



England-Wide Concessionary Bus Travel: The Passenger Perspective

Report for Passenger Focus

July 2009



Foreword

In April 2006 the Department for Transport introduced a concessionary fares scheme requiring local authorities in England to provide free bus travel for older and disabled people in their local area; in April 2008 they extended this to enable them to travel free on local buses anywhere in England.

Passenger Focus has been representing the interests of rail passengers for many years; the Government has indicated its intention to extend our remit to representing the interests of bus and coach (and possibly tram) passengers in England (outside London) from April 2010. It has asked us to operate in 'shadow' form in respect of bus and coach passengers in the meantime. We could think of no more appropriate or topical issue with which to start than concessionary fares.

The scheme has rarely been out of the news. Much of the controversy has centred around the funding and administration of the scheme. Some local authorities have complained that they are not being provided with sufficient funds to cover the concession (others have reported a surplus), and that take-up of the concession from people who live outside their area means some local people are, as a result, unable to get on, or get a seat. Some operators feel that the locally-administered scheme creates unnecessary complexity and bureaucracy and would be better administered centrally, an issue which is now being addressed through a Government consultation. Relative minor adjustments to the scheme announced in April 2009 resulted in a series of newspaper headlines that could have led some readers to believe, quite wrongly, that entitlements were being radically cut back.

But what about the passengers? How much use have older and disabled people made of their pass to travel around their local area or further afield? How have they found the experience? And what about the passengers who are not entitled to free travel? Have they noticed a difference? Are buses less reliable and more crowded? Do they support the scheme?

Our research found that older and disabled people have been using buses significantly more since free travel was introduced in April 2006, and extended in April 2008. Not having to pay to use the bus is making it easier for older and disabled people to get out of the house, visit friends and relatives, go shopping and take advantage of sport, leisure and recreation opportunities. Some are making journeys they wouldn't previously have made. Some of those who have cars are leaving them behind, preferring to take the bus. With a few exceptions, the scheme does not appear to be having an excessive impact on overcrowding or the quality of local bus services. Free national off-peak travel is popular with older and disabled bus users qualifying for a free pass; bus users who currently have to pay full fare are equally positive.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Colin Foxall".

Colin Foxall CBE
Chairman
Passenger Focus

Executive Summary

In preparation for its new role as the bus passenger champion, Passenger Focus has undertaken research into the impacts of nationwide concessionary bus travel for older and disabled passengers. In the research we spoke to both pass holders and non-pass holders to understand the effects of concessionary bus travel from their perspective and explore their views of the new scheme.

Background

From 1 April 2008 all people aged 60 and over or with an eligible disability have been entitled to free off-peak bus travel anywhere in England. This replaced the previous entitlement to free off-peak journeys within the pass holder's local area, introduced in 2006¹.

The concession entitles pass holders to free bus travel after 9:30am on weekdays and at any time on weekends. In some areas the statutory entitlement has also been enhanced to include free bus travel before 9:30am and free travel on other forms of local public transport.

The Research

The research was undertaken by Integrated Transport Planning Ltd on behalf of Passenger Focus in January and February 2009. There were two main components:

- Eight focus groups (four with pass holders and four with non-pass holders) undertaken in Manchester, Bournemouth, Norwich and Hartlepool. Three of the pass holder focus groups were with people who qualified for the concession due to their age and one was with people who qualified due to disability.
- A survey of 2,000 pass holders and non-pass holders, undertaken in Birmingham, Bath, Scarborough and Newark-on-Trent.

Key Findings

- There is strong evidence that concessionary bus travel has encouraged greater bus use by pass-holders, particularly in their local area. In the survey over a third (39%) said they travel more by bus within their local area since they obtained a concessionary pass.
- In comparison, about one in eight (13%) of pass holders reported making more journeys by bus outside of their local area following the introduction of the free national bus travel entitlement.
- In the focus groups, pass holders reported a number of barriers to travelling by bus outside their area, despite this now being free under the new concession. These included:
 - general anxiety about travelling on unfamiliar bus services
 - a perceived lack of information on bus timetables, service frequencies and stops
 - a lack of awareness of the extent of local free travel entitlements
 - the length of respective journey times by bus compared to car
 - bus service reliability issues, particularly with respect to connecting services.

- It should also be noted that the survey was undertaken in February, and less than a year after the introduction of the new concession. Subsequent research, carried out in summer, may indicate greater use of buses by pass holders outside their local area.
- Amongst pass holders who were using their pass to travel outside their local area, 35% were undertaking journeys by bus that they had previously made by car. 12% were making journeys by bus that they had not previously made by any means, prior to the new concession.
- The most common reasons pass holders travelled by bus outside their local area were to visit family and friends (46%), make shopping journeys (46%) and to access sport, recreation and leisure facilities (18%). 10% of pass holders travelling outside their local area by bus had done so for holiday purposes or while away on holiday.
- The vast majority (94%) of passengers in the survey usually travel on local services which have seats available and are not crowded, while 3% said they usually had to stand due to levels of crowding. However, when prompted with details of the national free bus travel scheme, around a fifth of all respondents felt that their local services had become more crowded since April 2008 and 13% of non-pass holders and 11% of pass holders indicated that they had experienced excessive overcrowding on their local services due to high numbers of free pass holding passengers. It would appear that these instances



¹ Older and disabled passengers in the West Midlands, Merseyside and some other parts of England were entitled to free local bus travel prior to the introduction of the statutory concession in 2006, through local concessionary schemes.



“Not having to pay to use the bus is making it easier for older and disabled people to get out of the house, visit friends and relatives, go shopping and take advantage of sport, leisure and recreation opportunities. Some are making journeys they wouldn't previously have made”

of overcrowding mainly take place during off-peak morning and afternoon periods (reflecting the finding that pass holders most commonly travel by bus at these times) although the focus group discussions indicated that overcrowding during peak times is exacerbated by pass holders in areas where the entitlement is enhanced to allow free travel before 9:30am (for example in Hartlepool).

- Nevertheless, the survey showed that these instances of excessive overcrowding due to high volumes of pass holding passengers are localised to specific routes, with the greatest proportion of bus services affected in Scarborough. Despite the fact that the majority (77%) of respondents felt overcrowding occurred throughout the year, there was also evidence to suggest that overcrowding is more of a seasonal issue in Scarborough, where 47% had experienced overcrowding specifically during the summer months of May to August. This might be more widely reflected in the results of a survey undertaken over the summer or in a set of locations which are more appealing to tourists.

- Despite this, the general perception of the vast majority (93%) of non-pass holders was that any excessive overcrowding caused by the national free travel entitlement has not had any impact on their bus use, and as a result the majority (57%) did not support the idea of restricting the concession to less busy bus services. In addition, over 85% of non-pass holders felt that the frequency and quality of their local bus services had either stayed the same or improved since the national free travel entitlement has been introduced.

- There was limited evidence that overcrowding linked to the introduction of free national bus travel has impacted on the perceived quality of bus services. 76% of passengers felt the quality of bus services had stayed about the same since the introduction of the new concession, while 12% felt it had improved and 8% thought it had got worse.

- There was strong support for the concessionary scheme, amongst both pass holders and non-pass holders. Overall, 95% of passengers in the survey (96% of pass holders and 94% of non-pass holders) thought it was right that older and disabled people were entitled to free national off-peak bus travel through the current concessionary scheme. This view was also strongly supported by the findings of the focus groups with non-pass holders.

- Views were more mixed on the idea of extending the scheme to free bus travel at all times of the day, including the morning peak. Overall 58% agreed with this potential change while 33% disagreed.

Conclusions

Debates between different tiers of government and operators have focused on the funding formula for the concessionary fares scheme. A Government consultation on the administrative arrangements for the scheme provides an opportunity to bring these debates to a resolution. Our research focused on the views of passengers, both those who are already benefiting from the pass, and those who do not qualify for the concession at the moment.

- 1 The research demonstrates that free national off-peak bus travel is popular with older and disabled bus users qualifying for a free pass. Bus users who currently have to pay full fare are equally positive.
- 2 Older and disabled people have been using buses significantly more since free off-peak local bus travel was introduced in April 2006, and extended to free off-peak national bus travel in April 2008.
- 3 Not having to pay to use the bus is making it easier for older and disabled people to get out of the house, visit friends and relatives, go shopping and take advantage of sport, leisure and recreation opportunities. Some are making journeys they wouldn't previously have made.
- 4 Some of those who have cars are leaving them behind, preferring to take the bus.
- 5 With a few exceptions, the scheme does not appear to be having an excessive impact on overcrowding or the quality of local bus services.
- 6 Not everyone who could be benefiting is benefiting – there is a need to improve information on services outside the local area to prevent 'rationing by ignorance'.

Passenger Focus will work with the Government, bus operators and local authorities to seek to ensure that the scheme continues to deliver benefits to passengers and to ensure that all those entitled to free travel have the information they need to take advantage of their entitlements.

England-Wide Concessionary Bus Travel: The Passenger Perspective

Final Report

Version 2.0

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1 RESEARCH CONTEXT AND OBJECTIVES

- 1.1 From 1 April 2008 all people aged 60 and over or with an eligible disability² have been entitled to free off-peak bus travel anywhere in England. This has replaced the previous entitlement to free off-peak journeys within the pass holder's local area, which was introduced in April 2006³.
- 1.2 A review of the available evidence at the beginning of this study indicated that pass take-up increased significantly as a result of the free local off-peak travel introduced in April 2006, and has continued to increase as a result of the introduction of free national travel in April 2008. While the number of passes issued has increased, so have the number of trips made by eligible pass holders. Research by the Department for Transport (DfT)⁴ found that in the three months following its implementation, over 80% of those who had held a pass under the previous scheme had received or requested a new pass entitling them to the country-wide concession. In addition, 33% of those who had never used a bus before had also received or requested a pass under the new scheme. The DfT research also found that 69% of respondents with the new concession had used their pass at least once in the previous month. This was an increase on 2007 when, under the old concession, 60% of respondents with a pass had used it at least once in the previous month.
- 1.3 However, the literature review concluded that there is currently limited evidence on what types of journey the new pass is being used for, or the effect of the concessionary travel on pass holders use of other transport types. There is also little yet known about the impacts of the new concession on non-pass holders.
- 1.4 The overall objective of this research was therefore to understand the impacts of the introduction of free national off-peak bus travel on both pass holding and non-pass holding bus passengers. The specific objectives were to explore the impact of concessionary bus travel on:
- The frequency and nature of bus use amongst pass holders.
 - Modal choice amongst pass holders.
 - Levels of overcrowding on off-peak bus services, as perceived by pass holders and non-pass holders, and any knock on impacts of overcrowding on non-pass holders.
 - Views about the new concession amongst both pass holders and non-pass holders.

² For the purpose of the England-wide concessionary bus travel scheme you are classified as having an eligible disability if you are blind or partially sighted, profoundly or severely deaf, without speech, have a disability or injury which has a substantial long term effect on your ability to walk, do not have arms or have long term loss of the use of both arms, have a learning disability or you would have your licence to drive a motor vehicle refused on grounds of physical fitness.

³ Older and disabled passengers in the West Midlands, Merseyside and some other parts of England were entitled to free local bus travel prior to the introduction of the statutory concession in 2006, through local concessionary schemes.

⁴ Department for Transport, 'Awareness and use of bus concessionary fares', 2008, Available from: www.dft.gov.uk/pgr/statistics/datatablespublications/trsnstatsatt/pubawarenessanduseofbusconcess

2 SAMPLE AND METHODOLOGY

- 2.1 A methodology involving both qualitative and quantitative research was employed to meet the research objectives. Initially focus groups were used to assess trends and patterns in the travel behaviour, attitudes and perceptions of a range of bus passengers across England with respect to country-wide concessionary travel. A structured questionnaire was then administered among a statistically valid sample to determine the 'numbers' of bus passengers displaying the types of behaviours, attitudes and perceptions identified in the qualitative research.
- 2.2 The research comprised eight focus groups (one with free pass holders and one with non-pass holders living in four locations within England) followed by a survey of 2002 bus passengers (evenly split between pass holders and non-pass holders living in four alternative locations within England). Both samples were constructed to represent bus users who live within the boundary of their local transport authority area (within which free bus travel has been available to eligible pass holders since at least April 2006). The findings from both phases of the research are reported in the following section with the quantitative findings qualified by outputs from the focus groups where appropriate.
- 2.3 Three of the four focus groups with pass holders involved people who qualify for free travel by virtue of their age (60 years and over) and the fourth group represented people with an eligible disability, including people with both physical and sensory impairments. The four groups of non-pass holders each represented a spread of age group but excluded people who qualify for any free travel scheme. In addition, where possible the non-pass holder groups included a spread of regular commuters and non commuters. Both sets of groups also encompassed a mix of genders and a spread of socio-economic group. The focus groups were conducted in January 2009 and followed topic guides and stimulus materials (included as Appendices A and B) designed to respond to the specific objectives of the research.
- 2.4 The survey of bus passengers comprised interviews with 1000 pass holders (both older and disabled persons pass holders in equal proportion across the four areas) and 1002 non-pass holders (250 interviews in each of three areas and 252 in one (Newark)) undertaken at selected bus stops using questionnaires (included as Appendix C) designed to meet the research objectives. Both samples included a range of respondent ages and representation of users of a mix of different operators in each area (with the exception of Bath where First dominates the market). A good mix of journey purposes (commuters and non commuters) was again a priority for the non-pass holder sample. The survey fieldwork was undertaken in February 2009 from the start time for free travel at each location through to 19.30 to give a broad spread of responses by people travelling at different times of day. Table 2-1 outlines the sampling criteria within the eight survey locations selected for the purposes of the research.

