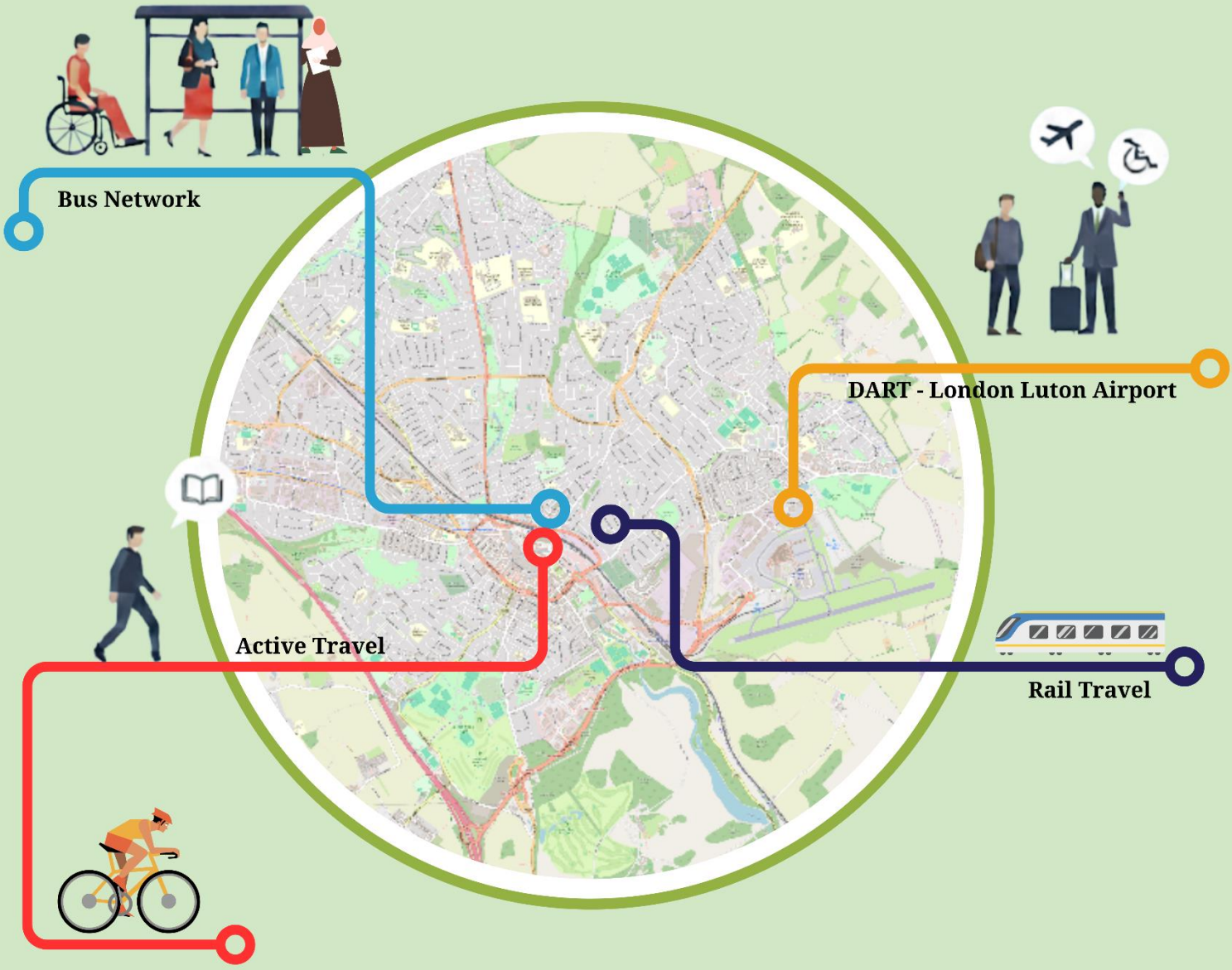
Making Transport Policy Work For Everyone: How can Luton's transport system serve its diverse communities?



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This paper is submitted to the Transport Planning Society as part of the 2025 Bursary Competition, under the theme of: The Integration Imperative: How can we make a reality of connecting Policy, Places and People?

Abstract:

This study examines how effectively Luton's transport system serves its culturally and linguistically diverse population. Using a mixed-methods approach, it combines Census analysis with an online survey exploring residents' experiences of accessibility, confidence, communication and safety. Findings show that while physical infrastructure is generally available, many users face barriers linked to unclear or inconsistent information, fragmented ticketing, limited staff support and concerns about safety. Linguistic diversity also affects how people navigate digital tools and signage. The research highlights the need for clearer communication, more integrated ticketing, improved real-time updates and safer public spaces. These insights offer practical recommendations for Luton and other diverse towns aiming to build more inclusive, user-centred transport systems.

