



AGE BETTER
IN SHEFFIELD

Everyone Back on the Bus

Using public transport after a
pandemic - A Learning Digest
from Better Journeys

Introduction

Better Journeys aims to reduce social isolation and loneliness amongst the over 50s in Sheffield by making independent travel easier. This can be through various means; from using public transport, to active forms of travel such as walking and cycling. The original geographical focus of the project was the Firth Park Ward in the north of the city, but the area was subsequently widened and, as ABiS now focuses on the legacy of an age friendly Sheffield, many of the initiatives to encourage active travel such as the campaign to increase cycling confidence among older people, are relevant city wide.

First Response

As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and the various lockdown restrictions the Better Journeys' project was heavily impacted. The target audience is older adults aged 50 or over, and one of the main focuses of the service is to develop ways of encouraging those adults to get out in the local community more, often by using public transport. With the Covid-19 lockdown restrictions, Better Journeys needed to adapt to the changing pattern of use and perceptions of public transport. It was unsafe for them to continue to promote the use of public transport and encouraging older, potentially vulnerable adults who should be shielding from the virus, to leave their homes.

One of the first things they decided to do was to research what their target audience might require from public transport beyond the pandemic. A survey was designed using Survey Monkey and participants aged 50 or over were recruited through social media and other ABiS delivery partners. The survey, carried out in June 2020 received 54 responses which were used to understand what older people perceived as barriers to returning to public transport as well as challenges to active travel in general post pandemic.

Summary of Survey Findings

Access to Information

Issues around the reliability of public transport and services returning to what they were offering pre-pandemic were mentioned often. Access to reliable information including timetables, safety measures and the new forms of support public transport providers are introducing in response to the pandemic, will all be key to encouraging older people to return to public transport. For example, Stagecoach one of the major bus operators in Sheffield, have added a "Busy Bus" feature to their app, which enables passengers to see how busy services are and help them avoid travelling at those peak times.

However, older people will inevitably be disadvantaged as bus companies increasingly provide information on disruptions and service changes only online (Twitter is often where bus companies relay useful live service updates) and through apps on smart phones.

Many of the older people Better Journeys have engaged with are not internet users and currently have no means to access this digital information. Overall, the findings in this survey show that advancements in technology which includes service information moving online often leave older passengers behind. Public transport can be a lifeline for older users and in order to ensure they are not forgotten, both post-pandemic and in the long-term, service providers will need to ensure that both the service information and the travel environment, including bus stops, are age friendly.

Safety Concerns

For many older people one of the barriers to returning to public transport will be Coronavirus-related safety concerns and it will be vital to assist older adults in feeling safe and confident enough to return to using public transport. Obviously, Government guidelines, such as mandatory wearing of face coverings on public transport, must be relayed to passengers and complied with, but it is also crucial they are knowledgeable about the extra measures that are being put in place by service providers for passenger wellbeing and safety. This will both aid their confidence in going out in public again and will also ensure that they have knowledge around any guidelines they should be adhering to. For example, it is important that anyone intending to travel by public transport knows they should wear a face covering and that anyone who is exempt can prepare by acquiring a face covering exemption journey assistance card*.

SYLTE Future Travel Survey

South Yorkshire Passenger Transport Executive carried out their own survey in July 2020, publishing the results in September 2020. They surveyed the general public across South Yorkshire with the aim being to gain insight into travel behaviour post COVID-19. Respondents were asked about trips pre and post Covid and their journey purpose. Four main areas are looked at – travel to work, travel to education, travel for shopping and travel for leisure, as well as future travel views. They received 1,096 responses and the overwhelming majority 69.3% of these were from people who used the bus at least once a week pre pandemic.

The survey predicted post Covid-19 bus travel to fall with work trips made by commuters the least likely to return to pre pandemic levels. It also showed that it was likely that leisure trips and shopping trips by bus would also decline by 9% and 8% respectively. In giving reasons for why they may be more reluctant to travel by bus for leisure 56.7% said they were concerned about regular cleaning of seats, handrails etc. on buses while 54.4% felt they would be more likely to go by bus if they knew good social distancing rules were in place. Interestingly 13.8% said they thought bus services were likely to be less frequent and more prone to delays and cancellations post pandemic and this would deter them from travelling. We do not have break down by age of passenger responses to this survey.