Table 2-1: Qualitative and Quantitative Research Locations⁵ and Sampling Criteria

Qualitative Research (Focus Groups)	
Location	Local Enhancements to the Free National Bus Travel
Manchester	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> 'Standard concessionary fare' for travel before 9.30am <input type="checkbox"/> Some disabled pass holders can travel free at all times <input type="checkbox"/> Free off-peak and half fare peak train & Metrolink travel <input type="checkbox"/> Free travel vouchers for some blind & disabled residents
Bournemouth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Free companions travel across the Bournemouth, Poole and Christchurch area and out of area without a change of bus <input type="checkbox"/> Blind and partially sighted travel for free at any time in Bournemouth, Poole and Christchurch
Norwich	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Free travel between 8.30am⁶ and 11.30pm <input type="checkbox"/> Free travel across Norfolk <input type="checkbox"/> Companions concession allowing the same benefits
Hartlepool	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Free travel on local bus services at all times <input type="checkbox"/> Free travel throughout the 'Tees' area of Hartlepool, Stockton, Middlesbrough, Redcar and Cleveland at all times
Quantitative Research (Bus Stop Surveys)	
Location	Local Enhancements to the Free National Bus Travel
Birmingham	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Free off-peak bus, train, Midland Metro and Ring & Ride travel between 9.30am until end of daytime services. <input type="checkbox"/> Reduced price peak bus, train and Midland Metro travel
Bath	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Free travel after 9.00am on local bus and Park & Ride services <input type="checkbox"/> Companions concession allowing the same benefits
Scarborough	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Free bus travel after 9.00am in North Yorkshire & York <input type="checkbox"/> Companions concession allowing the same benefits
Newark-on-Trent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Half price bus travel before 9.30am and half price local rail <input type="checkbox"/> Free travel on tram 9.30 to 4.00pm; half price at other times <input type="checkbox"/> Companions concession allowing the same benefits
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⁵ Locations selected by Passenger Focus to achieve representative samples of pass holding and non-pass holding bus passengers across England within the available resources covering settlements of different sizes/characteristics, a range of enhancements to concessionary travel entitlements and different operators.

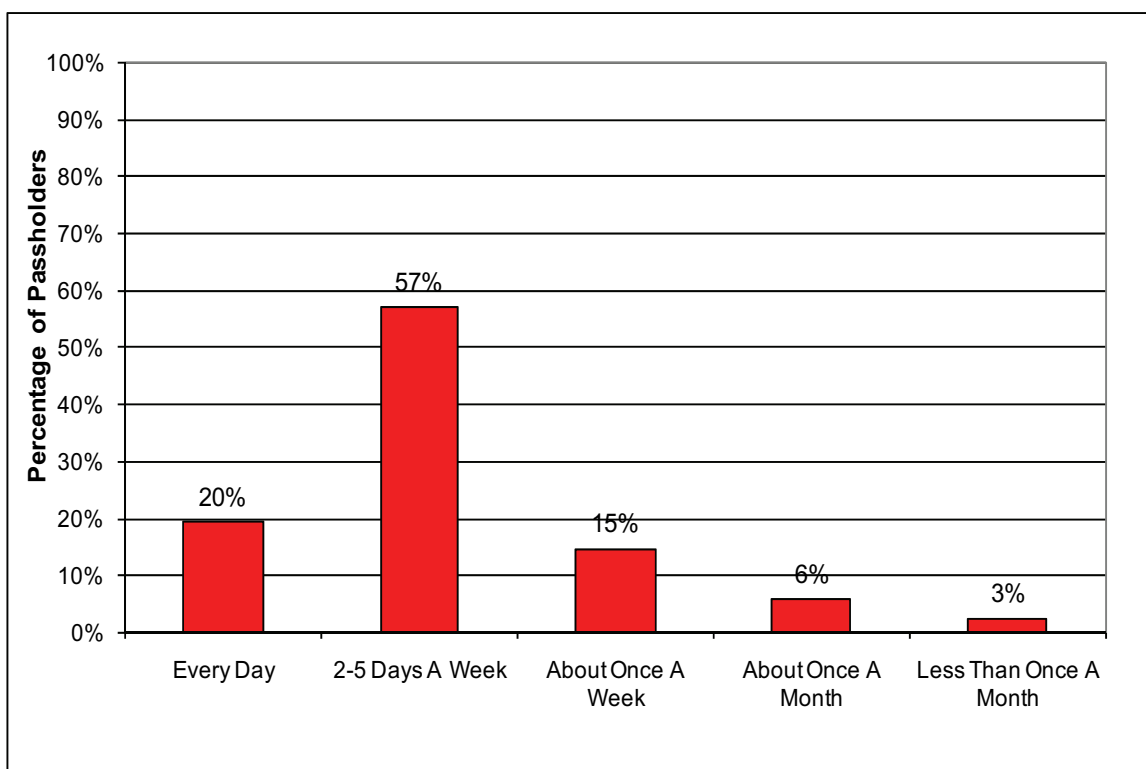
⁶ In April 2009, following the fieldwork for this research, the start time of the concession in Norwich was changed to 9:30am.

3 KEY FINDINGS

Frequency and Nature of Bus Use amongst Pass Holders

3.1 The majority of pass holders usually travel by bus more than once a week within their local area⁷, with 57% of pass holders using the bus to travel locally between 2 and 5 days per week and 20% of pass holders travelling by bus every day within their local area.

Figure 3-1 Frequency of travel by pass holders within their local area



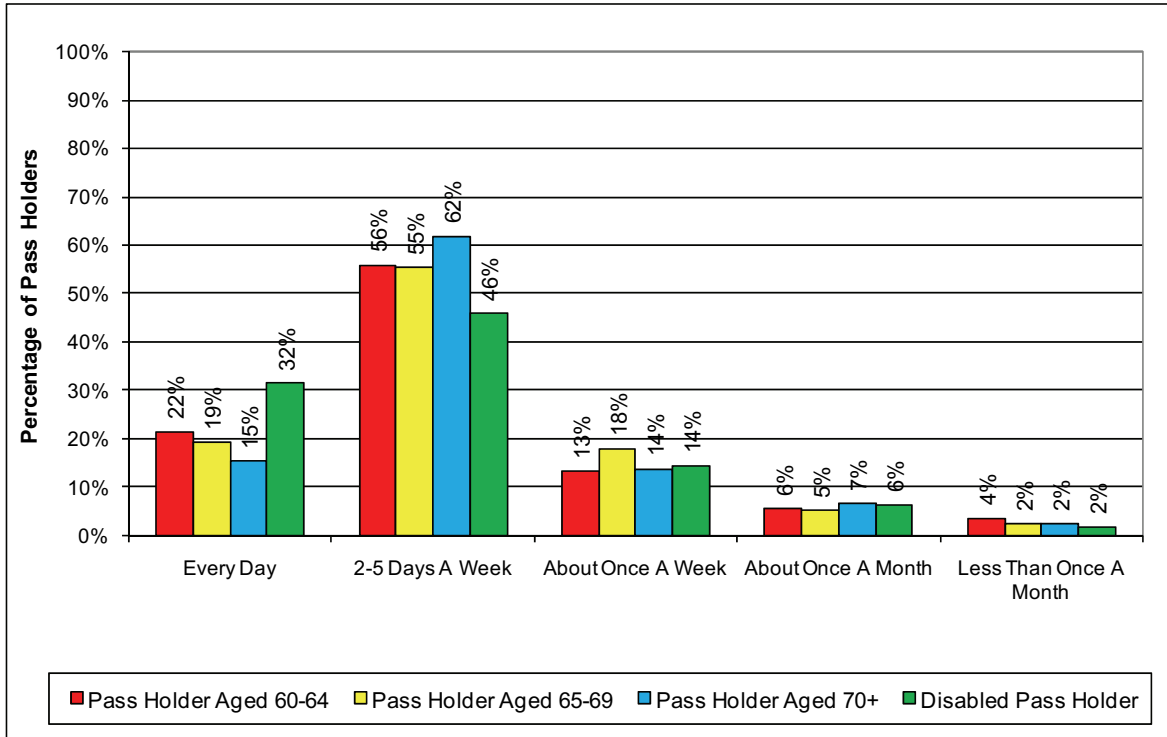
“I tend to use the buses a great deal for local journeys since we’ve got our bus pass.”

[Concessionary Pass Holder Aged 60 or Over, Bournemouth]

3.2 Figure 3-2 shows that when analysed by pass holder type, disabled pass holders are more likely to use the bus on a daily basis than pass holders who qualify for the concession due to their age. Just under a third (32%) of disabled passengers travel by bus locally every day, compared to 22% of pass holders aged 60-64, 19% of pass holders aged 65-69, and 15% of pass holders aged 70 and over.

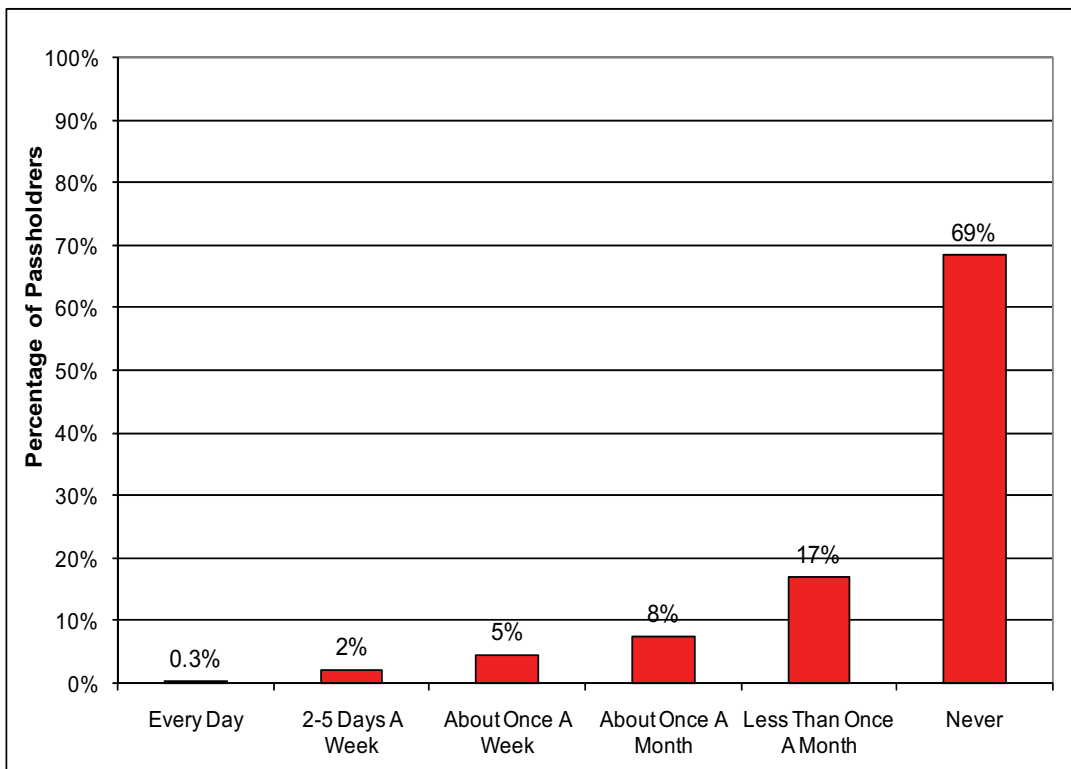
⁷ Respondents were shown a map of the boundaries of their ‘local area’ (defined as the local transport authority area within which free bus travel has been available to eligible pass holders since at least April 2006) before being asked questions about their travel both inside and outside this area.

Figure 3-2 Frequency of travel within the local area by pass holder type



3.3 Pass holders travel much less frequently by bus outside their local area. Overall, just over 2% of pass holders usually travel by bus more than once a week outside their local area. 5% of pass holders travel by bus about once a week, 8% about once a month and 17% less than once a month outside their local area. Over two-thirds (69%) had never travelled by bus outside their local area.

Figure 3-3 Frequency of travel by pass holders outside their local area



3.4 The fact that the survey was undertaken in February with its comparatively colder, wetter weather and shorter daylight hours, may have influenced these results. However, the indications from the focus groups were that other barriers to using the bus outside of the local area have the greatest impact. These include:

- ❑ a general anxiety amongst pass holders when making unfamiliar journeys;
- ❑ a perceived lack of available travel information for these journeys;
- ❑ a lack of awareness of the extent of local free travel entitlements;
- ❑ the length of respective journey times by bus compared to car; and
- ❑ bus service reliability issues, particularly with respect to connecting services.