Acknowledgements:

I wish to thank everyone who shared their insights through the survey or informal chats, your time and perspectives helped me shape this work more than you realise.

I would like to express my gratitude to AECOM for supporting my TPS bursary application. A sincere thank you to my line manager, Catherine Durbin, for her encouragement and belief in me from the very start.

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Finally, my appreciation also goes to the TPS for giving me the opportunity to carry out this research. I genuinely enjoyed the whole process, it's given me rich experience and opened doors to conversations with people in the industry I might not have met otherwise.

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1. Introduction

Transport is more than a means of getting from A to B, it supports access to jobs, education, healthcare, and cultural life. When transport systems fail to meet the needs of their users, the outcome can be exclusion. In places with complex demographic profiles, designing transport that works for varied communities becomes especially important. Different groups bring distinct expectations, abilities, languages, and experiences. Their interactions with transport are shaped by migration histories, cultural norms, perceptions of safety, digital confidence, and language proficiency. A system designed around a "typical" user often fails to recognise these differences, increasing the risk of exclusion.

Luton provides a relevant case study. The 2021 Census shows it is one of only four local authorities outside London with a non-White majority (54.8%). 45.2% of people in Luton are White, of which only 31.8% identify as White British, compared with 74.4% nationally. It also has one of the lowest proportions of residents with English as a first language (76.5%) in England. These figures paint a picture of a town that's culturally rich and might have different transport needs.

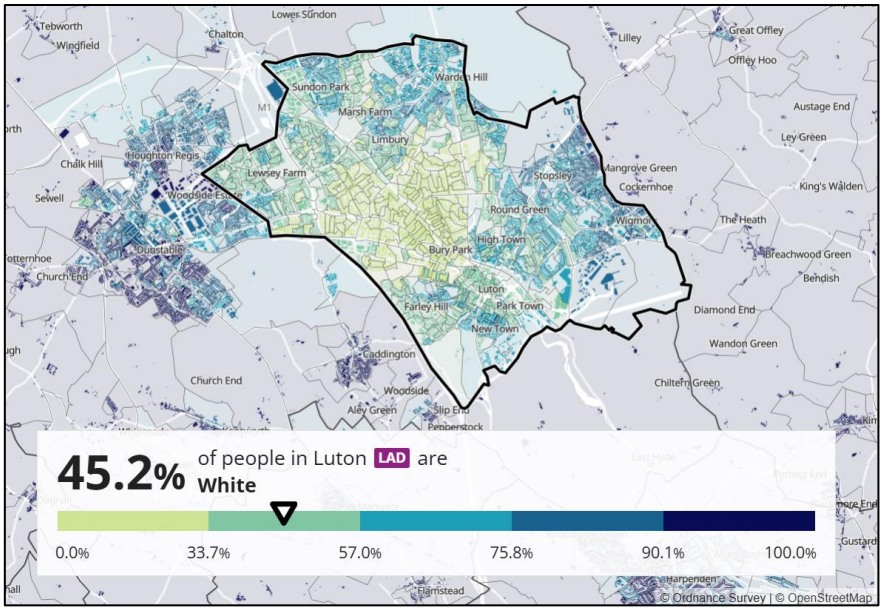


Figure 1-1: Ethnicity in Luton

The diversity of Luton's population raises questions about how transport policy can address cultural, linguistic, and confidence sides of accessibility. This paper asks: how can Luton's transport policy better serve its diverse population, and what lessons can be drawn for other UK towns? To answer this, the study uses both primary and secondary data through collecting survey data and an analysis of demographic.

The purpose of this research is to examine the extent of which Luton's current transport policies and practices reflect the needs of its diverse population. It will explore practical measures that could make Luton's transport more accessible. While grounded in the local case of Luton, this study also seeks to identify insights and recommendations that can be transferred to other diverse towns across the UK, or further afield.

2. Literature Review, Policies and Guidance

2.1 Literature Review

Transport inclusion is seen as essential for fairness in society and sustainable urban development. It means having transport networks that allow everyone to take part fully in everyday life, regardless of age, gender, income, ethnicity, language, or ability (Lucas, 2012). Lucas argued that transport exclusion is a systematic issue that is deeply connected with broader social inequalities.

Inclusive transport goes beyond physical accessibility, but also includes affordability, safety, information access, cultural familiarity, and the confidence to use available services (Mattioli et al., 2020).

