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By e-mail

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4th July 2013

Dear Janet,

Re: Abbey Line Surveys, June 2013

Introduction

We have now completed our passenger surveys on the St Albans Abbey branch, along the length of the Line to and from Watford Junction. The objective of the surveys was to learn about the travel behaviour of Abbey Line users and use this understanding in order to better plan future rail services and improve the general running of the Line. A summary of our findings is provided in this note, while the full data collected can be found in the attached spreadsheet. As this year's work did not cover all services in a systematic manner, we have not undertaken a formal comparison with previous year's work, but the results appear comparable, which is encouraging, and should enable you to have confidence in taking forward the findings.

Surveying Methods

As agreed, surveys were carried out on the morning of Saturday 1st, afternoon/evening of Tuesday 4th, morning of Wednesday 5th and the afternoon/evening of Sunday 9th June, thereby covering a range of days and times. This should make the results representative of the Line as a whole.

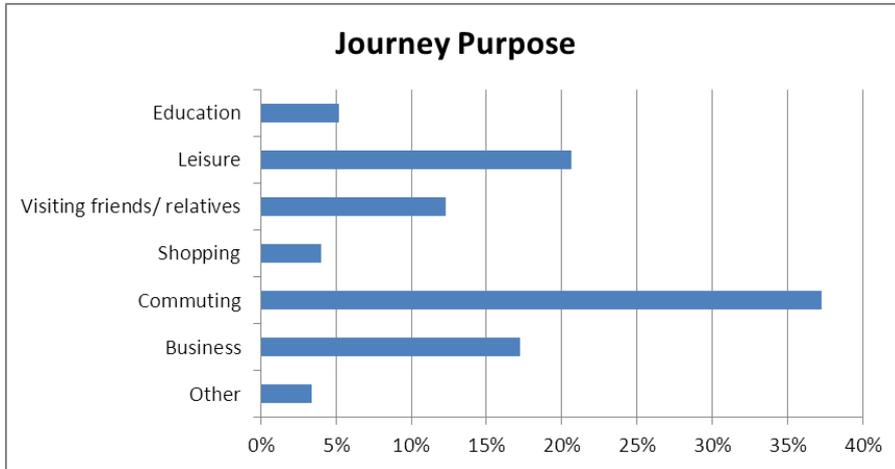
The method used for the passenger surveys was to hand out surveys to passengers on the train and for passengers to fill in the survey and return it to the surveyor directly or by freepost. Just under 1000 surveys were distributed over the four survey periods covering weekday morning and evening peaks as well as a Saturday morning and Sunday afternoon/evening. There was a good response rate of approximately one third, with 328 useful responses received; this is broadly equivalent to 1/5 of weekday trips, suggesting that responses are likely to be representative of the overall picture.

Results

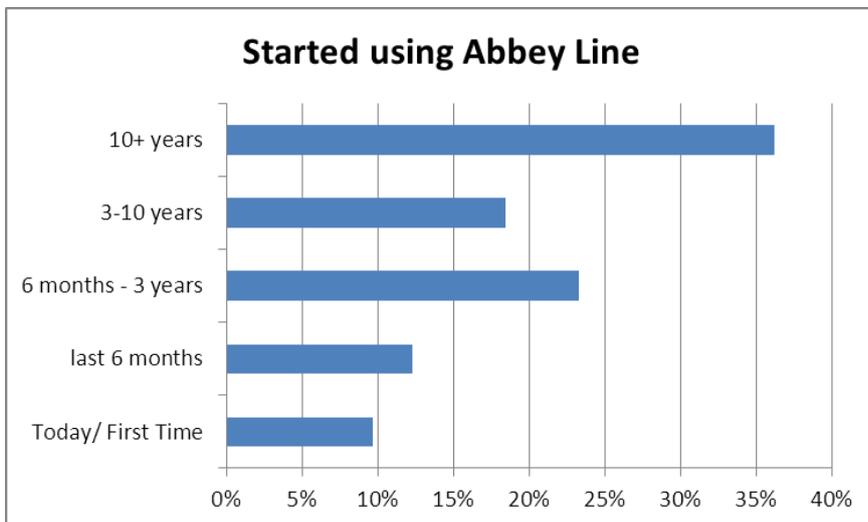
Data and comments in the following sections reflect an unweighted average across the different days and times surveyed.