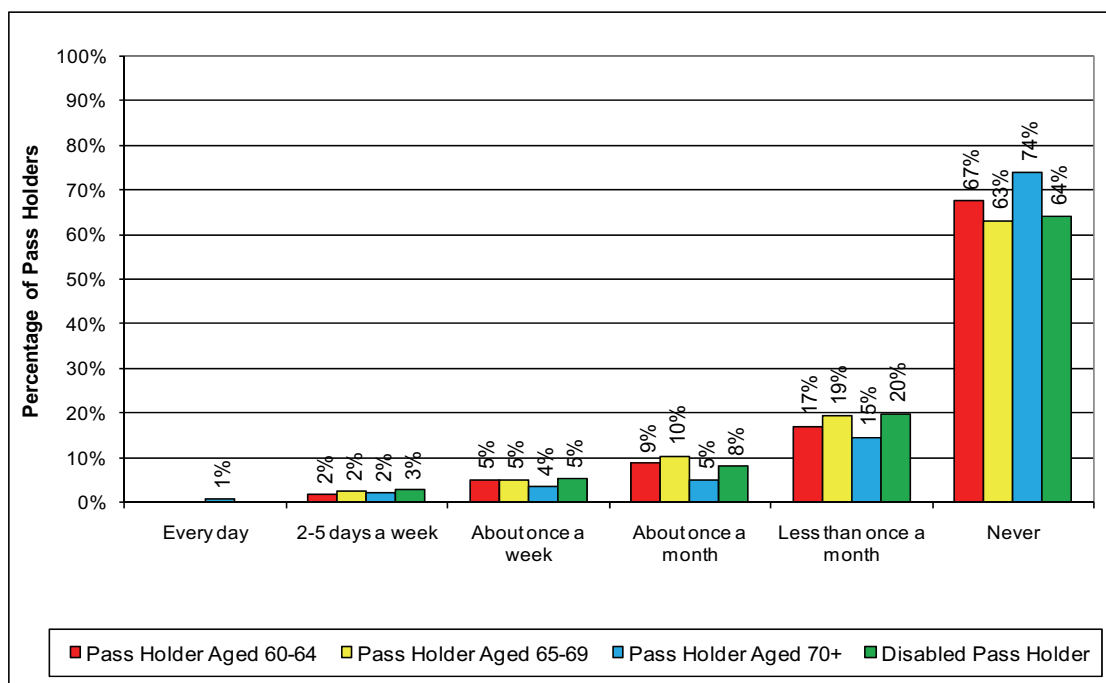
3.5 Despite these barriers, the indications from the focus groups were that many pass holders intend to travel by bus more often outside their local area in the future.

“Now you can travel all over the country on the buses, I mean I have only been to Swanage, that’s as far as I’ve been...I think I will use them more extensively.”

[Concessionary Pass Holder Aged 60 or Over, Bournemouth]

3.6 When analysed by pass holder type, there is little difference in the frequency with which disabled and older pass holders travel by bus outside of their local area, although a slightly greater proportion (74%) of the oldest category of pass holders (those aged 70 and over) had never travelled by bus outside of their local area.

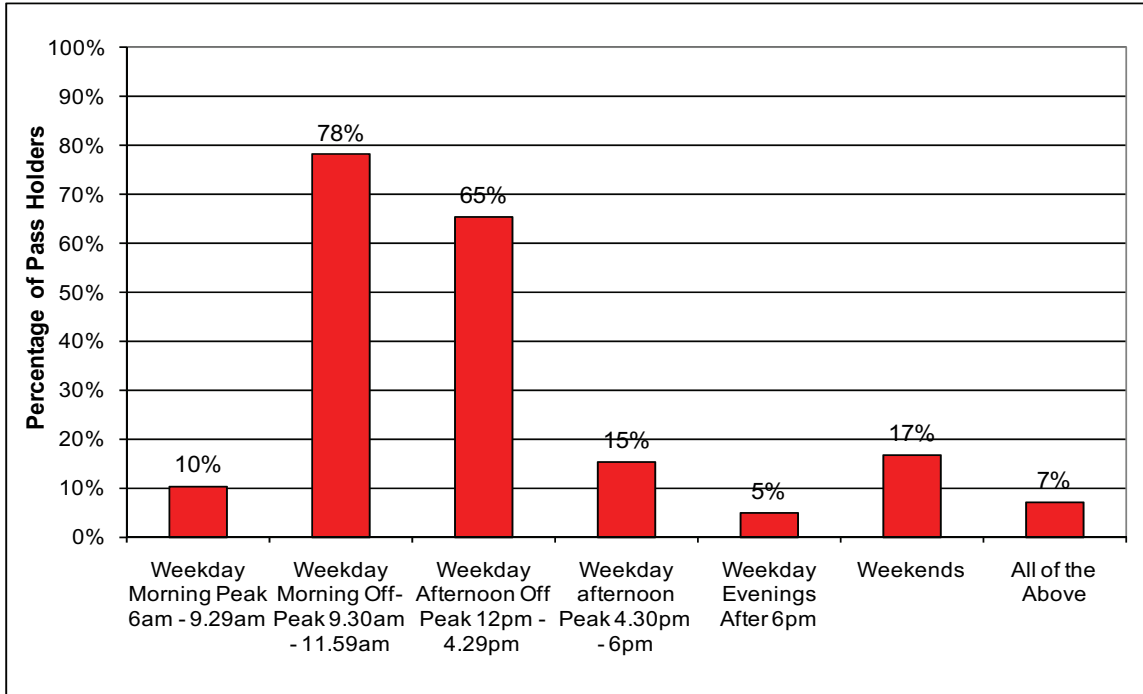
Figure 3-4 Frequency of travel outside the local area by pass holder type



3.7 The survey also showed that pass holders mainly travel by bus within their local area during the off-peak morning and afternoon periods. 10% of pass holders use the bus during the morning peak between 6am and 9.29am, while 15% use buses during the afternoon peak of 4.30pm until 6pm. However, most (78%) pass

holders make bus trips between 9.30am and 11.59am, and 65% make trips between 12pm and 4.29pm. A small proportion of the survey sample of pass holders use bus services during weekday evenings (5%), while just 17% of pass holders use bus services on Saturdays and Sundays.

Figure 3-5 Time of day that pass holders travel by bus within their local area



3.8 The restriction of the free travel entitlement during the morning peak in most areas is likely to be the main factor in the off-peak nature of pass holders' travel. The focus groups also indicated that the retired nature of a large proportion of pass holders (83% of the survey sample of pass holders were retired) also influences their travel patterns. This is partly because retired people tend to have a greater flexibility in terms of the time available to them to travel but also because they tend to respect the needs of those people who travel to work and therefore deliberately avoid travelling during peak times. Some focus group participants were also particularly keen not to travel by bus at busy times in the afternoon peak to avoid mixing with large numbers of children travelling home from school.

“Especially when you get to my age, you know you’re thinking I could do that journey, it might take longer, but time doesn’t mean anything to us nowadays, you know, so you could give the time for the journey”

[Concessionary Pass Holder Aged 60 or Over, Manchester]

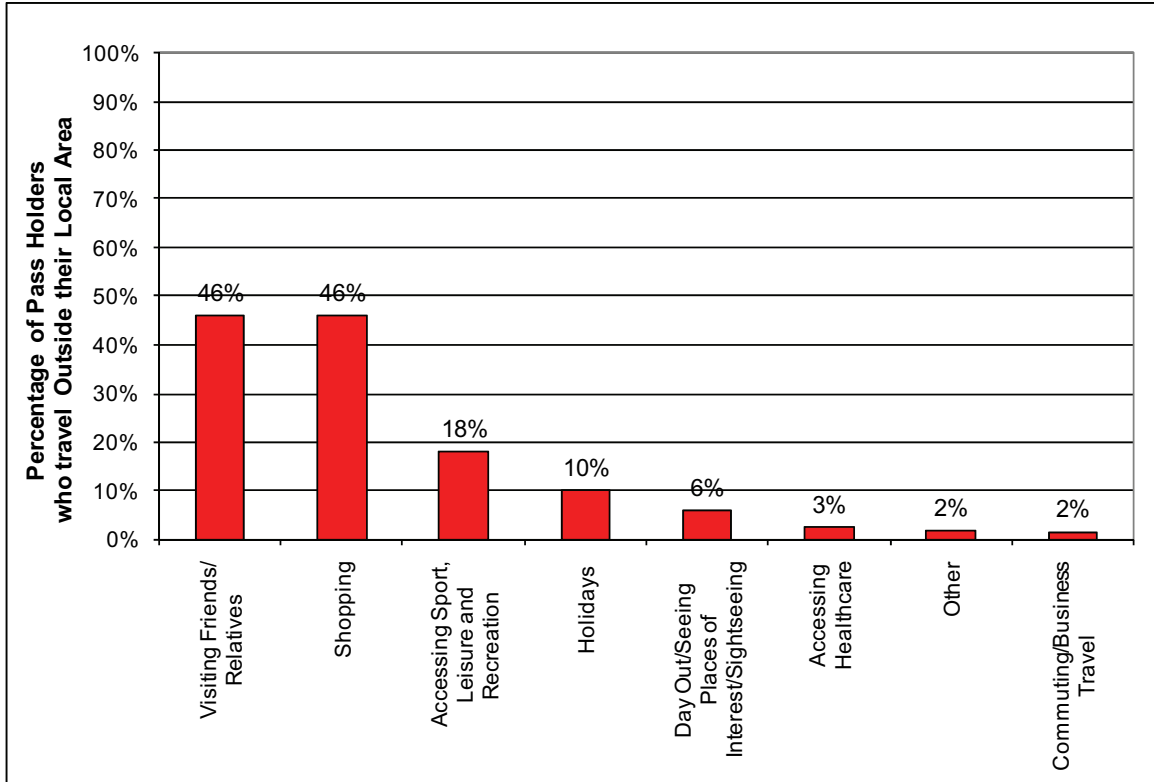
“I try to get home before the school kids come out. They’re all rushing to get on the bus and I feel a little bit intimidated you know if there’s a group of kids”

[Concessionary Pass Holder Aged 60 or Over, Manchester]

3.9 For journeys by bus outside of the local area, the two main reasons given by pass holders for making trips were to visit friends and relatives and for shopping

purposes, again reflecting the retired nature of the survey sample. 46% of pass holders who travel outside of their local area make journeys to visit friends and relatives, 46% for shopping purposes and 18% for the purposes of accessing sport, leisure and recreation facilities. 10% of pass holders make journeys by bus outside of their local area either for holiday purposes or while away on holiday.

Figure 3-6 Journey purposes for trips made by pass holders outside of their local area



Impacts of Concessionary Bus Travel

Impact on frequency and length of journeys by pass holders

3.10 Pass holders were asked whether they now make more, less or the same number of bus journeys in their local area since they obtained a free concessionary pass. In most cases this was in 2006 or before, depending on when free local bus travel had been introduced in their area. Overall, 39% of pass holding respondents (39% of older pass holders and 36% of disabled pass holders) stated that they make a greater number of local journeys by bus than before they obtained their pass, while 58% of respondents make about the same number of journeys as before. 18% of pass holders (22% of older pass holders and 16% of disabled pass holders) also indicated that they make longer local journeys by bus with their pass than before.

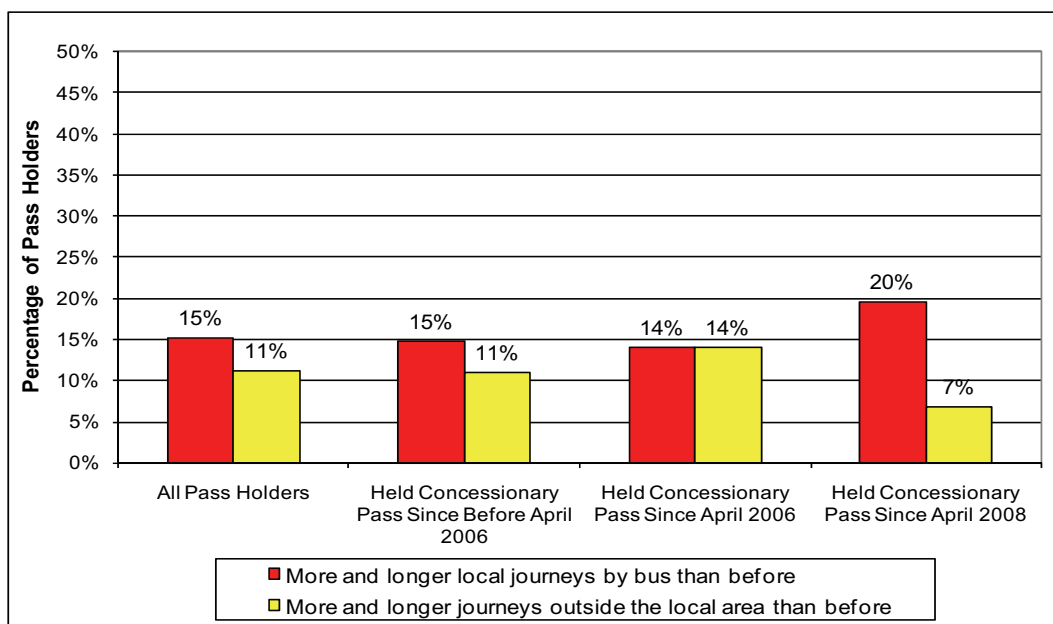
3.11 Pass holders were also asked whether they now make more, less or the same number of journeys by bus outside of their local area since the introduction of free national bus travel in April 2008. Of all the pass holders interviewed, 13% (14% of

older pass holders and 13% of disabled pass holders) indicated that they make more journeys as a result of the free national bus travel entitlement. 12% of pass holders (12% of older pass holders and 14% of disabled pass holders) also indicated that they make longer journeys by bus outside of the local area with their new pass.

