

---

# Public transport and Gender

*A pre-budget briefing from the UK  
Women's Budget*

**March 2020**

## Gender and public transport

Briefing from the **UK Women's Budget Group** on public transport and gender.

### Key points

- *Travel by public transport is highly gendered. In 2018 across England men made slightly more journeys by rail than women, but women made over a third more journeys by bus than men.*<sup>1</sup>
- *In 2018 across England men made slightly more journeys by rail than women, but women made over a third more journeys by bus than men.*<sup>2</sup>
- *In Scotland and Wales the data suggests that these trends are replicated: women are more likely to use the bus than men, whilst men are more likely to use rail than women.*
- *In Northern Ireland the latest figures show there is little difference in how frequently men and women use public transport, but like the rest of the UK, men tend to travel further distances than women on all forms of transport.*<sup>3</sup>
- *In 2017/18, UK Government spending on public transport totalled £32.5bn.*<sup>4</sup>
- *This included £18bn on railways, £10.5bn on local and national roads and £2.5bn on 'local public transport' including buses.*<sup>5</sup>
- *Analysis by the Equality Trust showed that the richest ten per cent receives £977.4 million in transport subsidy; the poorest ten per cent receives just £296.7 million.*<sup>6</sup>
- *Bus fares are a barrier to access. 38% of adults would use buses more often if fares were cheaper. 14% of women and 12% of men said they don't use buses because fares were too high.*<sup>7</sup>
- *Between March 2012 and March 2018, the average annual percentage change in bus fares was 2.9%, which was higher than the average annual rate of inflation (1.6%).*<sup>8</sup>
- .

### Introduction

Affordable, reliable and dependable public transport allows people to access essential opportunities such as paid work, education, shopping and socialising. Conversely, a lack of transport, including public transport, is inextricably linked to social disadvantage, exclusion<sup>9</sup> and gender inequality.

As women are far more likely than men to live on low incomes, work part-time, live in poverty and to undertake unpaid work in the home and the community, poor quality, unreliable and expensive

public transport has a far bigger impact on their lives than it does on the lives of men. This makes it imperative that public transport policy and spending is understood from a gender perspective at a local, regional and national level.

For people on low incomes, or living in poverty, or for those undertaking unpaid work such as caring for dependent relatives, low cost, highly dependable public transport can substantially increase access to paid employment, education, shopping, socialising

<sup>1</sup> Department of Transport, 2019, Mode of Travel Statistical Data Set, NTS0702 <https://bit.ly/34dmDGR>

<sup>2</sup> Department of Transport, 2019, Mode of Travel Statistical Data Set, NTS0702 <https://bit.ly/34dmDGR>

<sup>3</sup> Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2019, Travel Survey for Northern Ireland In-depth Report 2015-2017 p 21 <https://bit.ly/2MU7kNt>

<sup>4</sup> Department for Transport, 2019, UK Public Expenditure on Transport by function: from 2005/06 – 2017/18 <https://bit.ly/2Wk9MzP>

<sup>5</sup> House of Commons Library, 2018, Transport Spending by Region, <https://bit.ly/2MSaeSB>

<sup>6</sup> Equality Trust, 2015, Taken for a Ride - How UK public transport subsidies entrench inequality, p5 <https://bit.ly/2paFcN6>

<sup>7</sup> Department of Transport, 2013, Public Attitudes Towards Buses, Table ATT0109 <https://bit.ly/2op0Koj>

<sup>8</sup> Department of Transport, 2017, Quarterly bus statistics: July to September 2017, <https://bit.ly/2NmF3y3>

<sup>9</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of the links between poverty and transport, see UCL Transport Institute (2014) *Transport and Poverty: A review of the evidence* (<http://bit.ly/2PIKilr>)

and reaching essential services such as JobCentre Plus, hospitals and GP surgeries.

