often led to changed behaviours. Nearly half of respondents (45%) said they had altered their journey or travel mode due to safety concerns at these stages. Most did

so occasionally (37%), while 9% reported doing so frequently. Those who reported such changes were more likely to be women, younger adults and disabled respondents. Just under half of the total sample (49%) had made no adjustments.

Incidents of antisocial or criminal behaviour during first and last mile stages were common. Over 40% of respondents had witnessed or experienced ASB, and 35% reported verbal harassment. Smaller but still significant proportions experienced more serious offences, including hate crime (14%), theft (12%), sexual offences (9%) and violent crime (9%). These experiences often reinforced precautionary behaviours or avoidance of certain times or locations, particularly among groups already reporting heightened safety concerns.

The impact of time of day was particularly marked. Most respondents (45%) said they felt safest during the daytime, typically between 9 am and 3 pm. In contrast, only 2% felt safest during late-night hours (after 10 pm). Patterns of unease were concentrated in the evening and night, with 55% identifying late night as the period they felt least safe and a further 19% citing the early evening. Only 3% reported feeling unsafe during daylight hours, reinforcing the importance of lighting, visibility and active surroundings in shaping perceptions of security.

Figure 5: Feelings of safety when making first and last mile journeys, by time periods

Early morning: before 7 am — Most unsafe: 1%, Most safe: 7%
Morning rush hour: 7 am – 9 am — Most unsafe: 1%, Most safe: 24%
Daytime: 9 am – 3 pm — Most unsafe: 3%, Most safe: 45%
Afternoon rush hour: 3 pm – 7 pm — Most unsafe: 4%, Most safe: 5%
Evening: 7 pm – 10 pm — Most unsafe: 19%, Most safe: 1%
Nighttime: 10 pm and later — Most unsafe: 54%, Most safe: 2%
No difference, I feel the same at all times — Most unsafe: 16%, Most safe: 17%

■ Most unsafe ■ Most safe

Improving personal safety in the North of England for the future

Expectations for how safety will evolve over the next five years were mixed. Just over one quarter (28%) believe conditions will remain the same, while a similar proportion (28%) anticipate decline. A smaller group (24%) expect improvements, and 19% said they do not know. Demographic patterns revealed notable variation. White British respondents were more likely to expect safety to worsen (25%), whereas disabled respondents were more likely to anticipate improvement (18%). LGB participants, particularly those identifying as bisexual, were less likely to express concern and more likely to report uncertainty, suggesting a more ambiguous outlook among these groups.

To explore potential solutions, the survey asked respondents to rank a series of interventions across four domains: design and infrastructure, staffing and security, travel planning, and information and reporting. In the area of infrastructure and design, improved lighting emerged

as the most widely supported measure. It was ranked first by 30% of respondents, with an additional 30% placing it second. Increased CCTV also received strong support, with 48% ranking it among their top two priorities. Preferences for these visible safety features were highest among women and older adults. Respondents aged 60 to 69 were significantly more likely than those under 30 to prioritise lighting, and women consistently ranked both lighting and CCTV above men.

In relation to staffing and security, increased staff presence received the strongest overall support. More than two thirds (68%) ranked this as their top preference. Zero-tolerance enforcement of antisocial or criminal behaviour followed, with 34% ranking it second. Less support was given to bystander training, undercover personnel or volunteer-led schemes. Women and disabled respondents were most likely to prioritise staff visibility, reflecting higher levels of concern about both real and perceived vulnerability during travel.

Flexible and practical travel planning measures were also highly rated. Request-stop policies and safe route planning both appeared in the top two preferences for over 30% of respondents. These measures were especially valued by women and disabled participants, who often face greater risk or reduced access during the first and last mile of their journeys.

Information and reporting systems also featured prominently in the findings. Fast, discreet reporting methods received strong support, with 50% ranking this option highest. Real-time journey and safety information followed. In contrast, mechanisms such as crowdsourced safety ratings or general feedback platforms attracted lower levels of support, indicating a preference for responsive, individualised tools.

Attitudes towards emerging surveillance technologies were more divided. Overall, 36% of respondents said they were very supportive of advanced tools such as facial recognition or artificial intelligence, whilst 32% were somewhat supportive. However, younger adults, LGB respondents and those from ethnic minority backgrounds were more likely to express concern or uncertainty. Support was strongest among older and non-disabled respondents.

Finally, the survey examined willingness to invest in safety improvements. A majority of respondents (58%) said they would support increased funding for personal safety measures, even if this resulted in higher fares or taxes. However, this support was not universal. Non-disabled and heterosexual respondents expressed the highest levels of support, with nearly one third of the latter group stating they were very supportive. Support was more mixed among disabled and LGB participants. Younger respondents, particularly those under 30, were least likely to back additional funding, possibly reflecting cost sensitivity or competing priorities.