Passenger Characteristics

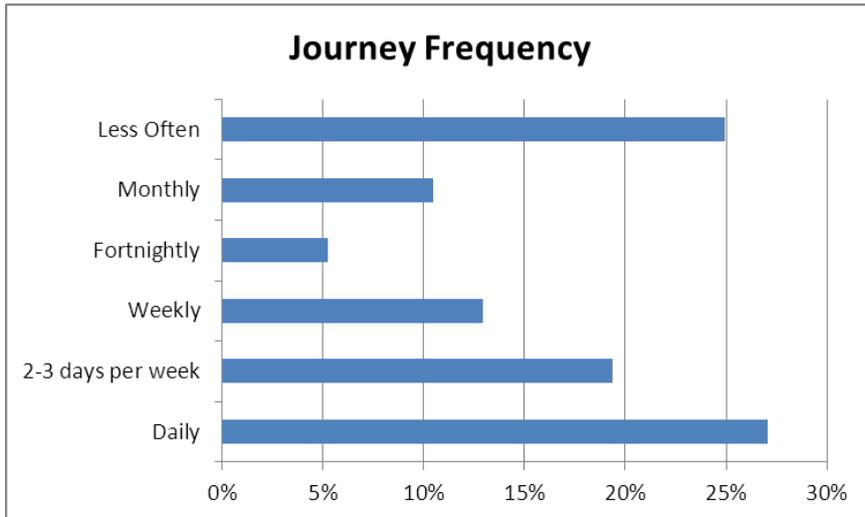
The range of journey purposes of passengers is reasonably wide, although the most popular reason for travel on the Abbey Line is commuting. 60% of passengers travel for the non-discretionary purposes of Business, Commuting, or for Education. Just over 20% travel for leisure purposes, although when surveyed under 5% were travelling to go shopping.



Reflecting the dominant use of the line for commuting purposes, almost 40% of passengers have been using the line for more than ten years, and a further 18% have been using it for over three years. However, around a quarter of all passengers have only started using the line in the last 6 months - 3 years. Almost 10% of users surveyed were using the line for the first time and another 12% had only started using it in the last 6 months. Of those who has started using it within the last 6 months most found out about it online or through a friend.



Over a quarter of Abbey Line passengers use the Line daily, while a combined 60% use it at least once a week.

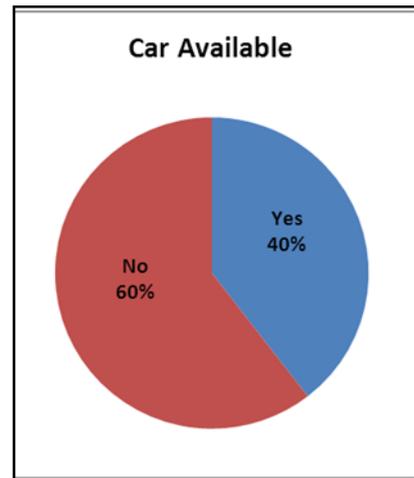
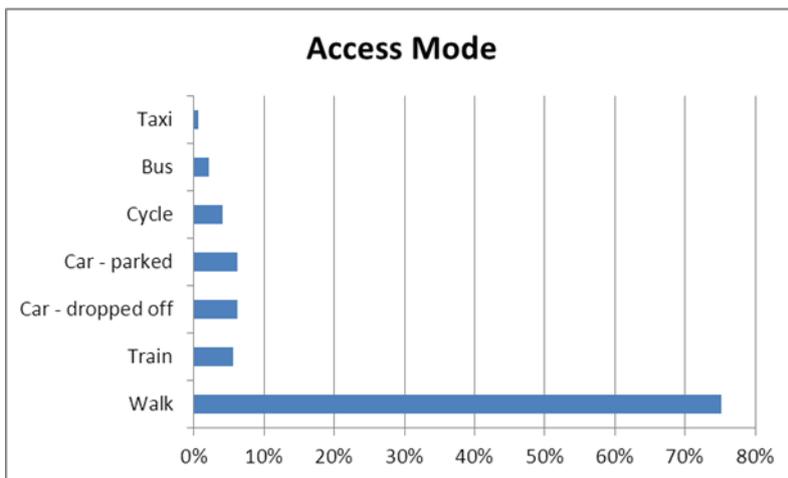