This briefing focuses specifically on **public** transport, primarily on buses and trains. Spending on public transport is not equal; some forms attract more investment than others. In 2017/18, UK Government spending on public transport totalled £32.5bn.<sup>10</sup> This included £18bn on railways, £10.5bn on local and national roads and £2.5bn on 'local public transport' including buses.<sup>11</sup> Looking at the regional breakdown, £26.4bn was spent in England, £3.6bn in Scotland, £1,3bn in Wales and £555m in Northern Ireland

Nationally, most political and media focus seems to be on railways and trains, rather than buses, and on the ownership models as much as (if not more than) the passenger experience.

Different elements of public transport are governed by different legislation, and transport is a devolved matter which means the Governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have different legislation and policy priorities to England. This briefing draws on statistics from a variety of sources and (wherever possible) indicates where figures relate to UK, GB, Wales & England or just England.

Across Great Britain, public transport is supplied by both public and private sectors. In most of England, Scotland and Wales, private bus operators provide services in two ways: either commercially or under contract to local government or the Passenger Transport Executive<sup>12</sup> following competitive tendering processes. In London, bus, underground and several 'local' rail services are operated under contract with Transport for London. In England and Wales, rail services are provided under franchises let by the Department for Transport, (although in recent times companies that have deemed to have 'failed' to provide a suitable service have had their contract terminated and the state has taken over running of the service for the remainder of the time). The Scottish Parliament is responsible for the rail franchising process within Scotland. In Northern

Ireland a state-owned operation is responsible for all rail services and almost all bus services.

### Transport and its impact on women

Across the UK, women and men use public transport differently. In 2018 across **England** men made slightly more journeys by rail than women, but women made over a third more journeys by bus than men. Across the year men on average made 13 journeys by bus in London, 28 journeys by local buses outside of London, 24 journeys by rail and 12 journeys by London Underground.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, women, on average, made 17 journeys by bus in London, 38 journeys by local buses outside of London, 21 journeys by rail and 10 journeys by London Underground.<sup>14</sup> In **Scotland and Wales** the data suggests that these trends are replicated: women are more likely to use the bus than men, whilst men are more likely to use rail than women. In **Northern Ireland** the latest figures show there is little difference in how frequently men and women use public transport, but like the rest of the UK, men tend to travel further distances than women on all forms of transport.<sup>15</sup>

There is little coherent analysis within central or local Government about the impact on women and men of public transport policy. The Equality Impact Assessment of the 2017 Bus Act states that any impact on women as a result of the changes implemented by the Act<sup>16</sup> should be addressed by Local Transport Authorities, but it is not clear that this happens systematically if at all.

Women's transport needs are also different to men's. Women are far more likely than men to be in paid part time work for significant periods of their working lives. A key issue for many women, therefore, is the challenge of paying for weekly transport passes when working in this way: public transport can be prohibitively expensive and inflexible for anyone working outside 'normal' full time hours. The Campaign for Better Transport is campaigning on this issue, putting pressure on the Government to introduce a countrywide system that would

<sup>10</sup> Department for Transport, 2019, UK Public Expenditure on Transport by function: from 2005/06 – 2017/18 <https://bit.ly/2Wk9MzP>

<sup>11</sup> House of Commons Library, 2018, Transport Spending by Region, <https://bit.ly/2MSaeSB>

<sup>12</sup> More information about PTEs can be found here <http://orr.gov.uk/about-orr/who-we-work-with/government/passenger-transport-executives>

<sup>13</sup> A 'local bus' service is defined as a stopping service available to the general public, where the route is registered with the Traffic Commissioner, which is eligible for Bus Service Operators Grant. See

Department of Transport, 2018, Transport Statistics Great Britain 2018: Notes and Definitions: Public Transport <https://bit.ly/2PrHxh8>

<sup>14</sup> Department of Transport, 2019, Mode of Travel Statistical Data Set, NTS0702 <https://bit.ly/34dmDGR>

<sup>15</sup> Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2019, Travel Survey for Northern Ireland In-depth Report 2015-2017 p 21 <https://bit.ly/2MU7kNt>

<sup>16</sup> Department for Transport, 2016, Changes to bus market legislation - bus franchising and partnership improvements for inclusion in the Buses Bill, Impact Assessment <https://bit.ly/2Jv9UHv>

substantially reduce the cost of travel for people working part time.