Existing literature highlights that access to transport is not always evenly distributed with factors such as language, cultural identity, disability, gender, and income all affecting how people engage with the transport system. Further research found variations in accessibility levels linked to race and socio-economic status, suggesting that structural inequalities persist even in well-connected cities (UCL, 2023). Similarly, Hrelja (2024) emphasises that social dimensions such as ethnicity, language, and culture remain under-addressed in public transport planning frameworks across Europe.

Barriers to access can arise from physical or financial constraints but also from cultural and linguistic differences, limiting people's ability to use existing systems confidently. Recent debates regarding inclusive mobility highlight that effective transport systems must consider who feels able to use them. For instance, perceptions of safety, trust in authorities, and user-confidence all influence travel behaviour. These are particularly relevant for culturally diverse towns like Luton, where first-generation migrants or non-native speakers can have different experiences of mobility.

Cultural, Linguistic and Confidence Barriers

Although many studies prioritise physical or financial constraints, fewer consider how culture, language, and confidence influence everyday travel. Bednarowska-Michaiel (2023) found ethnic differences in cycling participation in London, shaped by perceived safety, representation, and social norms. Clarkson et al. (2018) showed that England's free bus-pass scheme produced unequal benefits across ethnic groups, reflecting different levels of trust and comfort to using public transport. Similarly, Malden et al. (2023) identified barriers for ethnic minorities and disabled people in active travel, including fear of harassment, lack of culturally sensitive infrastructure, and lower digital familiarity.

In multilingual areas, assumptions of fluent English in signage, apps, and announcements can form subtle barriers. However, language is not always the issue but transparent information for all. One previous TPS bursary paper explored "Does written language create barriers to transport for people with low literacy levels?" (Newey, S. 2020) and found that written signage, often "taken for granted", can interfere with travel confidence for individuals with low literacy or non-native English speakers (or those who do not know the language at all).

2.2 Policies and Guidance

National Policies

Current national policy emphasises inclusive engagement. The DfT's Inclusive Transport Strategy (2018) focuses more on disabled passengers, leaving cultural and linguistic inclusion less developed. Bus Back Better (2021) encourages local authorities to incorporate inclusivity in Bus Service Improvement Plans (BSIPs) through community consultation. Gear Change (DfT, 2020) highlights inequalities in active travel, noting that women, ethnic minorities, and older adults remain under-represented.

The literature also connects transport with health. Poor public transport provision and inaccessible systems discourage active travel and can worsen inequalities in physical activity, contributing to poorer health outcomes. Air pollution is disproportionately concentrated in more deprived and diverse urban areas, making sustainable transport both an equity and a health issue. Public Health England (2019) reported that deprived and ethnically diverse communities are disproportionately exposed to poor air quality and its related health impacts.

Local Policies

Local Transport Plans (LTPs) are statutory documents that every local transport authority in England must prepare under the Transport Act 2000. They set long-term frameworks for local transport investment and priorities. In practice, an LTP guides investment decisions, priorities, and performance monitoring for everything from roads and public transport to walking, cycling, and safety.

In Luton, the LTP and the BSIP shape the town's direction on accessibility. Luton's approach to inclusivity is comprehensive and included in the town's strategy, addressing structural inequalities and community specific needs.

Key highlights of the Luton Local Transport Plan 4 can be found in Table 2-1.

Table 2-1: LLTP 4 - highlights

Luton Local Transport Plan 4 – key highlights	
Reducing Poverty and Improving Inclusion	- Recognizes high levels of deprivation in parts of Luton. - Links transport to access to jobs, education, healthcare, and leisure, especially for those without cars. - Uses data from the Inclusive Growth Commission and Mosaic Persona profiles to tailor interventions to community needs.
Accessibility and Equality of Opportunity	- Prioritises non-car owning households, elderly, disabled, and low-income groups. - Commits to accessible infrastructure: dropped kerbs, raised bus stops, step-free rail stations, and real-time passenger information. - Promotes inclusive design in streetscape improvements and new developments.

Community Engagement and Empowerment	- Supports community-led transport solutions, such as social car schemes and mobility hubs. - Works with local groups (e.g., disability forums, cycling groups, religious organisations) to co-design interventions. - Encourages behavioural change through education, training, and local campaigns.
Targeted Safety and Public Realm Improvements	- Focuses on areas of high deprivation for road safety, lighting, and public realm upgrades. - Implements 20mph zones, safer crossings, and better lighting to improve perceptions of safety. - Addresses crime and anti-social behaviour through design and partnership with community safety agencies.
Data-Driven and Persona-Based Planning	- Uses Experian Mosaic profiles to understand socio-economic and cultural diversity. - Tailors transport modes and communication strategies to different groups (e.g., Urban Cohesion, Rental Hubs, Senior Security). - Plans interventions based on travel behaviour, digital access, and health indicators.