Better Journey's Project Coordinator - Bluebell Evans

“One of things which I was most taken by when looking at the results of the survey we did was how older people’s confidence had been impacted by the Coronavirus pandemic.



A high level of participants stated that they felt extremely confident going out alone before the pandemic, however when asked how they felt about going out alone after lockdown, the majority said they felt less confident. No participants said they felt more confident post pandemic/lockdown. This suggests that there will be a lot of work to do when it is eventually safe to start encouraging older people to travel independently again, especially as things like confidence can be so easily damaged but very difficult to repair. This suggested to me that Age-Friendly staff training could play an important role in encouraging older people to get back on the bus by offering them reassurance.

Another concerning finding was the reduction in the regular use of the bus and tram in Sheffield by older people. Moreover, the survey showed that older people's concerns around using public transport more than doubled as a result of the pandemic. I found this worrying because if these forms of transport are an older adult's sole way of accessing their local services and amenities, then their reduced use of public transport could cause them to become more socially isolated and lonelier".

"I strongly believe that we can minimise the long-term impact the Coronavirus pandemic has had on older people's lives by helping them return to a normal lifestyle. I am determined that there shouldn't be a 'new normal' for older people in Sheffield where they are limited by their damaged confidence and left behind."

The importance of an Age-Friendly Sheffield approach in getting everyone back on the bus

Transportation is one of the eight domains or areas selected by the World Health Organisation to form the framework of what is considered crucial in developing our cities and communities that are “age friendly”. With the recognition of the challenges an ageing global population can pose, comes the necessity to future proof our towns and cities so that they become places where people can age actively and continue to fulfill their potential. Whether it is using public services or alternative forms of travel such as cycling, the ability to get about confidently and safely will be crucial for all of us as we grow older.

Bus Driver Training

We know that before the first lockdown in March 2020 there were already significant barriers to older people making independent journeys by public transport and Better Journeys was working to reduce these through initiatives such as Bus Buddies, Independent Travel Training and designing a training module to be used to educate bus drivers about the needs of older passengers.

The Bus Buddies initiative and Independent Travel Training were put on hold during the first lockdown in March 2020 and have yet to be reintroduced. The development of Age Friendly Bus Driver Training continued with the completion of the first draft of the resources in February 2021.

Once finalized it is hoped that the training will be rolled out to First Bus and Stagecoach for use in training new bus drivers and delivering ongoing development to existing drivers. The training was coproduced with older bus users by working with other Age Better in Sheffield Delivery Partners to access their participants. Older people were responsible for the video clips in the training which explain in their own words some of the challenges faced when travelling by bus.

Journey Assistance Cards

There are many different versions of these cards - your company possibly produce their own.

They are designed to allow passengers to discretely inform their bus driver of any specific needs to help them with their journey.

These cards can be used by all passengers, however some of them are more likely to be used by older people.

The training explains that older passengers may use *journey assistance cards, as shown above, which they will present to the driver on boarding the bus. The message is clear: be patient but the training also underlines the importance of a friendly welcome and a kind approach which will help to build confidence and trust in public transport. In the coproduction phase older people were very vocal about what they value, and this has been captured in one of the Power Point slides.

Feedback from older people - Positives

The driver recognized I was running for the bus and waited for me before setting off.

The driver still let me on even though I jumped on as he was shutting the doors.

Drivers in Sheffield are generally very friendly, especially in comparison with other cities.

Bus drivers take notice of our needs, lowering the ramp if it looks like it would be helpful (e.g. if using a walker, pram or shopping trolley).

I feel very safe on public transport and drivers are very often informative and willing to help if I have a problem.

Buses get you to your destination on time.

I was waiting for my bus and there was a queue of other buses at the stop. My bus pulled up at the back of the queue and the driver waited for the other buses to leave before moving down the queue. This allowed an older person with limited mobility to get on the bus without having to walk to the back of the queue.