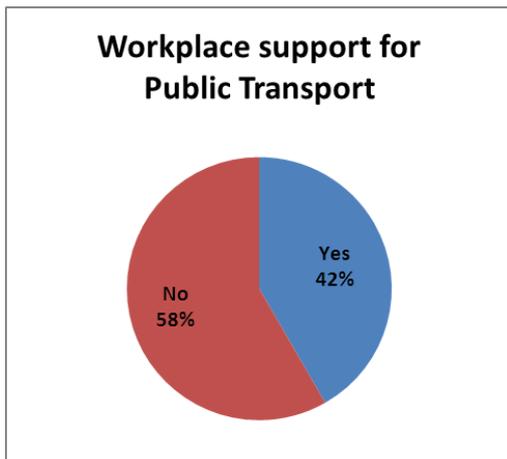
However, 25% of people use this Line less than once a month – this is quite high and is nearly all represented by leisure users. Trip purposes for infrequent users include people visiting the area to see friends, for walks in the woods, and even the Harry Potter World, although some people use it as an alternative to the mainline when there are problems from St Albans to London.

Access

Of those that chose to travel by train over any other mode for their journey, most picked it because it was quick, direct, convenient, a better option than the bus and they were unwilling to drive into central London. Significantly, 40% did have a car available but chose train.

The vast majority of people access the Abbey Line by walking. Around 10% arrived by car, either being dropped off or parking. Only 4% cycle to the station, this may be low due to the proximity of the housing to the stations between Watford and St Albans, but may also reflect the inadequate provision of suitable cycle routes and lack of secure facilities for bicycles at the stations. 6% arrived by train and at least a third of these came specifically from the Overground (i.e. local services at Watford).





Around 40% of passengers felt that their workplace encouraged or supported the use of public transport. While it may not be possible for every company to offer season ticket loans or a cycle to work scheme, as environmental issues have become more prevalent in society more could be being done to publicise and encourage public transport use. This can help reduce congestion in busy areas, improve the general fitness of workers, and (through fare revenues) raise money to reinvest in further improving public transport.

Likes

Frequently occurring comments on what people liked about the Abbey Line included:

- Having a quick journey time
- Convenient due to proximity with local resident's housing
- Providing a good connection to both St Albans and Watford
- Never being too crowded and being easy to get a seat
- Staff mostly friendly

Dislikes

In contrast there are certain comments aspects that passengers do not like about the Abbey Line:

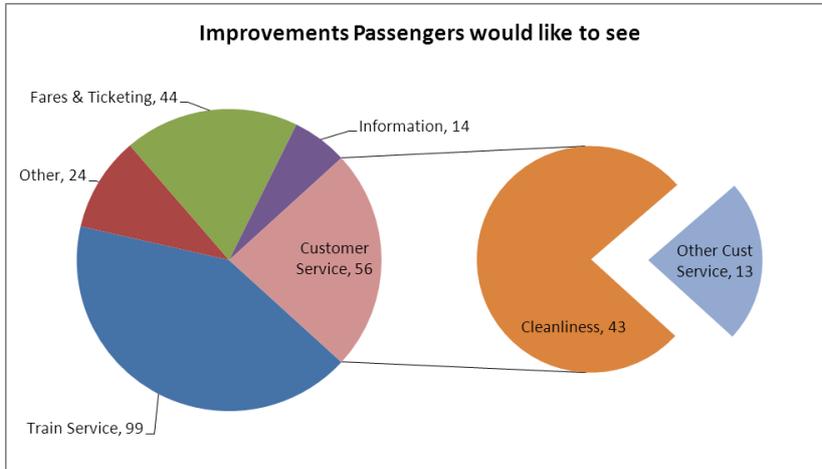
- Lack of cleanliness
- Long waiting times between trains
- Trains cancelled due to crew absence
- Last train service being too early in the evening
- Not always a smooth connection between the Abbey Line and mainline at Watford Junction

Improvements

Some improvements that many Abbey Line passengers would like to be see addressed, in order to improve the service, are:

- to keep the service running later at night (especially at weekends)
- regular cleaning of the interior of the train which is dirty and tatty
- service frequency
- communication when services are delayed or cancelled

However, there were a wide range of responses, which we have categorised, for ease of comprehension. "Train service" issues include cancellations and length of the traffic day; cleaning and staff problems have been put under the category of "customer service". The following pie chart includes all responses regarding aspects of the Abbey Line which passengers felt required improvement. Note that respondents were allowed to make three comments under this heading.