3.12 Overall, 15% of all the pass holders interviewed are now making both a greater number of local journeys and local journeys of a greater length by bus than they did before they obtained their pass. In comparison, 20% of pass holders who have only held a free bus pass since April 2008 are making both a greater number of local journeys and journeys of a greater length by bus than before.

3.13 11% of all pass holders are now making both a greater number of journeys and journeys of a greater length outside of their local area by bus than they did before the introduction of free national bus travel in April 2008. In comparison, 7% of pass holders who have only held a free bus pass since April 2008 are making both a greater number of journeys outside their local area and journeys of a greater length outside of their local area by bus than before.

Figure 3-7 Pass holders making both a greater number and greater length of bus journeys by length of time held a concessionary pass



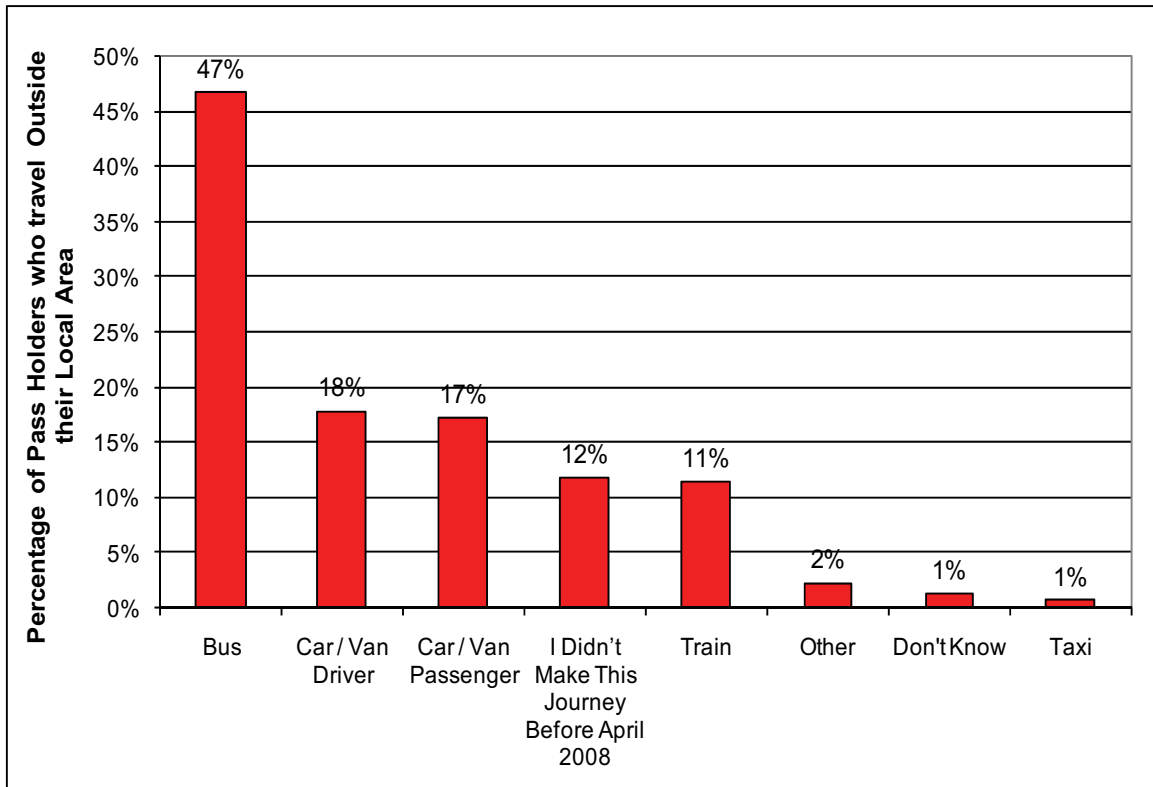
Impact on modal choice

3.14 Prior to the introduction of free national bus travel in April 2008, pass holders made journeys outside of their local area using a variety of modes of transport. 47% of respondents who now travel outside of their local area by bus also previously made these journeys by bus before April 2008. However, there is strong evidence of a modal shift for journeys outside of the local area as a result of the introduction of the new bus pass, with 35% of these respondents now choosing to make journeys by bus which previously would have been made by car or van either as a driver or passenger. In addition, free bus travel has encouraged

11% of these respondents to choose to travel by bus outside of their local area instead of paying to travel by train.

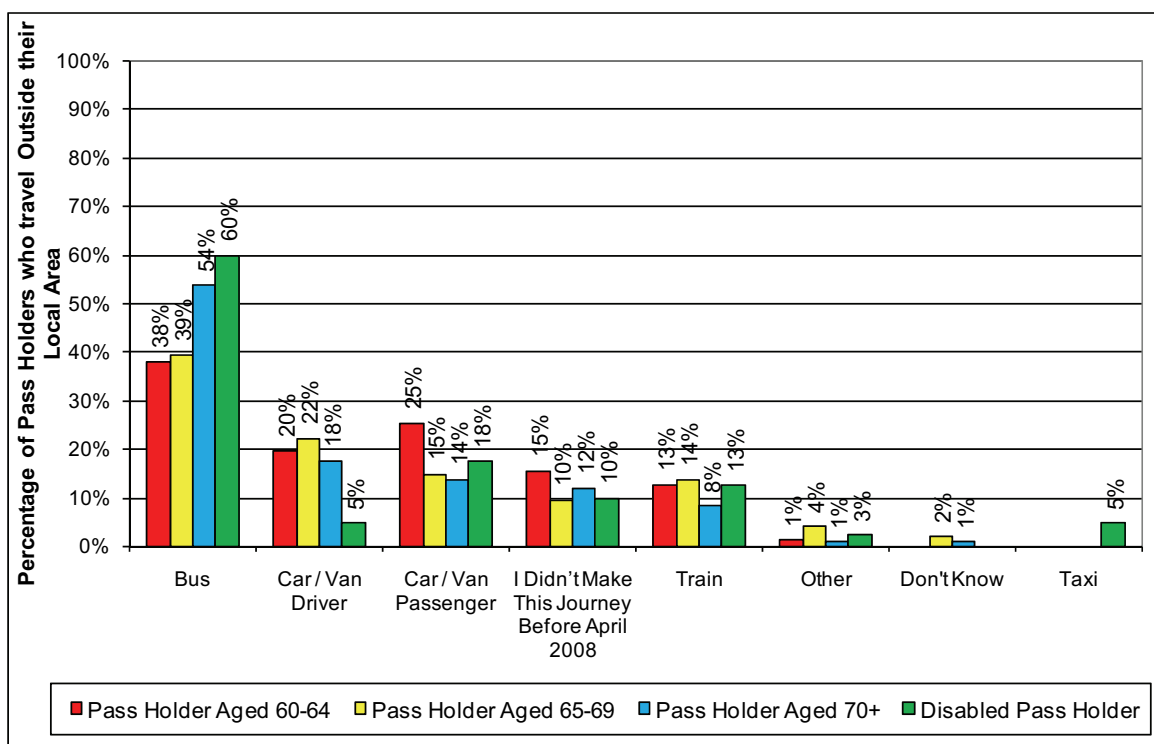
3.15 The survey also provides evidence to suggest that free bus travel outside of the local area has generated additional journeys that wouldn't otherwise have been made by pass holders. 12% of pass holders who now travel outside of their local area by bus would not previously have made these journeys at all, but are happy to do so now that they are provided with the opportunity for free off-peak bus travel. Further analysis shows that a higher proportion of these respondents interviewed in Newark (18%) and a lower proportion in Scarborough (5%) are making journeys outside of their local area by bus that they wouldn't have made before.

Figure 3-8 Previous mode of choice for current bus journeys made by pass holders outside of their local area



3.16 When analysed by pass holder type, a much smaller proportion of disabled pass holders previously travelled outside of their local area by car or van as a driver (5%) and a greater proportion of disabled pass holders (60%) and pass holders aged 70 and over (54%) previously travelled by bus. Figure 3-9 also shows that all of those respondents who previously travelled outside of their local area by taxi were disabled pass holders.

Figure 3-9 Previous mode of choice for current bus journeys made outside of the local area by pass holder type



3.17 The focus group discussions also indicated that the new free bus pass has prompted a modal shift from car to bus while also generating some new bus journeys.

“I do have a car, but I’m retired so I use the bus about two or three times a week actually because I love my bus pass.”

[Concessionary Pass Holder Aged 60 or Over, Manchester]

3.18 Group participants felt that the perceived high cost and lack of available parking spaces in town and city centres and also at hospitals are key determinants of modal choice at off-peak times for pass holders (and for many non-pass holding bus users) who have access to a car. In addition, traffic congestion and the related stresses of driving in urban areas are factors influencing pass holders aged 60 and over to travel less by car now that they have a free bus pass.

“When I started using buses for the very first time around here, I was pleasantly surprised I was, about the speed, especially the dedicated bus lanes, they really bombed along and I thought ‘My God they get you into town really fast’.”

[Concessionary Pass Holder Aged 60 or Over, Manchester]

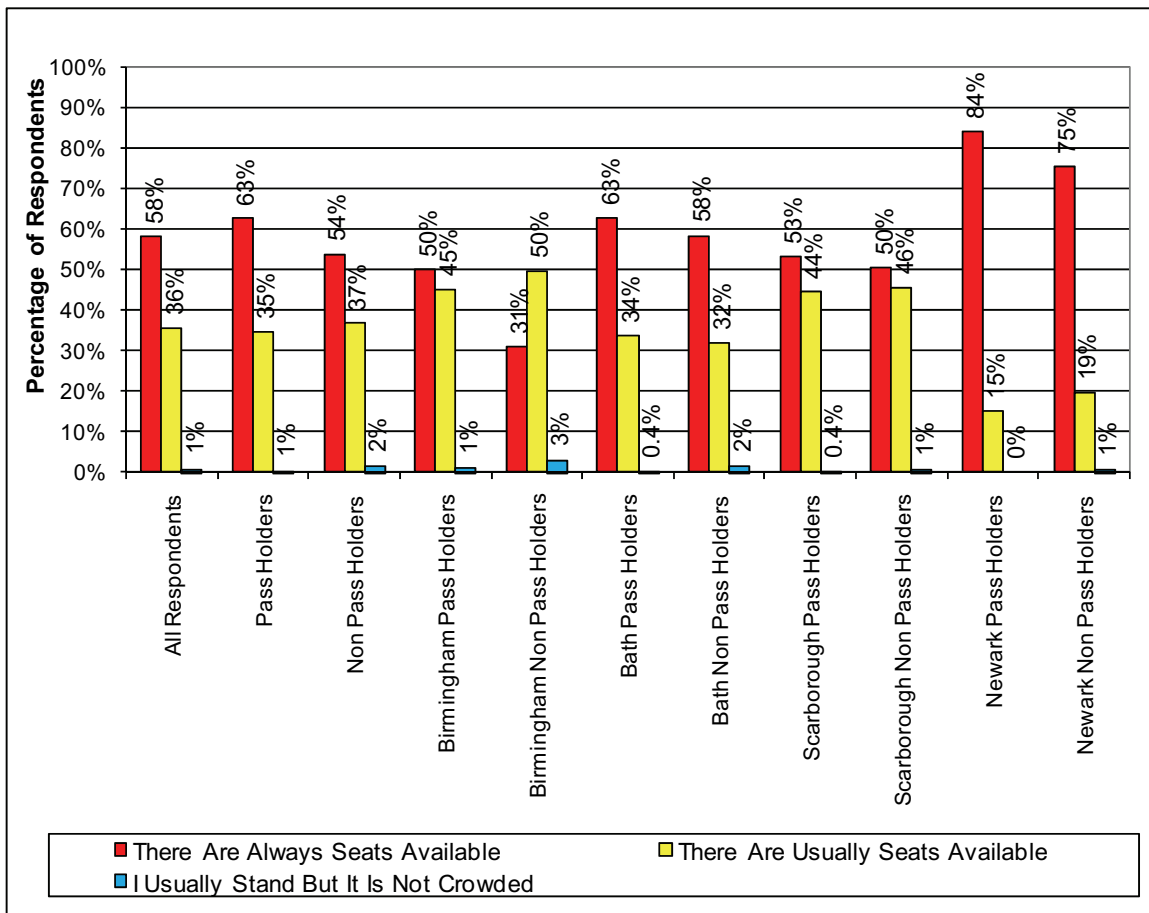
3.19 However, the focus group discussions suggested that for those pass holders who have access to a car, it is still the dominant mode of choice for some journey purposes, particularly for the weekly shop, and for travelling to certain destinations not accessible by bus.