When I don't know where to get off, drivers often let me know when I'm at the right stop.

A photograph showing an elderly woman with short white hair and a grey jacket looking at a document held by an elderly man with glasses and a white beard. The man is wearing a light-colored jacket and a dark backpack. They appear to be in a public transport setting, possibly a bus stop or a bus, as they are looking at what looks like a journey assistance card or a document related to bus travel.

The Age Friendly Bus Stop

Lai Yin Association who work with older people in Sheffield's Chinese community were contracted through ABIS to engage with people aged 50 or over through working groups to explore topics that they considered were relevant to transforming Sheffield into an Age Friendly city.

One working group focused on public transport and came up with a model for an age-friendly bus stop. This included several features they considered important including timetables displayed in a large font along with the bus route, adequate lighting, suitable seating and shelter from wind and rain.



One of the features that was suggested was a live departure/ arrival screen at bus stops, to provide more information to passengers about when a service is delayed or disrupted. This would be more accessible for those who are not 'online' and the members of the focus group involved in designing this prototype said it was a feature which would aid the use of public transport amongst older people.

An audit was carried out of the bus stops in the Firth Park area to see if any of them met the age friendly criteria shown in the prototype design.

Summary of findings from Firth Park Bus Stop Audit

- **Seating** – majority narrow, short and flat, often with separators too. Some with sloped bars as seats. Some quite low. A couple of bus stops didn't have any seats at all. All were made of the same material which can become very cold to sit on.
- **Timetables/routes** – majority of timetable cases/displays not used to their full potential. For example, usually only one oversized A4 display used out of two available. No routes displayed despite room for them sometimes in sides/timetable cases. All timetables were displayed in the same, small, standard font size.
- **Lighting** – Out of 25 bus shelters, only 6 had lights which were working.
- **No Smoking signs** – no-smoking signs in a few but often not in visible places and usually only one per shelter.
- **Roof/sides** – most stops had curved roofs to aid self-cleaning, some had two sides where the visibility was good. Some also had sides which were shorter.
- **Cleanliness** – all bus shelters in general needed a clean, some had been subject to vandalism which had not tended to.

The detailed findings from the audit have now been presented to SYPTE and it is hoped that they will be used to carry out improvements to the existing bus stops in the area so as to reduce some of the barriers experienced by older people when thinking about getting back on the bus.

Learning and Legacy

A global pandemic, a series of national lockdowns and instructions for many older people to shield are not the circumstances in which a project aimed at encouraging independent travel in the overs 50's might be expected to thrive. Better Journeys has adapted quickly to the challenges and the change.

Their work in understanding and promoting the actions necessary to encourage older passengers back on to public transport post pandemic will be part of the legacy of Age Better in Sheffield. Their ability to engage the bus companies and SYPTE in conversation means that older passengers' voices are being heard and that age friendly transportation is on the agenda in places where it counts.

The value of working in partnership with other ABiS projects is shown through the excellent work produced by the Lai Yin working group while having access to the target audience through the whole ABiS programme made it easier to conduct the transport survey during lockdown.

The project has shown that public transport is increasingly turning to digital technology and social media to disseminate information including bus routes and timetables. This highlights once again the digital divide that exists across different parts of our society but underlines that in order to build an age friendly culture, we must address the barriers that will exclude people from participating fully as they age. Many older people have still to find the motivation to get online and maybe the desire to make the most of public transport is one of the factors that could motivate them. As we move beyond lockdown and begin once again to travel for leisure wouldn't it be encouraging to see Sheffield transport providers running a campaign to get older people to use a simple "age friendly travel app" to access information, travel tips, special offers and safety advice?

Better Journeys is a project that started with one set of plans and due to circumstances had to adapt quickly, because of that it has become uniquely placed to know what it will take to get everyone back on the bus.

***Journey Assistance Cards can be obtained from Bus Interchanges or people can contact Better Journeys and ask for them to be sent via the post.**

Age Better in Sheffield

152 Rockingham Street

Sheffield

S1 4EB

www.agebettersheff.co.uk