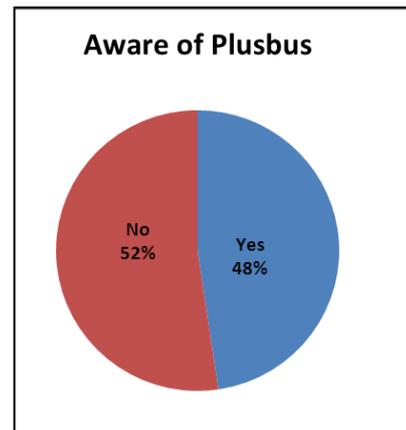
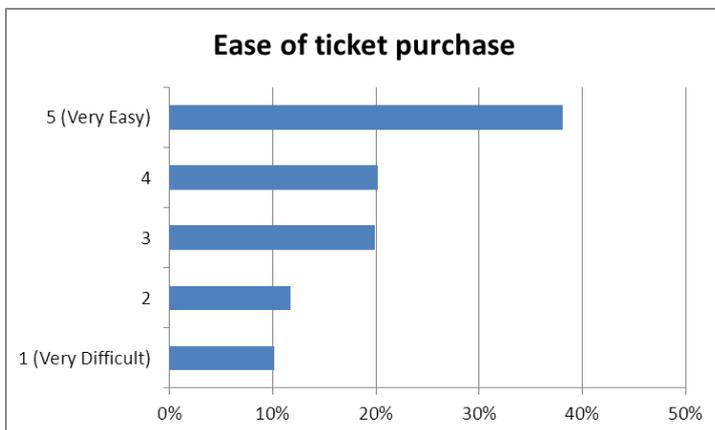


More specific issues include announcements on trains, particularly at night, as to which station they are arriving into, as it can be difficult to see the station signs. Other passengers want better ticket facilities available, introduction of 'Carnet' tickets and/or inclusion of the Line in the Oyster smartcard system, better signage at Watford Junction to platform 11 for the Abbey Line trains and to exit the station, and improvements to the height of the platform at St Albans Abbey.

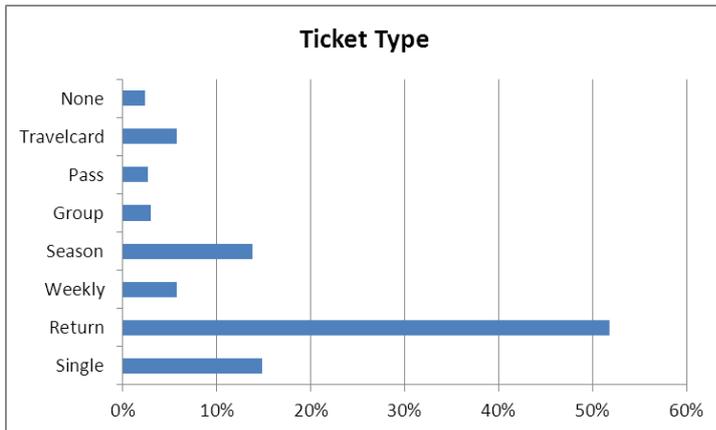
Things that would encourage people to use trains more included extending a direct service from the Abbey Line to London, it being cheaper, trains being kept in better condition, and (as noted earlier) a more frequent service.

Tickets

A lot of people commented on the issue of ticketing, aside from wanting cheaper fares; passengers would like the extension of the Oyster area from Watford Junction up to St Albans Abbey. Giving passengers the option of using a smart card for travel could help to improve compliance. There are several reasons for passengers not always having tickets, including a lack of ticket machines at all the stations, whilst Revenue Protection Inspectors are only present to sell tickets on some trains, whereas outside of the busiest times people can travel without paying any fare. Ticket machines also allow for passengers to continue their onward journey without having to queue up and waste time waiting at Watford Junction. Some comments received noted a concern with people loitering at stations which discourages people from choosing to use the line.