- 3.20 The availability of additional concessionary scheme enhancements in each local transport authority area also has an impact on modal choice amongst pass holders. For example, in Greater Manchester, the availability of free off-peak and half fare peak Metrolink and rail travel means that these alternatives are used more frequently than the bus by some respondents. The availability of free bus travel at all times for disabled pass holders in the Tees area and from 8.30am in Norfolk was also noted by pass holders as a factor in their increased usage of the bus within their local area, particularly for travel to early morning hospital appointments.
- 3.21 However, the enhancements to local schemes, particularly where pass holders were able to use additional modes of public transport (e.g. tram and local train) or travel at earlier times of day, coupled with the relatively infrequent nature of bus journeys made by pass holders outside of their local areas meant that some people were uncertain about their exact entitlements when travelling beyond their local boundaries. In general, there was also some uncertainty about where exactly the geographic boundaries of their enhanced entitlements fall.

Impact on overcrowding

- 3.22 Survey respondents were firstly asked, unprompted, how busy they find the bus services that they use for the journeys that they make most frequently within their local area. 94% of all respondents said that they could always or usually get a seat for the journeys they make most frequently. 58% of all respondents (both pass holders and non-pass holders) believe that there are always seats available on these bus services when they use them and a further 36% believe that seats are usually available when travelling by bus.
- 3.23 63% of all pass holders and 54% of all non-pass holding bus users felt that there are always seats available on the buses that they use most frequently within their local area. This lower proportion of non-pass holders may reflect the limitations on pass use in the morning peak in many areas meaning that non-pass holders are more likely to travel at busier times. In addition, 35% of pass holders and 37% of non-pass holders believe that there are usually seats available for the bus journeys that they make. Significantly greater proportions of pass holders (84%) and non-pass holders (75%) in Newark stated that there are always seats available on their bus services when they use them.

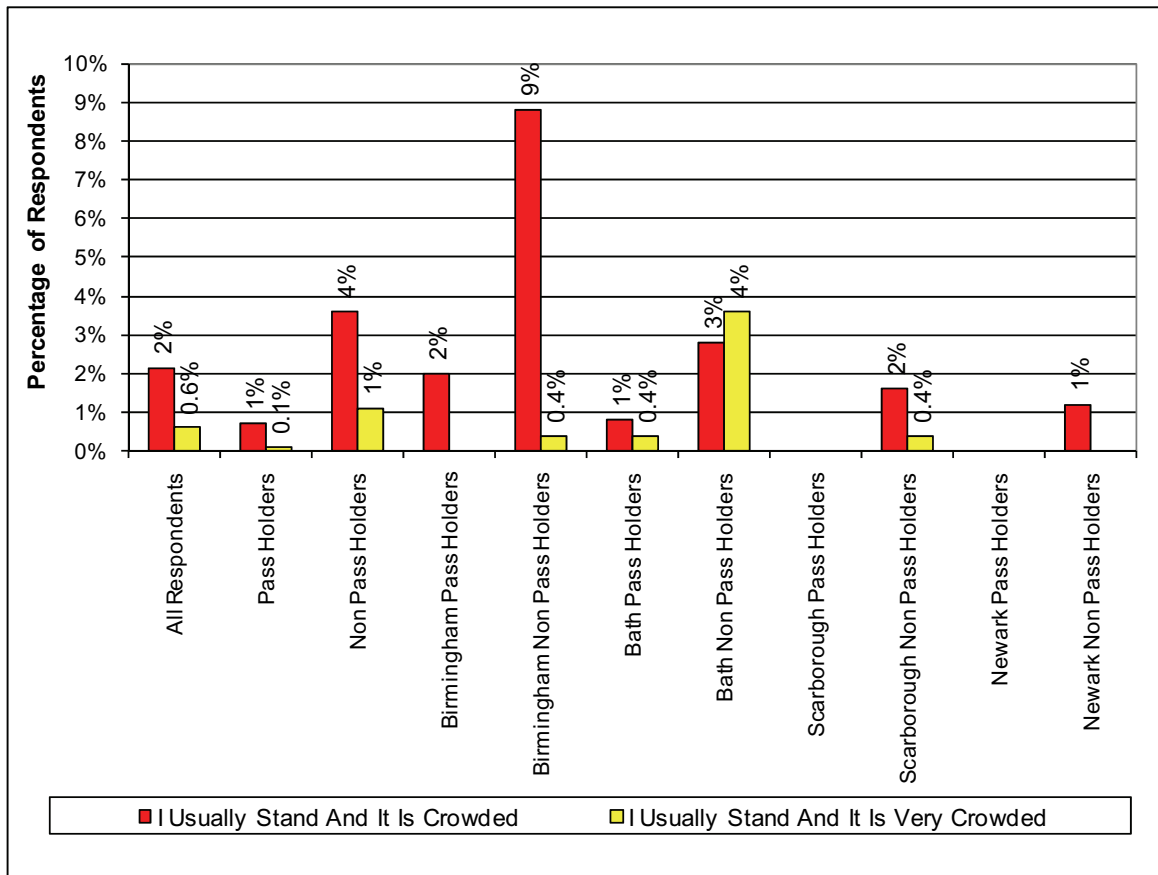
Figure 3-10 Proportions of respondents describing local bus services as not crowded (unprompted)



3.24 In comparison, just 2% (43 people) of all survey respondents (1% of pass holders and 4% of non-pass holders) usually have to stand on local buses that are crowded and 0.6% (12 people) of the total survey sample (0.1% of pass holders and 1% of non-pass holders) usually have to stand on a very crowded bus.

3.25 A higher proportion of non-pass holders in Birmingham (9%) usually have to stand on local buses that are crowded than in any of the other areas. In addition, a high proportion of Bath non-pass holders (4%) usually have to stand on very crowded local buses. In contrast no pass holders in Scarborough or Newark reported having to stand due to crowding on the local buses they used.

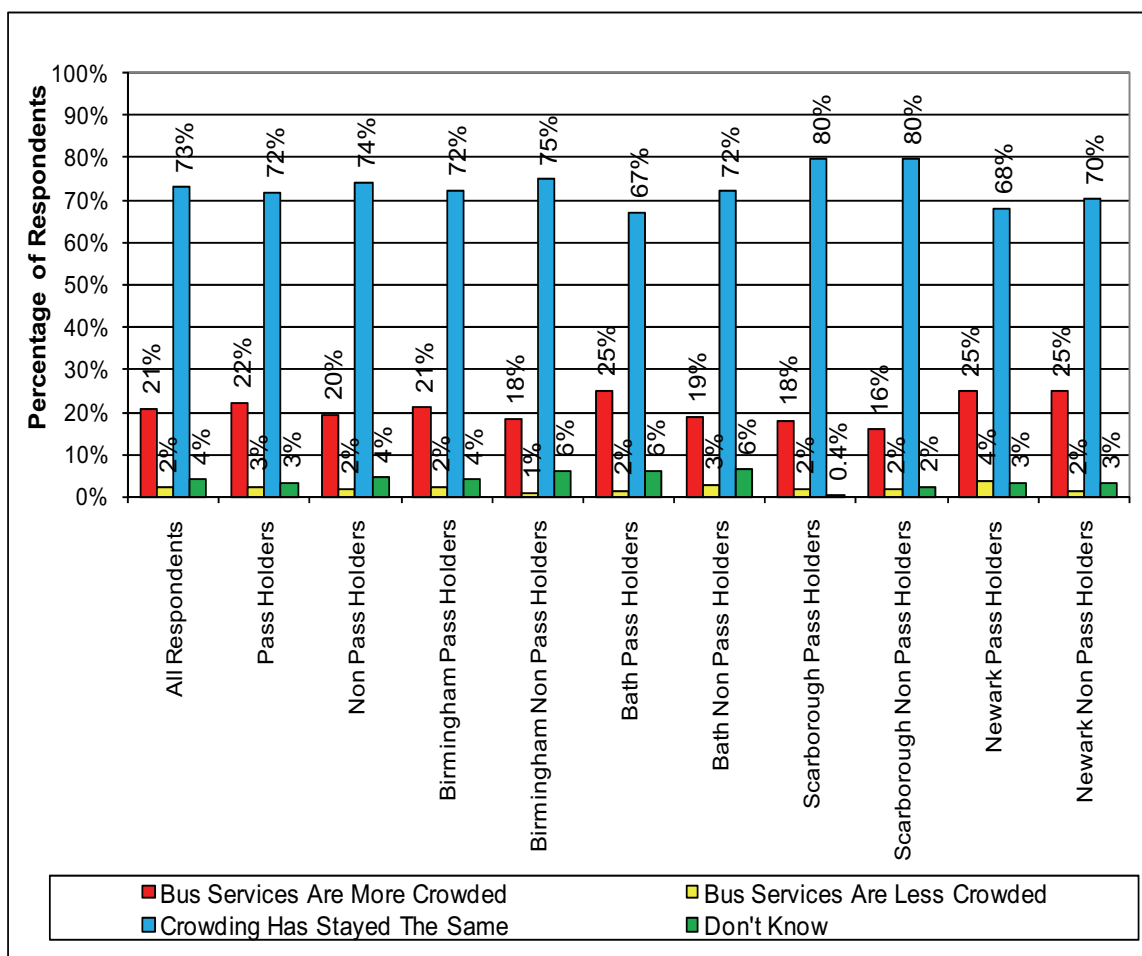
Figure 3-11 Proportions of respondents describing local bus services as crowded (unprompted)



3.26 In a separate question, respondents were then prompted with information about the national free off-peak bus travel scheme and asked explicitly whether they thought that bus services have become any more or less crowded since April 2008 when the free national bus travel entitlement was introduced.

3.27 73% of all respondents felt that the level of crowding on the services that they use has stayed about the same since the new free national bus pass was introduced while 21% of all respondents felt that the services they use have become more crowded. Just 2% felt that there is now less crowding on their bus services compared to April 2008. In general when prompted in this way, the responses of pass holders and non-pass holders closely reflected these proportions and there was little difference in the perceptions of respondents by survey location.

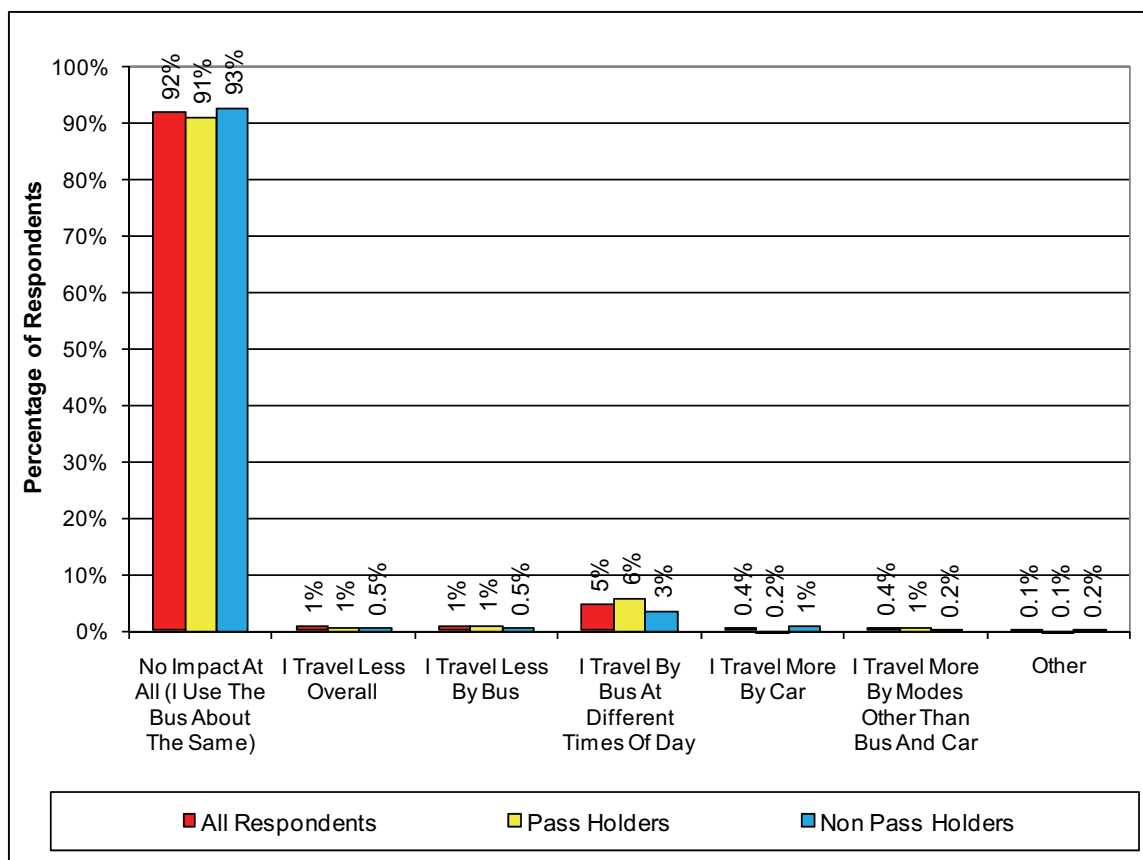
Figure 3-12 Views of levels of crowding since April 2008 (prompted)



3.28 When they were then asked what impact this level of crowding has had on their bus usage, 92% of all respondents (91% of pass holders and 93% of non-pass holders) stated that it has had no impact at all, which would be expected given that overall 73% of respondents felt that crowding levels had stayed the same on the buses they use.