Women are also more likely to have caring responsibilities that may require them to make multiple short journeys during a day, (for example to drop children off at school, visit an elderly parent and shop for food). This creates another challenge, since many transport services are based on a 'hub and spoke model' aimed at people who wish to travel into the centre of towns or cities for work in the morning and back to residential areas in the evening.

The failure of public transport to meet women's needs is one of the causes of the gender pay gap as Jackie Longworth has argued:

*Some 30 per cent of women have no access to a car particularly during the working day because either they cannot afford one or the family car is used by their partner for work. Except in London, public transport systems tend to be designed on a 'hub and spoke' model focused on the centres of conurbations. This means that a journey to work via school or childcare drop-off might involve several changes and a long commuting time. Combine this with the fact that high paid jobs [in the West of England] are unevenly distributed and it is not surprising that many women seeking work choose a more local, lower paid, job. Planners, transport authorities and developers need to consider the differing needs of women and men when deciding how to distribute residential and employment space and to ensure that public transport opens up the connections between them.<sup>17</sup>*

However, aside from Jackie Longworth's work, transport as a barrier to women's employment receives far less attention than other barriers such as childcare. This is even more apparent when looking at the intersection between race and gender.

### Transport and poverty

There are clear links between a lack of quality, affordable, reliable public transport and poverty. Since women are more likely than men to live in poverty and to experience 'persistent poverty'<sup>18</sup> the

impacts of lack of affordable reliable transport are gendered.

Across **Great Britain** poorer people use the bus and wealthier people use trains. In **Scotland**, people earning up to £15k per year are twice as likely to use the bus everyday than those earning £30k-£40k and three times as likely as those earning £50k+; conversely, those earning up to £15k per year are five times less likely than those earning over £50k to use the train.<sup>19</sup> In **England**, people in the lowest income level are a third more likely than any other earners to use buses in London and three times more likely to use buses outside London than those in the highest income level. People in the highest income bracket are more than three times more likely to use rail – and almost three times more likely to use London Underground - than those in the lowest income bracket.<sup>20</sup>

Sustrans and the Campaign for Better Transport have both highlighted the ways that lack of quality public transport exacerbates isolation, inequality and poverty, limiting people's access to paid employment, education, networking and accessing employment and welfare services.<sup>2122</sup>

### Political focus on trains

Whilst all of the political parties mentioned buses and trains in their 2017 General Election manifestos, trains tend to have a bigger focus than buses, and most of the attention is on ownership models with some reference to environmental impact as well as costs of transport. Campaign for Better Transport argues that poor bus provision is down to political bias. *"MPs and national journalists are more likely to use trains and roads and therefore tend to focus on these when considering transport policies and stories. They are less affected by buses and therefore fail to acknowledge their importance. [Analysis of MPs' expense claims in 2017] showed that in total MPs claimed less than £1,900 on bus fares [compared to] £1.4 million on rail travel, £1 million for car travel,*

<sup>17</sup> Jackie Longworth, 2016, How to eliminate the gender pay gap: local actions, CESR Review, UWE, <https://bit.ly/32SfsDv> p.7

<sup>18</sup> The Office for National Statistics define persistent poverty "as experiencing relative low income in the current year, as well as at least 2 out of the 3 preceding years" ONS, 2015, Persistent poverty in the UK and EU, <https://bit.ly/2pmocTI>

<sup>19</sup> Transport Scotland, 2018, Adults use of local bus and train services, <https://bit.ly/2WmAc48>

<sup>20</sup> Department for Transport, 2019, Travel by household income quintile and main mode / mode: England, from 2002 – 2018, <https://bit.ly/2pIXsCX>

<sup>21</sup> Sustrans, 2012, Locked Out: Transport Poverty in England, <https://bit.ly/2BRgEve>

<sup>22</sup> Campaign for Better Transport, 2019, The future of the bus: Future funding arrangements, <https://bit.ly/2qTqr1H>

£0.75 million on air travel, nearly £60,000 on taxis, and £30,000 on the underground.”<sup>23</sup>