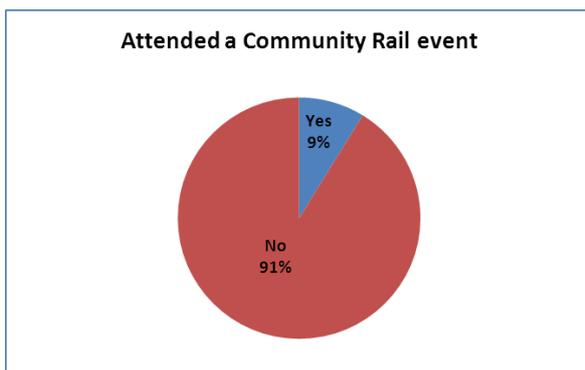
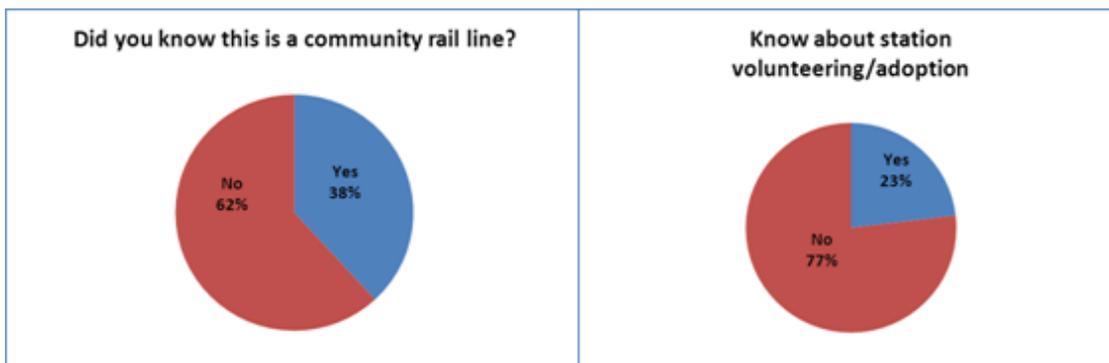
The pie chart above shows that around half of people were aware of Plusbus. However, there were comments from some passengers that they were neither sure how to purchase a Plusbus ticket for the local area, nor if it was valid on buses around St Albans.



Unsurprisingly the majority of passengers travel with return tickets. 2% indicated that they had no ticket, more left this question blank suggesting that it is likely that more than 2% of Abbey Line users travel without a valid ticket, and possibly only purchase one if there are Revenue Protection Inspectors on board. (Previous surveys have found much higher proportions of passengers without a valid ticket when specifically asked). Despite passengers undertaking frequent journeys for commuting or educational purposes, only 20% carry weekly or longer season tickets.

Community Rail

Almost four in ten people are already aware that the Abbey Line is a Community Rail Line and almost a quarter know about station volunteering or adoption, however less than one in ten has actually attended a community rail event.



62% of passengers did not know the Abbey Line is a Community Line; however it is promising that a number of people asked for more information to be sent to them about community rail and volunteering.

Conclusions

A very high percentage of people use the Abbey Line at least once a week. Encouragingly 75% of people walk and an improvement to cycle facilities at stations could help inspire more passengers to use a sustainable access mode when arriving at the station. Local residents certainly appreciate the connections to both St Albans and Watford. Although some local residents are willing to volunteer towards the Community Rail project; a bit more publicity to promote the Abbey Line community rail Line could prove beneficial.

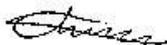
One major concern that passengers have is the lack of train cleanliness and the poor condition of seating. If the trains are smartened up and regularly cleaned then it may make using the line more attractive to infrequent users.

Ticketing on the Abbey Line is not as good as it could be; improvements are needed especially outside of peak periods. Installing reliable ticket machines at each station and having regular ticket inspections would help to protect revenue, and an additional presence of staff has the further benefit of improving passenger security on the Line.

An improvement in communication would also improve the service for passengers. When trains are delayed or cancelled, passengers feel they are isolated and not given any information on alternatives. It is also felt that announcements or displays on board indicating which station is next would be of benefit, especially when it is difficult to see station signage in the dark.

Passengers would like to see a more frequent service, although with the current track layout this is not realistic. However it would be achievable to install ticket machines at the Abbey Line stations that do not currently have them, as well as negotiating with London Midland to add later running evening services which would seemingly have a reasonable demand especially at the weekends.

Yours sincerely,



(Mr) Chris Dethridge,
Analyst

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