Figure 6: Support for the use of newer surveillance technologies and funding increases to support safety interventions
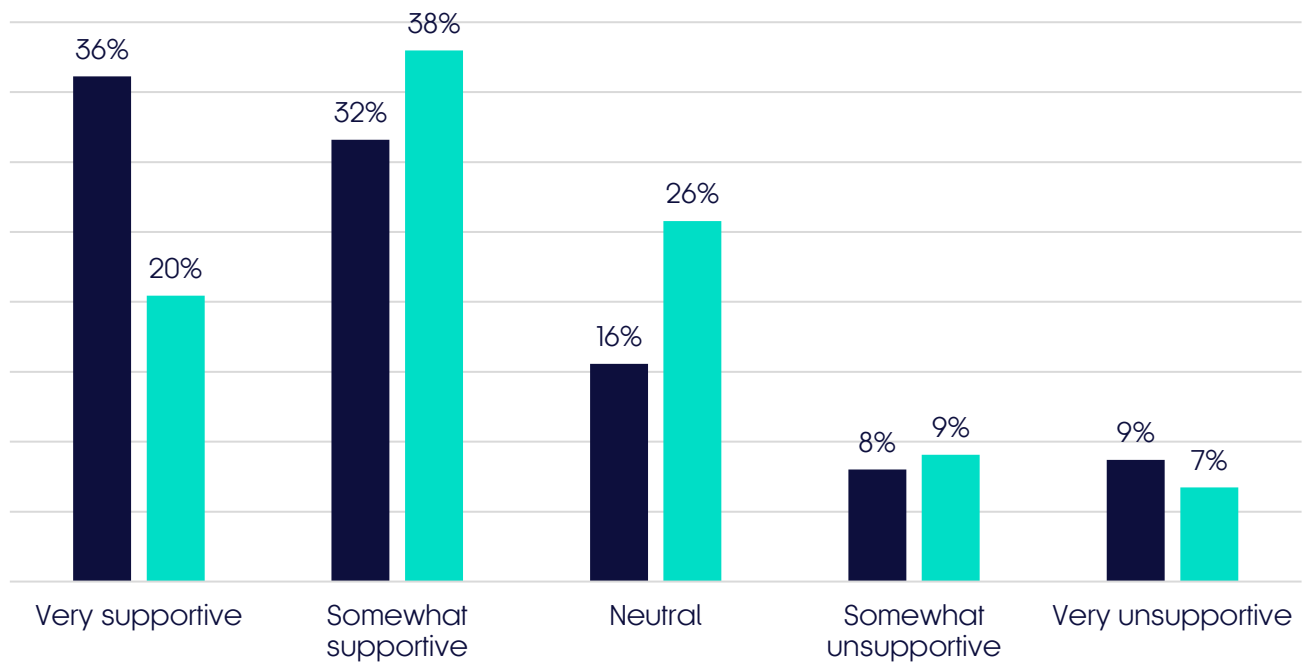
Legend:
- Increase surveillance with newer technologies (e.g., facial recognition and artificial intelligence)?
- Increasing funding for personal safety measures on public transport, even if this meant higher fares or taxes?

Category	Increase surveillance with newer technologies	Increasing funding for personal safety measures
Very supportive	36%	20%
Somewhat supportive	32%	38%
Neutral	16%	26%
Somewhat unsupportive	8%	9%
Very unsupportive	9%	7%

4. Conclusions

This research confirms that personal safety is central to how people in the North of England engage with public transport. From the first mile to the last, perceptions of risk influence travel behaviour, mobility, and, at times, whether individuals go on to access essential services and opportunities.

Whilst safety concerns are not shared equally, their impact is clear. Women, disabled people, ethnic minorities, and younger adults consistently report higher levels of concern and a greater reliance on precautionary strategies. These experiences highlight the additional effort some groups must make simply to travel, as well as the need for transport systems that address these disparities through design and operation.

Participants described strategies such as adjusting their routes, avoiding certain modes, or using technology for reassurance. These are rational responses to perceived threats, yet they also signal opportunities for authorities to provide greater support through enhanced public realm design and policies and interventions that actively promote safety.

Incident reporting remains an area for improvement, with low levels of engagement and mixed confidence in outcomes. Strengthening awareness, accessibility, and trust in reporting processes could help address under-reporting and enable quicker, more effective responses to incidents. Positively, and perhaps most importantly, there is strong public backing for visible, practical, and staff-led measures ranging from improved lighting, increased personnel, request-stop policies, to discreet reporting tools.

Improving safety is therefore not only about reducing the risk of harm, but also about unlocking access, encouraging sustainable travel, and building a transport network that works for everyone. With the help of these insights, policymakers and operators can take meaningful steps toward a system where all passengers feel secure, included, and confident to travel.

Authors of this report

Tom Mace, Social researcher

Dr Tom Jarvis, Principal social researcher

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.

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

Transport for the North (2025) Safety and public transport in the North. Available at: www.transportforthenorth.com/publications

For more information, contact research@transportforthenorth.com