3.29 Less than 1% of all respondents said that crowding had influenced them to travel more by car, or by other alternative modes to the bus. However, 5% of all respondents reported that crowding caused by the new concession had influenced them to travel by bus at different times of the day. When analysed by survey location, a larger proportion of respondents in Scarborough (14%) than the other three areas indicated that they had changed the time of their travel due to crowding levels.

Figure 3-13 Perceived impact of levels of crowding on bus use



3.30 Respondents were then asked whether there were any particular bus routes or services in their local area that suffer from excessive overcrowding due to high numbers of pass holders. 12% of all respondents (11% of non-pass holders and 13% of pass holders) indicated one or more bus route or service that they thought suffered from excessive overcrowding for this reason.

3.31 In total, 91 bus routes were identified by respondents as suffering from excessive crowding due to concessionary passengers across the four areas.

Table 3-1 Frequency of 'excessively overcrowded' routes highlighted by location

Survey Location	Number of individual bus routes highlighted	Estimated number of bus routes in each local area ⁸	% of bus routes in each area highlighted as excessively overcrowded
Bath	12	95	13%
Birmingham	46	344	13%
Newark	12	43	28%
Scarborough	21	58	36%

⁸ 'Local areas' represented by bus routes within the boundaries of Bath & North East Somerset Council, the West Midlands Metropolitan Area, Newark & Sherwood District Council and Scarborough Borough Council respectively. The West Midlands figure includes only Travel West Midlands services as the vast majority of respondents in the Birmingham sample (96%) are users of these services.

- 3.32 Overall, respondents in Birmingham highlighted the greatest number of routes and services that suffer from overcrowding due to the number of concessionary passengers, as would be expected given that it has the largest number of bus routes in the survey sample. In percentage terms however, Scarborough (36%) has the highest estimated proportion of services that suffer from excessive overcrowding for this reason.
- 3.33 Of the respondents who indicated a specific route or service that suffers from excessive overcrowding due to high numbers of free pass holding passengers, 46% believe this is an issue during the morning off-peak (9.30am until 11.59am), while 35% felt this overcrowding is a problem during the afternoon off-peak (12pm to 4.29pm). 23% felt that their services are busiest during the afternoon peak period of 4.30pm until 6pm, while 17% believe the bus to be overcrowded during the morning peak period. These findings reflect the patterns of bus usage by pass holders as detailed in Figure 3-5.
- 3.34 More than three quarters of these respondents (77% overall; 74% of pass holders and 79% of non-pass holders) felt that overcrowding on these bus services due to the number of pass holders using them is an issue at all times throughout the year, with 6% (5% of pass holders and 6% of non-pass holders) stating that it is an issue between January and April, 13% (19% of pass holders and 9% of non-pass holders) between May to August and 8% (5% of pass holders and 9% of non-pass holders) between September and December. However, a significantly greater proportion of respondents considered bus services in Scarborough to be more overcrowded with pass holders during the summer months of May to August. 47% of respondents who indicated a specific route or service that suffers from excessive overcrowding due to high numbers of free pass holders in Scarborough believed that bus services are excessively overcrowded during this time.
- 3.35 When focus group participants were asked about the impact of the take up and use of the free national bus travel entitlement on overcrowding on buses, it was clear that in the main overcrowding was not perceived to be due to pass holders, but to other bus users and factors. These include commuters travelling to and from work, children travelling to school, college and overseas students (particularly in Bournemouth during the summer months), mothers with pushchairs, the Christmas period and a reduced frequency of service or services not turning up on specific routes.
- 3.36 A minority view stated in the Norwich and Hartlepool groups (by a small number of pass holders and non-pass holders) was that pass holders do exacerbate the problem of overcrowding on buses at peak times. Although these instances were restricted to a small number of routes, the view was that enhancing the concession in the Norfolk and Tees areas to allow free travel for eligible older and disabled people at earlier times during the morning peak (or in the case of the Tees area, throughout the morning peak) has resulted in unacceptable levels of overcrowding on a small number of routes.

"I find that it's nearly full if I get a ten past nine with retired people, one of the trips sometimes I come and not one person paid, everybody got a pass"

[Concessionary Pass Holder Aged 60 or Over, Norwich]

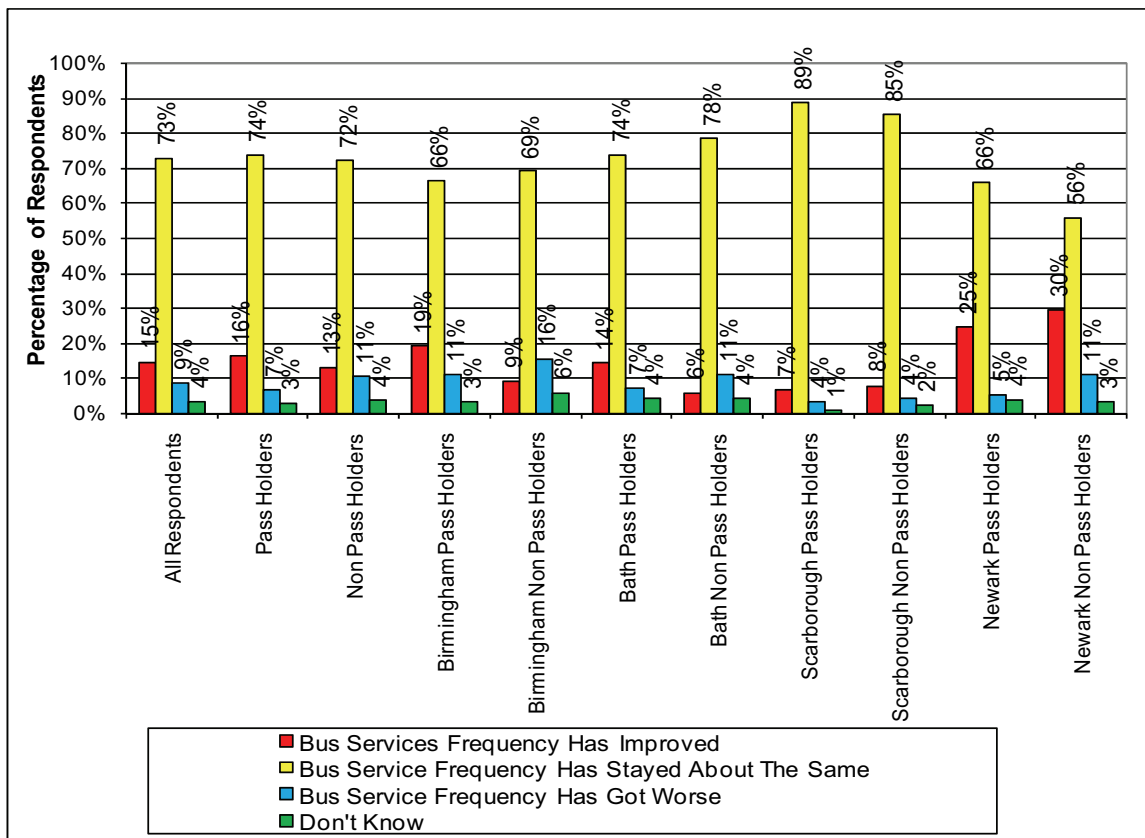
“Since everybody can use these bus passes to go everywhere, the old people spend all day down the town, so there’s not one of them, there’s about 30 of them in one group”

[Concessionary Pass Holder with an Eligible Disability, Hartlepool]

Impact on service frequency and quality

3.37 Respondents were asked whether bus service frequency had changed since the introduction of the new entitlement in April 2008. The vast majority of all respondents (73%) felt that the frequency of bus services had stayed about the same, while 15% felt that service frequency had improved and 9% thought it had got worse. The response of pass holders was very similar to that of non-pass holders. Figure 3-14 shows that the largest proportions of respondents who felt that their service frequencies had improved were interviewed in Newark (30% of non-pass holders and 25% of pass holders) and the largest proportions of respondents who felt that their service frequencies had got worse were interviewed in Birmingham (16% of non-pass holders and 11% of pass holders).

Figure 3-14 Perceptions of frequency of service since April 2008

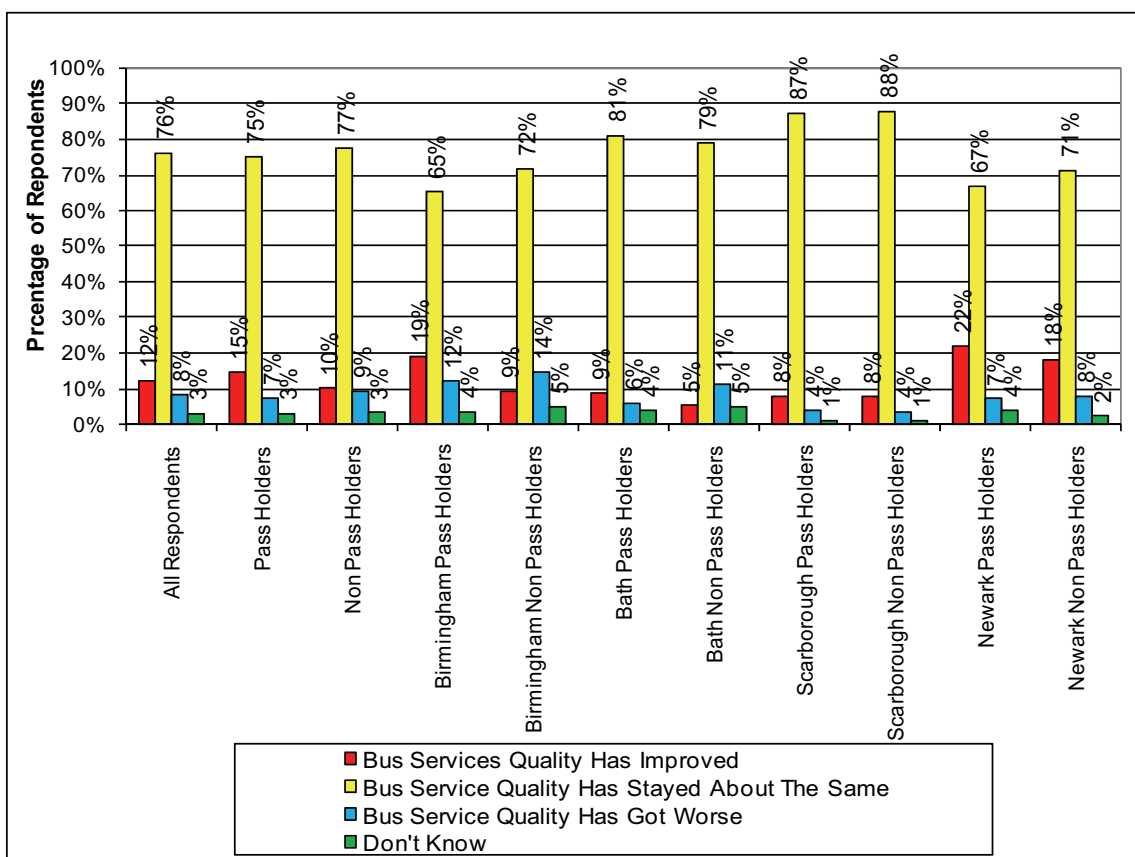


3.38 Respondents were then asked whether bus service quality had improved, stayed about the same or deteriorated since the introduction of the free national off-peak bus travel entitlement in April 2008. Again the vast majority of all respondents (76%) felt that the quality of bus services had stayed about the same, while 12%

felt that service quality had improved and 8% thought it had got worse. The response of pass holders was very similar to that of non-pass holders, with a slightly greater proportion of pass holders (15%) than non-pass holders (10%) believing that service quality had improved.

3.39 Figure 3-15 shows that the largest proportions of respondents who felt that their service quality had improved were interviewed in Newark (22% of pass holders and 18% of non-pass holders) and the largest proportions of respondents who felt that their service quality had got worse were interviewed in Birmingham (14% of non-pass holders and 12% of pass holders) although 19% of pass holders in Birmingham felt service quality had improved.

Figure 3-15 Perceptions of quality of service since April 2008



3.40 Views on the overall quality of service that focus group respondents receive from bus operators varied according to the location of each group, although no one felt strongly that the national concession itself has impacted on bus service quality. There was however a suspicion amongst a couple of respondents that the scheme had contributed directly to an increase in fare levels and therefore had impacted on the value for money of the bus journeys of non-pass holders.