## Modes of Public Transport – Buses and Trains

### Buses

There are currently five main bus operators in Great Britain: Stagecoach; FirstGroup; Arriva; National Express; and Go-Ahead. In 2011 the Competition Commission calculated that these five companies accounted for 70% of the market (by number of services registered)<sup>24</sup>. Commercial bus operators are not required to consult before making changes to timetables or the position of bus stops; nor do they have to consider either public demand or the availability of existing services: each company can operate timetables and introduce new services solely on individual operators’ views on the demand and commercial viability. The role of local authorities is to secure, using subsidy, ‘socially necessary’ services which are not provided by the commercial market and to specify fare levels, type of bus and so on for these services, on the condition that they are provided by private contractors. Across the UK, the Government spent £2.3bn on bus services; much of this was spent on subsidising ‘unprofitable’ bus routes.

### Impact of austerity

Across the UK, particularly in rural and isolated communities, the bus is often the only form of public transport. However, such routes are often considered ‘unprofitable’ by private providers so rely on subsidy from local authorities. Swingeing cuts to local authority budgets since 2010 have severely affected the provision of subsidised bus services. Research by Campaign for Better Transport has found funding for buses across England and Wales have been cut by 33% since 2010, and by nearly £30 million in 2016/17 alone.<sup>25</sup>

The Campaign for Better Transport found that over 500 bus routes had been reduced or completely withdrawn in 2016/17.<sup>26</sup> In February 2018, analysis conducted by the BBC<sup>27</sup> showed that there had been a loss of 134 million miles of bus coverage across the UK

over the past decade. The North East of England was hardest hit, losing nearly a quarter (23%) of miles from its network in that time. Since women make a third more bus journeys than men they are disproportionately affected by these cuts.

Local authorities often have to subsidise bus routes where the passengers are primarily holders of concessionary bus passes – due to age or disability. Such passengers are therefore doubly dependent on local authority subsidies, and hugely at risk of being isolated as a result of cuts to public transport budgets.

### Dependable bus services

Public transport of any mode needs to be reliable and dependable for it to meet the needs of the public it serves. In a recent survey, 44% of people never used a local bus compared to 27% of people who use one weekly.<sup>28</sup> In a Government survey of public attitudes towards buses of those who didn’t use bus services, 18% of women and 15% of men said it was because the buses were infrequent or didn’t run when needed. Between September 2016 and September 2017, there were 4.4 billion bus journeys made in England, a 1.5% drop on the previous year. Bus use in England outside London declined by 2% over the same period.

A dependable bus service is therefore a key concern for people in the UK. In Great Britain, bus companies are measured solely on punctuality. The standards set mean that a bus can be up to one minute early and five minutes late, and the punctuality target for bus providers is 95%. Transport Focus, the Government sponsored body which measures passenger satisfaction with GB transport, captures information on satisfaction with punctuality rather than dependability. This is unfortunate because, in transport terms, these are not the same things at all. A bus that turns up once a day may turn up on time every day (and thus be punctual), but is not a dependable form of public transport if someone needs to travel at a time when there is no bus. Interestingly, in a survey conducted in 2013, 35% of people said they would use buses more often if the

<sup>23</sup> Campaign for Better Transport, 2018, The Value of Buses, <https://bit.ly/2q2eGoR>

<sup>24</sup> House of Commons Library, 2017, Briefing Paper Number CBP07545, Bus Services Act 2017, p10 <https://bit.ly/31UmQgy>

<sup>25</sup> Campaign for Better Transport, 2018, Buses in Crisis, <https://bit.ly/2PnbS0p>

<sup>26</sup> Campaign for Better Transport, 2018, Buses in Crisis, <https://bit.ly/2PnbS0p>

<sup>27</sup> BBC News, 16 February 2018, Britain's bus coverage hits 28-year low, <https://bbc.in/34a7VAs>

<sup>28</sup> Department of Transport, 2018, Data on results of the transport questions asked on the British social attitudes survey, produced by Department for Transport, <https://bit.ly/2NkeYQ3> Table ATT0303 *Frequency of travel by local bus*



buses were more frequent, including 41% of people who describe themselves as bus users<sup>29</sup>.

