# Voice of the Customer: Travel and Transport

**(April – June 2022)**

Insights into the lives of blind and partially sighted people in the UK and the issues that matter most to them. This time, we focus on their experiences of travel and navigating public transport services.

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## Introduction

As the UK’s leading sight loss charity, RNIB stands side by side with blind and partially sighted people through every challenge they face. To do this properly, in a constantly changing world, we need to keep listening to our customers to better understand their lives, needs and wishes.

Our ‘Voice of the customer’ is an ongoing programme which includes a regular survey of around 400 people with sight loss, analysis of what people are talking about on our social media channels, and monthly focus groups which allow us to dive deeper into issues.

Insights and findings from these channels and initiatives are published in a series of quarterly reports to help us – and our partners – better understand the changing needs of blind and partially sighted people.

Not only will this help us respond to new challenges as they develop, we will use this knowledge to continue our mission to break down the barriers for people with sight loss and create a world where blind and partially sighted people participate equally.

For this round we asked survey and focus group participants about their experiences with public transport.

## Key insights

* **More than one in three blind and partially sighted people never use public transport, and a similar proportion are not able to make all the journeys they want to. This limits their ability to work and participate in society.**
* **Technology such as smart phones and travel apps increase confidence and independence, but only a quarter of people with sight loss use tech regularly on public transport.**
* **Passenger assistance can enable people with sight loss to travel independently, and while few people are using the service, it is highly praised by those that do. Most people with sight loss rely on a family member or friend to provide this support.**
* **Accessible design – including the built environment at transport hubs as well as features such as audio announcements on buses and trains – allows for an improved experience for everyone.**

## Blind and partially sighted people’s experience of public transport

More than one in three blind and partially sighted people never use public transport, and a similar proportion are not able to make all the journeys they want to. Key barriers include:

* **Lack of confidence**. Over three quarters of blind and partially sighted people feel nervous about travelling to unfamiliar places, and whilst most feel safe, nearly one in five do not.
* **The need for assistance**. Two fifths of people with sight loss need assistance, even on familiar journeys. The proportion needing this support doubles for unfamiliar journeys.
* **Inaccessible information**. Nearly a quarter of people with sight loss resort to asking friends and family for travel information. Only one per cent use the electronic kiosks.
* **Poorly designed environments**. Over half of people with sight loss find it difficult to navigate public transport facilities.

### People with sight loss are less able to travel spontaneously

The level of planning and preparation required to travel is significantly greater for a blind or partially sighted person. Over half of survey participants said they find it difficult to plan an unfamiliar journey (although over a third find it easy).

Around a quarter find buying a ticket difficult (although over 60 per cent find it easy). The most common reason given by those who find it difficult was that they were unable to use the internet/ computer.

Familiarity with routes helps. Focus group participants spoke of memorising routes before they make a journey, and sometimes doing a “dry run” beforehand, so they feel prepared and safe. Some spoke of how this affects their everyday life and their ability to participate in society. Job choices and access to leisure and social pursuits are restricted with participants making choices based on which places are the easiest and quickest to get to.

### Navigation apps boost confidence when travelling

Having access to a smart phone with navigation apps such as Blind Square, Soundscape or Google Maps enables people with sight loss to access information (including timetable information, live updates and platform alterations) and travel with more confidence.

“My confidence has got a lot better over the last few years since I got an iPhone and started using the apps, whether that’s the map apps or travel apps. I think having apps on in the background really helps to take my stress levels down.” **Focus group participant**

Despite this, only a quarter of survey participants usually or always use technology. Common issues faced when using technology include poor Wi-Fi connection, inaccessible apps, and phone batteries dying.

### Passenger assistance can enable people with sight loss to travel independently, but most rely on family and friends

Even when making familiar journeys over two fifths of our survey participants need support every trip. For unfamiliar journeys, the proportion needing support doubles (to 71 per cent). For well over half (64 per cent) support is provided by a spouse, family member, friend or neighbour.

A relatively small proportion (16 per cent) receive support through a travel assistance scheme. Most of our focus group participants praised the service they received by railway passenger assistance, saying that when it works it provides them with reassurance and enables them to travel independently.

“I travel on the tube sometimes and I find London transport to be wonderfully helpful. They do the simple stuff well. They will touch your elbow and say “I’m London Transport staff, do you need any assistance?” which is very reassuring, and I wish they could transplant that in other support areas.” **Focus group participant**

Well over half (57 per cent) of our survey participants found the attitude and helpfulness of public transport staff to be excellent or good, compared to around one in 10 who found it poor. Attitudes of fellow passengers appear to be less positive with around two fifths (43 percent) rating the attitudes of this group as excellent or good, and nearly one in five (18 per cent) rating it as poor.

In both our survey and focus groups participants mentioned the importance of transport staff receiving training on how to support people with sight loss, and there was a strong implication of the need to change perceptions and build understanding of sight loss amongst the public.

### Built environment can disable or enable depending on design

Accessibility of environment is a key issue with over half of survey participants finding it difficult to navigate public transport facilities (around 40 per cent find it easy). Participants reported obstacles, changing layouts, large gaps, lack of markings and unclear visual information, all of which make it difficult to navigate transport hubs.

We asked focus group participants about design aspects which enabled them, and they spoke about tactile paving, step-free access, colour contrast and functioning lifts. Similarly, buses and trains that use ‘audio visual displays’ and ‘real-time announcements’ enable blind and partially sighted passengers to travel independently and with greater confidence. However, availability of these services varies greatly across the country, and is especially poor in rural areas.

"An audible announcement for each stop [helps]. When I left London I was amazed that the decade+ iBus feature on every London bus is a rarity outside London! Too many trains are also hit and miss with station announcements."

### Future developments

We also asked survey participants about autonomous vehicles (such as driverless cars). There was a fairly even mix of concern (31 per cent), and excitement (28 per cent), with the rest being neutral or not sure. However, we think more work is needed to educate all sections of society about these developments and we hope to explore this potentially game-changing mode of transport in more detail in future.

## References

All of the research in this report is drawn from our quarterly tracker survey from April-June 2022 and focus groups with blind and partially sighted people carried out during this same period. Reports produced from these sources are unpublished but available on request.

This report published September 2022.

## About RNIB’s research

RNIB is a leading source of information on sight loss and the issues affecting blind and partially sighted people. Our Research and Knowledge Hub contains key information and statistics about blind and partially sighted people including our Sight Loss Data Tool, which provides information about sight loss at a local level throughout the UK. You’ll also find research reports on a range of topics including employment, education, technology, accessibility and more. Visit our Knowledge and Research Hub at: **rnib.org.uk/research**