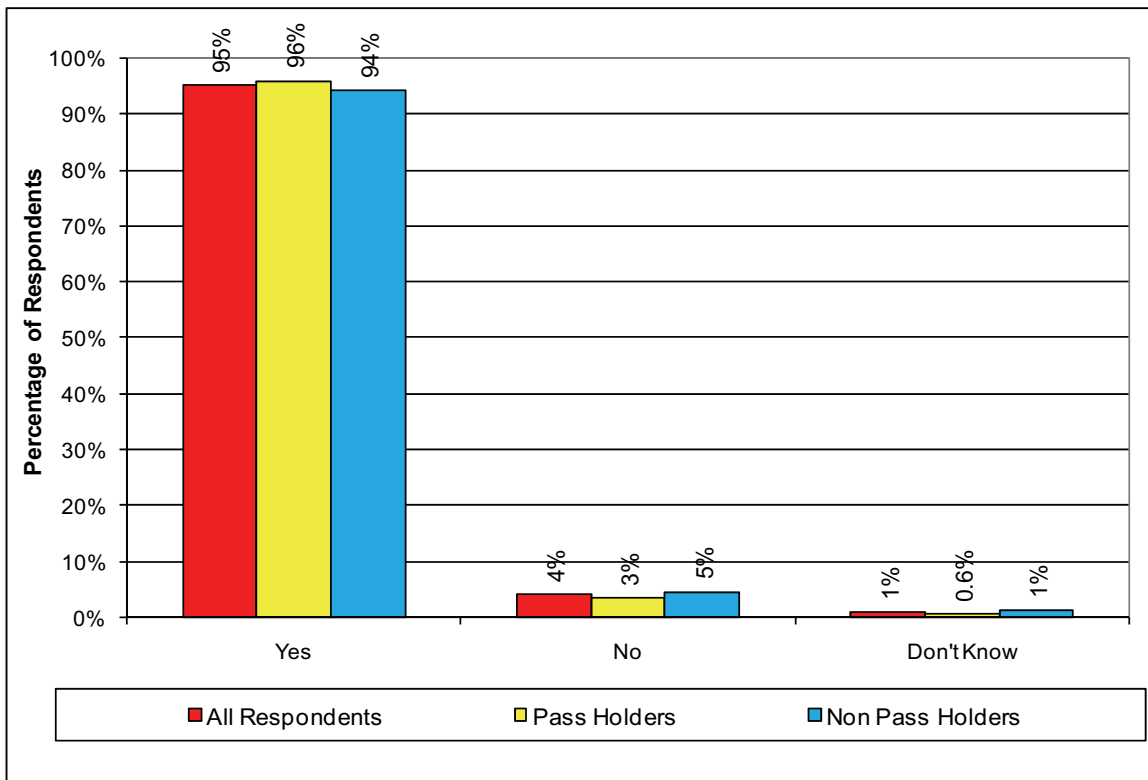
“Do you not think the prices have gone up to cover this? Yes, I think probably it has and if one journey has gone up by 30 odd pence to give this to the elderly and disabled I’m not against paying it, but I would like to think that they have also put the price of the advertising on buses up because that’s a big revenue isn’t it?”

[Non-pass Holder, Manchester]

Views on the National Concessionary Bus Travel Scheme

3.41 Survey respondents were asked several questions to ascertain their views of the existing England wide free bus travel scheme. Firstly, they were asked if they felt it is right that people aged 60 and over and people with eligible disabilities are provided with free off-peak bus travel throughout England in order to help maintain their mobility. 95% (96% of pass holders and 94% of non-pass holders) thought that it is right that these people receive free bus travel throughout England, while just 4% did not think it is right, and 1% did not know.

Figure 3-16 Views on whether it is right that people aged 60 and over and people with eligible disabilities are provided with free off-peak bus travel throughout England



3.42 In the focus groups there was also a strong feeling amongst pass holders and non-pass holders that older and eligible disabled people should be provided with free bus travel off-peak throughout England.

“I think they’re the most significant thing this Government has done to improve our quality of life”

[Concessionary Pass Holder Aged 60 or Over, Norwich]

“The elderly, they’ve worked all their lives, give them something free, you know at the end of the day they don’t get anything free why not? Give something back to them.”

[Non-pass Holder, Manchester]

“At the end of the day we’re going to be at that stage where we want it, aren’t we?”

[Non-pass Holder, Bournemouth]

3.43 However, although the majority of focus group respondents were happy with the current eligibility criteria, a small number of pass holders in Norwich and non-pass holders in Bournemouth, Norwich and Hartlepool felt that people should only receive a concessionary pass when they have retired from work rather than at 60. Some of these people felt that the right to the concession should also be means tested.

“I’m not sure it should have come in at age sixty, I think it should have come in at retirement because I do know people who use it to go to work and they’re earning quite good money. I think that’s wrong, I think it should come in with retirement rather than sixty”

[Concessionary Pass Holder Aged 60 or Over, Norwich]

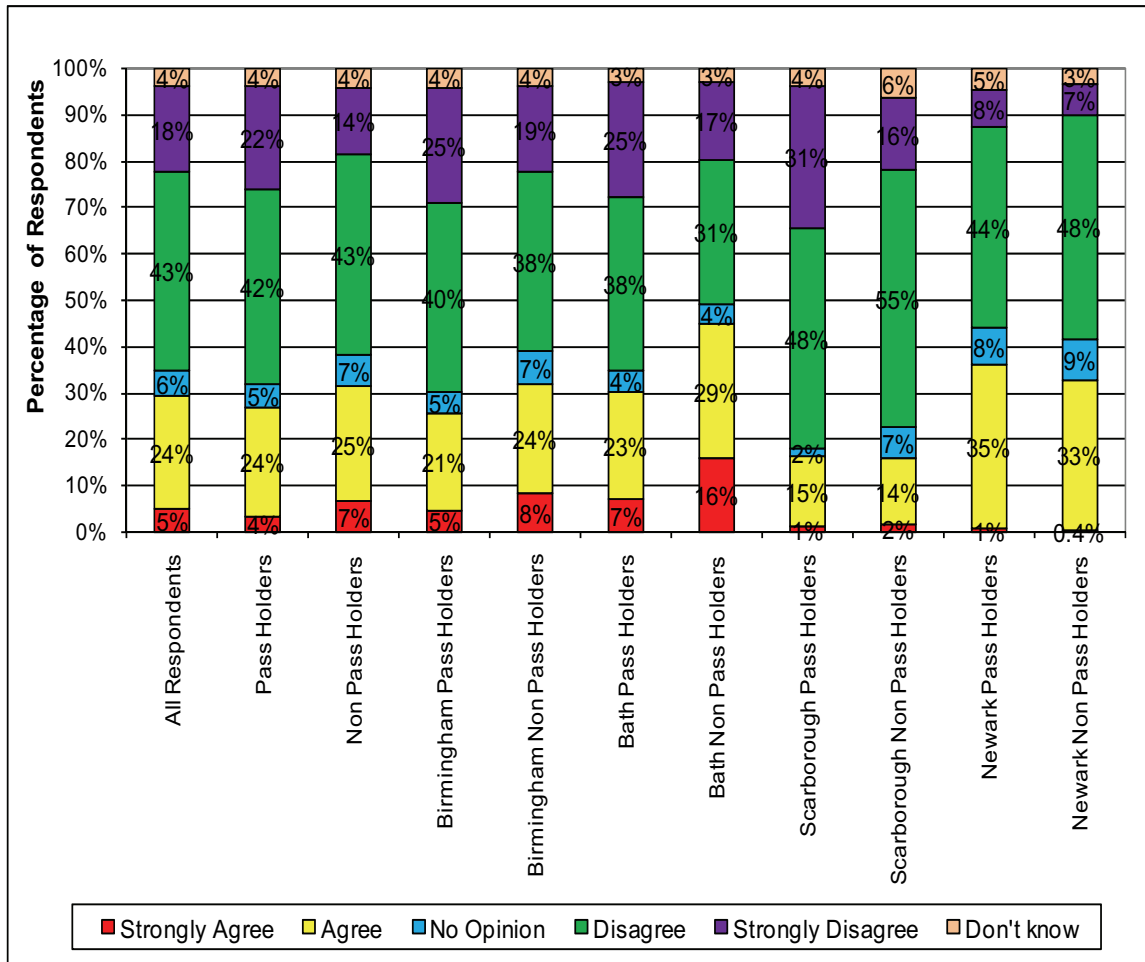
3.44 Both pass holders and non-pass holders were then asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with four statements about the England wide free bus pass; these statements were:

- The concession should be restricted to bus routes and travel times that are less busy.
- The concession should be reduced so older and disabled passengers pay half fare rather than travelling for free.
- The concession should be extended to cover travel by bus at all times of day, including the morning peak.
- The eligibility criteria for the scheme should be extended to cover all types of public transport e.g. train, tram and long distance coach travel.

3.45 When asked whether or not they felt that free bus travel should be restricted to bus routes and travel times that are less busy, the majority of respondents (61%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that there should be such a restriction on the routes and times at which they can travel while 29% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with this suggestion. There was little difference between the responses of pass holders and non-pass holders to this question although a slightly greater proportion of non-pass holders than pass holders agreed or strongly agreed with the suggestion of restricting the concession in this way.

3.46 Further analysis by survey location shows that a significantly greater proportion of both pass holders (78%) and non-pass holders (71%) interviewed in Scarborough disagreed or strongly disagreed with the suggestion of restricting the concession to routes and times that are less busy, while a larger proportion of non-pass holders in Bath (45%) agreed with this notion. Focus group respondents felt that free bus travel should apply to all bus services and routes without exception.

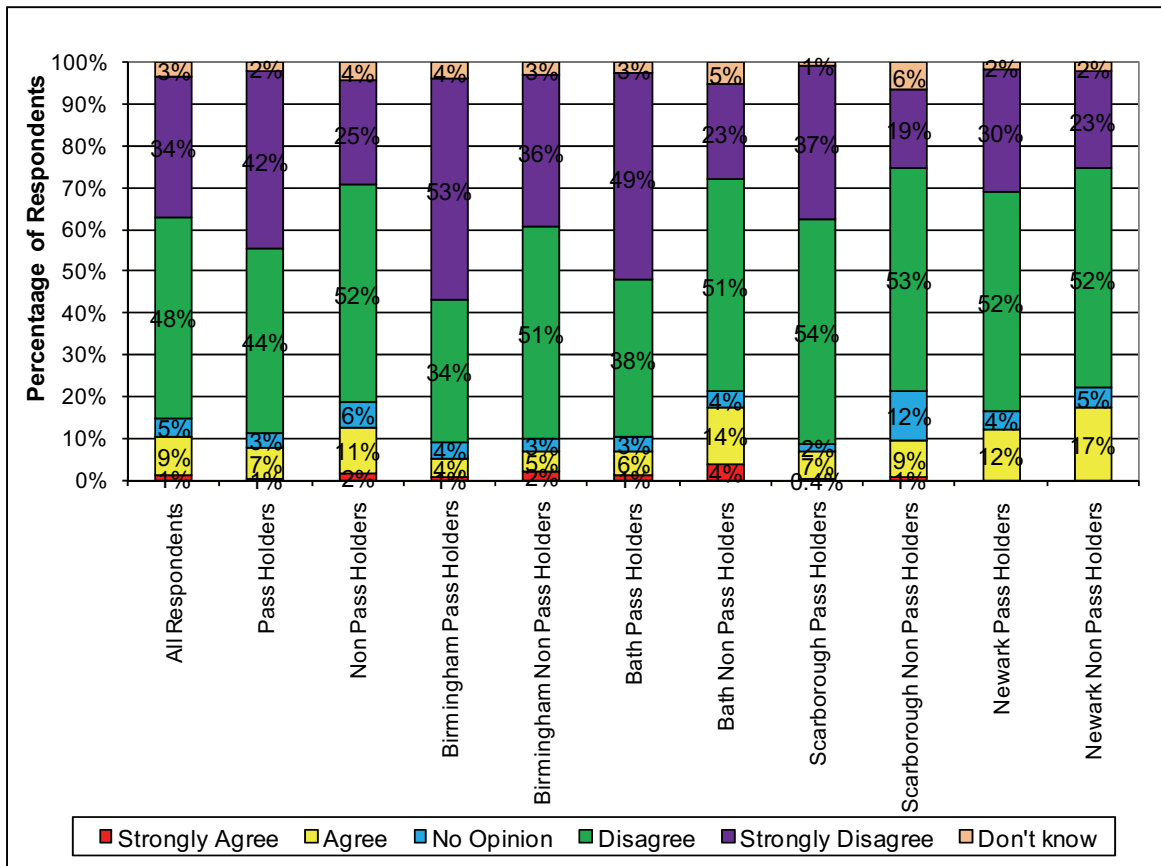
Figure 3-17 Views on whether the concession should be restricted to bus routes and travel times that are less busy



3.47 82% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the second statement that free bus travel for older and disabled passengers should be replaced by a half fare, with just 10% of the full survey sample agreeing or strongly agreeing with this statement. Again, only a slightly greater proportion of non-pass holders (13%) than pass holders (8%) agreed or strongly agreed with the suggestion of replacing free travel with a half fare.