### **Affordable bus services**

Bus fares are a barrier to access. 38% of adults would use buses more often if fares were cheaper. 14% of women and 12% of men said they don't use buses because fares were too high.<sup>30</sup> Between March 2012 and March 2018, the average annual percentage change in bus fares was 2.9%, which was higher than the average annual rate of inflation (1.6%). In addition, local bus fares in England increased by 71% between March 2005 and March 2018. Over the same period, the 'all items' Consumer Prices Index has risen by 35%, which means that bus fares have risen twice the rate in real terms.<sup>31</sup>

An expensive, irregular bus service hinders more than just access to paid employment; ., it can also lead to isolation, loneliness and poverty, denying people access to education, vital services and opportunities for socialising. In Chard in Somerset, one mother told the BBC how a 10-mile journey to take her autistic son to their nearest community hospital by bus can take three hours, the same time it would take to walk.<sup>32</sup>

### **Trains/Railways**

Although the rail industry in Great Britain was privatised in 1993, the UK Government still invests around £15bn in the railways. This equates to about £249 per person per year in England, (compared to £8 per person per year for buses).<sup>33</sup> As with bus services, the state subsidises "socially necessary" (and often unprofitable) services that might not otherwise be provided by private companies.<sup>34</sup>

And whilst trains attract more funding, resource (and media interest) than buses do, on the whole this is reserved for large intercity projects (e.g. HS2) that move wealthy people (mainly men) from one part of the country to another.

### **Rail fares and affordability**

One of the key issues with railways is affordability and availability. When asked their reasons for not travelling long distances by train, 36% of respondents stated that train fares are too high.<sup>35</sup> In 2018, rail fares in the UK increased on average by 3.4% , which was the largest increase in five years. For those who travel 'short journeys' (50 miles or less) by train, train frequency and fare costs are the two areas that they feel most need improvement: 30% report frequency and 42% report the cost of the fares.<sup>36</sup>

The effect of this is rail travel remains the preserve of the wealthiest people. Those in households of the highest income quintile are three times more likely to use the railways as those in the lowest income households.<sup>37</sup> Average trip numbers are almost double between those in the highest and second highest income quintile.<sup>38</sup>

However, one of the stark aspects of the debate on fares is how much it concentrates on 'commuters' and the expense they face, rather than people who may need to use rail for different purposes, or who use it for paid work but don't consider themselves 'commuters'.

### **The cost of train travel for part time workers**

People working part time, the vast majority of whom are women, face huge financial penalties in the rail fare system: most can either pay the highest peak time fares on the days they travel or pay for a full season ticket and pay for journeys they never take. In recent years, the Government has sought to address this anomaly publishing a report exploring this issue in some detail<sup>39</sup> and inviting companies tendering to run services to consider ways they can provide flexible fares to those commuters working part time and/or flexibly. In 2016, the Essex train company c2c offered a 'flexible season ticket' offering travellers 5% discount on fares (as opposed to 33% discount many 'full time' season tickets provide).<sup>40</sup> But on the whole,

<sup>29</sup> ONS, 2013, Public Attitudes Towards Busses, Table ATT0109 Statements by user/non-user status <https://bit.ly/2pWsa5G>

<sup>30</sup> ONS, 2013, Public Attitudes Towards Busses, Table ATT0109 Statements by user/non-user status <https://bit.ly/2pWsa5G>

<sup>31</sup> ONS, 2017, Local bus passenger journeys and fares in Great Britain for July to September 2017, <https://bit.ly/2BLD2Gi>

<sup>32</sup> BBC News, 16 February 2018, Britain's bus coverage hits 28-year low, <https://bbc.in/34a7VAs>

<sup>33</sup> House of Commons Library, 2018, Transport Spending by Region, <https://bit.ly/2MSaeSB>

<sup>34</sup> Department of Transport, 2017, Rail Factsheet, <https://bit.ly/31VJXHo> p.1

<sup>35</sup> Department of Transport, 2018, Rail Statistics: Reasons for not using trains for long distance journeys (more often), <https://bit.ly/2PqMhn6>

