

## **Why do so many disabled passengers avoid bus travel?**

Disabled people make about 10% fewer bus trips than other people each year according to the National Travel Survey. It is not obvious why this is the case.

There is some useful information in Wave 8 of the DfT's National Travel Attitudes Survey (NTAS) which focussed on personal safety when travelling. It was conducted online and by telephone in 2023 with responses from 2,018 individuals aged 16+ living in England.

### **Choosing not to go by bus**

When those who had not travelled by bus in the previous year were asked if this was a deliberate choice, 43% of disabled people said that this was the case, compared with 31% of other people. The top reason for avoiding the bus, chosen by 59% of the disabled respondents, was the behaviour of other passengers making them feel unsafe. 29% of other people chose this option.

### **Abusing disabled people**

30% of the disabled respondents had been verbally abused and 16% physically abused when using public transport. The equivalent figures for non-disabled people were 15% and 5%, respectively. Even if disabled people have not, themselves, been abused, they might be deterred from travelling if they have witnessed it or heard about examples from others.

78% of the disabled people who had been abused and chose not to report did so because they did not think that it would take it seriously, and 43% said that they were afraid that their abuser would seek revenge. In both cases, fewer than half the non-disabled people gave the same responses.

### **Why does this happen?**

It seems shocking that so many disabled people are abused when travelling. It is possible to see how it might happen. Travelling by bus means being physically close to strangers, sometimes for quite lengthy periods, and in very crowded vehicles. This offers the opportunity to assault another person in a way which means that there is ambiguity about whether it was deliberate or accidental. Disabled people may be targeted because they are more vulnerable and thought to be less likely to respond demonstrably.

Disputes can arise about wheelchair spaces or priority seats when a non-disabled person already occupies them and refuses to move. Disabled travellers should not have to ask. It should be vacated automatically, but this may not happen, particularly if the occupant feels that they need to use it, such as people with children in buggies or with suitcases. Hostility towards disabled people may arise when they are perceived as causing delays, such as when the wheelchair ramp is deployed. Dexterity issues may slow some people down in purchasing a ticket or showing a pass. Some disabilities cause communication difficulties which may lead to bus drivers becoming impatient and verbally abusive.

There is no excuse for the hostility towards disabled people, but bus travel can be frustrating for everyone, particularly when it is crowded, hot and slow. This can lead to frustration,

particularly at the end of a long day at work, which may be vented on the nearest vulnerable person, particularly if that person is perceived as contributing to the problem.

### **What can be done?**

Various campaigns have been tried such as 'Considerate Traveller' campaigns in London and the DfT's 'it's everyone's journey' campaign. People can wear a 'Please offer me a seat' badge or a 'Sunflower' lanyard, but some disabled people do not wish to be labelled as different or vulnerable. Having more staff around may help, but sometimes, they cause the problems, questioning people about their disability. Our knowledge of the effectiveness of these initiatives is limited.

There certainly needs to be increased awareness of this issue and public debate about ways of addressing it, because it reflects many of the challenges in today's society.

Written by Roger Mackett

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