3.48 Further analysis by survey location shows that greater proportions of non-pass holders in Bath (18%) and Newark (17%) either agreed or strongly agreed with introducing a half fare to replace the current entitlement for eligible pass holders to receive free travel off-peak.

Figure 3-18 Views on whether free travel for older and disabled passengers should be replaced by a half fare



3.49 Most pass holders in each of the focus groups felt that if the free concession on bus travel (and any local enhancements to the scheme) was removed then it would impact directly on their modal choice, resulting in them using the bus less than they currently do and travelling more again by car or on foot.

3.50 Pass holders in the Bournemouth group were particularly vociferous in their objection to losing their entitlement to free off-peak bus travel:

“We would be up in arms, we would.”

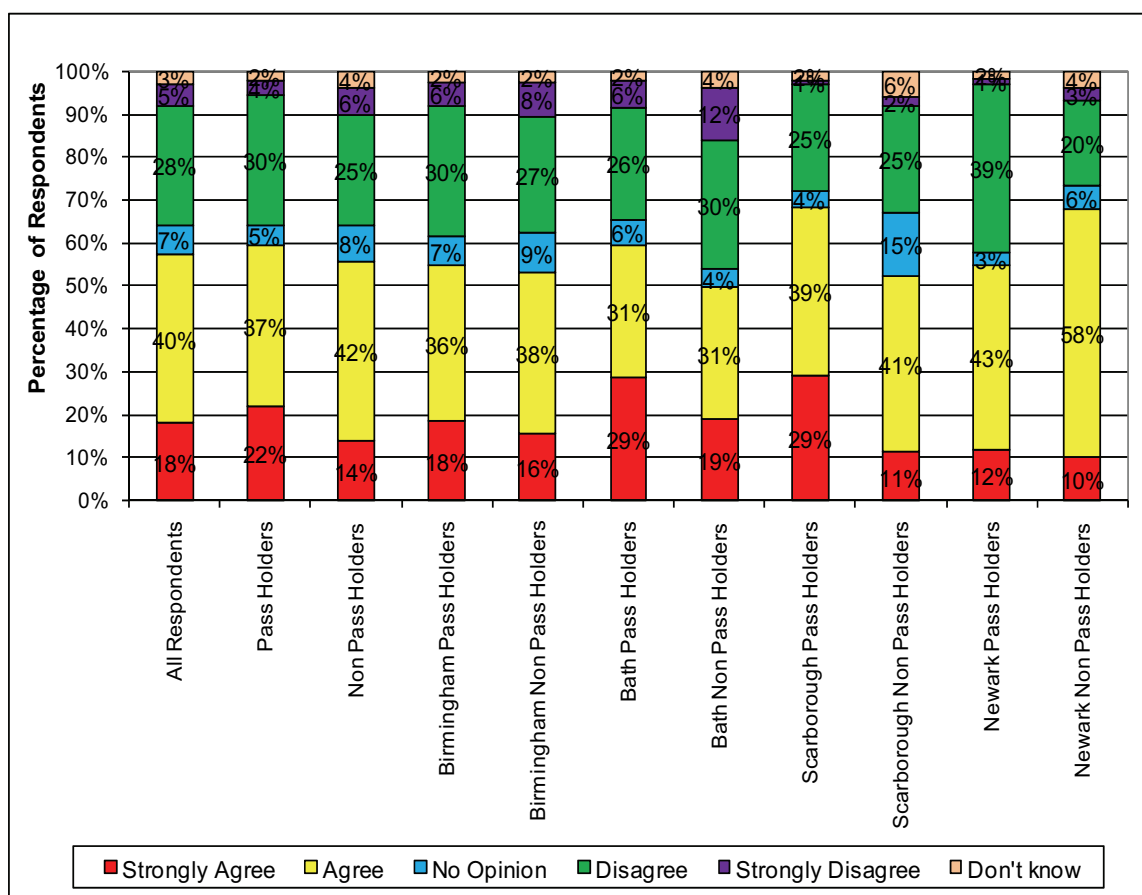
“We would all march down the town hall.”

[Concessionary Pass Holders Aged 60 or Over, Bournemouth)

3.51 58% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that free bus travel for older and disabled passengers should be extended to cover all times of day, including the morning peak. This time a slightly greater proportion of pass holders (59%) than non-pass holders (56%) agreed or strongly agreed with this suggestion.

3.52 Analysis by survey location shows that greater proportions of pass holders in Scarborough and non-pass holders in Newark (both 68%) either agreed or strongly agreed with extending the entitlement to travel for free by bus at all times of day.

Figure 3-19 Views on whether the free travel entitlement should be extended to cover travel by bus at all times of day, including the morning peak



3.53 However, many pass holding respondents in the focus groups felt that the current starting time of both the local concession in each area and the national concession (9.30am) is about right, with a particularly strong view again repeated that free travel for eligible pass holders should not be allowed in the morning peak. In fact some respondents in the Norwich non-pass holder group felt that the current local enhancement to allow concessionary travel from 8.30am should be changed to encourage eligible passengers to travel only at off-peak times⁹. Opinion was divided on this point though with the majority view of non-pass holders in Manchester and Hartlepool being that there should be no time restrictions on concessionary travel by bus at all.

“Why do they only get to travel free from 9.30 why can’t it be any time? Like I said before a lot of old people now don’t have a car so they have to use the bus or the Metro to get from A to B, like I said before they might have hospital appointments you know, why can’t they do that?”

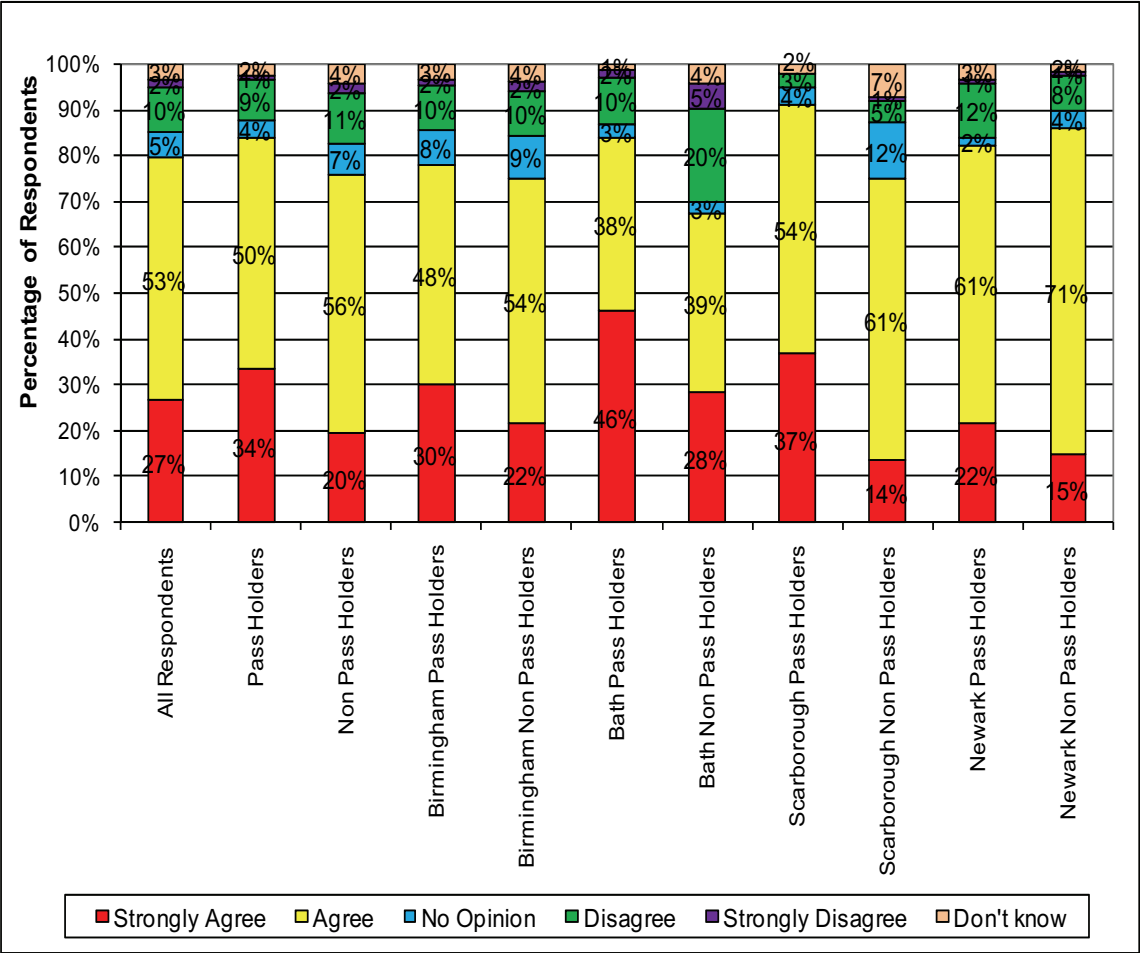
[Non-pass Holder, Manchester]

3.54 The final statement asked whether pass holders and non-pass holders felt that the eligibility criteria for the scheme should be extended to cover all types of public transport. 80% of all respondents agreed or strongly agreed that this should be the

⁹ In April 2009, following the fieldwork for this research, the start time of the concession in Norwich was changed to 9:30am.

case. Again the trend was that a greater proportion of pass holders (84% compared to 76% of non-pass holders) felt that the concession should be extended in this way. In comparison, 91% of pass holders surveyed in Scarborough felt that they should receive this enhanced entitlement, the highest proportion of any sub sample of pass holders or non-pass holders when analysed by survey location.

Figure 3-20 Views on whether the eligibility criteria for the scheme should be extended to cover all types of public transport



3.55 Most pass holders who expressed a view on this suggestion in the focus groups felt that in an ideal world the concession should be extended to national rail and coach services. However, few of these respondents felt this aspiration was realistic because of the associated cost. There were however mixed views on this issue amongst non-pass holding respondents depending on location. Many respondents in Manchester and Hartlepool were sympathetic to the idea of extending the modes which pass holders can use outside of their local area, but most respondents in the Bournemouth and Norwich groups were less supportive of this idea and felt that providing free nationwide bus travel only for eligible pass holders as under the current arrangements to be sufficient.

Other Findings from the Focus Groups

- 3.56 There was generally a high level of awareness of the term 'concessionary travel' as well as the existence of the national free bus travel entitlement amongst the focus groups of pass holders and certainly a higher awareness than amongst non-pass holders as would be expected.

"Concessionary doesn't mean free... It means its grant aided or funded to reduce the price, or make it free."

[Concessionary Pass Holder Aged 60 or Over, Manchester]

- 3.57 However, one participant in the group of eligible disabled pass holders felt that awareness of the concession amongst the deaf community needs to be improved.

"There's a lot of deaf people who don't know about it."

[Concessionary Pass Holder with an Eligible Disability, Hartlepool]

- 3.58 In addition to reducing the cost of their travel, pass holders and non-pass holders felt that the nationwide free off-peak bus travel entitlement provides quality of life improvements for eligible older and disabled people by improving their mobility and in the case of one visually impaired respondent, reducing any potential embarrassment when being asked to pay to complete their journey beyond the local authority boundary.

"You can't really afford to travel when you are on a pension like you did when you were working so this just makes life more interesting for longer, while you are able to do it."

[Concessionary Pass Holder Aged 60 or Over, Bournemouth]

"I use mine [pass] more because in my case I've lost the ability to walk the distances I used to walk."

[Concessionary Pass Holder Aged 60 or Over, Bournemouth]

"Yes, but at least now you know you've got your pass, because sometimes there was a little bit of embarrassment. Because they'd shout you or wave at you and you couldn't see them. 'You still owe 90p. Would the lady with the guide dog come forward?' They just made it very obvious. [Concessionary Pass Holder with a Visual Impairment, Hartlepool]

- 3.59 In Manchester, attitudes towards local bus services were generally positive with some respondents noting that service quality and reliability have improved recently although negative comments were made with respect to the cleanliness of bus services, personal safety issues, driver attitudes and bus fare levels.

- 3.60 In Bournemouth, bus services were generally viewed as being of high quality, with the frequency and reliability of bus services in particular and the increase in the use of buses with low floor access and CCTV in general being well received. Bus driver attitudes and driving styles were also commended by participants.
- 3.61 In Norwich, participants noted differences in the quality of service provided by different operators. They complained mainly about reliability issues but also about driver attitudes, the cleanliness of the buses and access issues for disabled people and people with pushchairs. There was also criticism of the fact that the frequency of bus services within the local area reduces after 6.30pm.
- 3.62 In Hartlepool, disabled respondents praised the bus drivers and the low floor buses operating in the area. The introduction of new buses on certain routes was welcomed, contributing to a perceived reduction in instances of overcrowding and improving the quality of the journey experience overall.



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