<sup>36</sup> Department of Transport, 2019, Attitudes towards train services <https://bit.ly/2NiuEDA> ATT0412

<sup>37</sup> Department for Transport, 2019, Travel by household income quintile and main mode / mode: England, from 2002 – 2018, <https://bit.ly/2pLXsCX>

<sup>38</sup> Department of Transport, 2017, Rail Factsheet, <https://bit.ly/31VJXHo> p.3

<sup>39</sup> IFF Research, 2013, The scope for flexible working in future, Department of Transport, <https://bit.ly/36d74AI>

<sup>40</sup> Lianna Etkind, 2017, Time for fairly-priced train tickets for part-time commuters, Working Families Blog, <https://bit.ly/349QY9g>

those working part time do not benefit from any reduction in the cost of travelling by train.

### Distribution of rail travel

Rail travel is not evenly spread across the country. In England, 69% of rail journeys take place in London and the South East. Furthermore, 64% of rail journeys start or end in London and residents of the Capital are four times more likely to use rail than those living elsewhere in England.<sup>41</sup> This means that the focus of transport debate on railways is in danger of bias towards wealthy male workers commuting in and out of London and thus ignores those who don't have access to the railway system, or use it in this way, but still heavily depend on public transport for getting around.

In addition, many areas outside of major towns and cities do not have access to a reliable railway system. There is a particular challenge for those who live in areas that are poorly served by public transport. 37% of rail users have to walk 30 minutes to get to their nearest railway station, 14% had a bus journey of over 30 minutes to get to their nearest railway station whilst 19% had no bus service to the station.<sup>42</sup>

### Car ownership

This briefing has focussed on public transport, but in seeking to understand how *public* transport impacts on men's and women's lives, it is important to understand the role of private car use as both a cause and a consequence of poor public transport provision. Car ownership across the UK is closely associated with wealth. In England, men are more likely than women to take trips by car (although this does change depending on age) and to travel further distances. In addition, 46% of households in the lowest income quintile have no access to a car, compared to 13% of those in the highest income quintile.<sup>43</sup> In Scotland, 50% of people earning £15k per year had a full driving license, compared to 90% of those earning £50k and over.<sup>44</sup>

This means that people living in poor or low-income households that are badly served by transport are also trapped by a lack of a car.

### Conclusion

The impact of cuts to local authorities is having a harmful effect on public transport provision, particularly buses, which in turn, is hurting women and those living on low incomes across the country.

As women are far more likely than men to live on low incomes, work part time, live in poverty and to undertake unpaid work in the home and the community, poor quality, unreliable and expensive public transport has a far bigger impact on their lives than it does on the lives of men. A lack of public transport creates barriers to women accessing employment opportunities, education, health and other essential services and reduces women's ability to socialise and participate in public life. This makes it imperative that public transport policy and spending is understood from a gender perspective at a local, regional and national level, and that the harmful cuts to local authority budgets are halted as a matter of urgency.

#### Written by

Rebecca Gill, independent consultant

This is an update on our 2018 briefing, Gender and Public Transport.

#### UK Women's Budget Group, March 2020

WBG is an independent, voluntary organisation made up of individuals from Academia, NGOs and trade unions. See [www.wbg.org.uk](http://www.wbg.org.uk)

**Contact:** Mary-Ann Stephenson (WBG Director):

[maryann.stephenson@wbg.org.uk](mailto:maryann.stephenson@wbg.org.uk)



<sup>41</sup> Department of Transport, 2017, Rail Factsheet, <https://bit.ly/31VJXHo>

<sup>42</sup> Department of Transport, 2019, Attitudes towards train services <https://bit.ly/2NiuEDA> Table ATT0402

<sup>43</sup> Department of Transport, 2019, Household car availability by household income quintile: England, from 2002 – 2018, <https://bit.ly/2piWS92>

<sup>44</sup> Transport Scotland, 2018, Transport and Travel in Scotland Results from the Scottish Household Survey Table 19: [Driving licence] People aged 17+ that hold a full driving licence, <https://bit.ly/2NnghOp>