Examples of Inclusive Measures mentioned in the Luton's LTP 4:

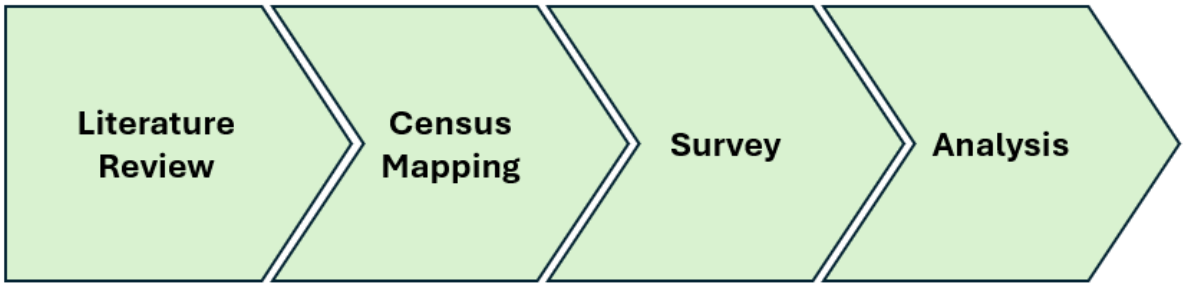
- Mobility hubs in diverse neighbourhoods
- Electric vehicle infrastructure in low car ownership areas
- Cycle and walking routes connecting deprived areas to services
- School exclusion zones to improve safety and encourage active travel
- Accessible bus and rail services, including concessionary fares and integrated ticketing

2.3 Summary

Luton's LTP4 acknowledges inclusion and the social dimensions of mobility, but stronger, more systematic approaches to serving diverse communities are still needed. Town level policy shows limited attention to cultural and confidence related barriers, despite substantial research on language and multilingual signage. Recent literature highlights that cultural identity, communication, and user confidence are an important part to transport access, yet these factors are often overlooked in UK local policy. This study addresses that gap by examining how such issues shape mobility in Luton and by offering practical recommendations that may benefit other diverse towns facing similar challenges.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data analysis with qualitative insights from survey responses. This approach allows to capture both the structural aspects of Luton's transport and the lived experiences of those navigating it.



The objective is to understand how cultural and confidence factors influence accessibility and travel behaviour within Luton. Quantitative data from the 2021 Census and local policy documents establish a demographic and policy baseline, while primary data gathered through an online survey captures personal experiences and perceptions.

This approach is designed to answer the question: **How can Luton's transport system better serve its diverse communities?** Making sure that findings are both evidence-based and grounded in real-world perspectives, reflecting how policy frameworks translate into everyday mobility experiences.

3.1 Secondary Data

The secondary data stage focused on reviewing both statistical data and policy frameworks relevant to transport inclusivity in Luton. The review provided context for understanding local needs, gaps, and existing interventions.

Census datasets were analysed using Excel and ONS visualisation tools to identify key demographic and spatial patterns in ethnicity, language, and travel behaviour. Local and national policy documents were reviewed to identify references to cultural and linguistic inclusion.

This stage established the baseline context presented in Chapter 4 and helped to design the themes and wording of the survey questions.

3.2 Primary Data

The primary data involved designing and distributing an online survey to people using Luton transport systems regularly. The survey was intended to capture everyday transport experiences, focusing on accessibility, confidence, and communication barriers.

Questions were designed to be short, clear, and inclusive, following best-practice survey design principles (Dillman et al., 2014).

The survey included:

- Multiple-choice questions on transport modes used, frequency of travel around Luton, preferred language, what makes transport easier/harder
- Likert-scale questions on perceptions of safety, confidence, and ease of navigation.
- One open-ended question allowing respondents to describe challenges or suggestions in their own words.

The survey was shared online through social media (LinkedIn), local cultural groups (Polish People in Luton), and personal networks. The survey was live between 9th September and 30th September 2025.

Key survey details:
• Target: 40-60 responses.
• Survey responses did not collect any personal data. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, with consent gathered at the start of the survey.
• All survey responses were exported into Excel for analysis.
- Quantitative questions: summarised using descriptive statistics (percentages, frequency distributions).
- Qualitative (open-text) responses: analysed to identify common themes and illustrative quotes.

3.3 Limitations

As with most small-scale research, there are limitations in scope and data reliability.

- Sample size: Survey responses are expected to be limited, providing indicative insights rather than statistically representative results.
- Self-selection bias: Participants with strong opinions or better English proficiency may be overrepresented.
- Data availability: Census data provides rich demographic detail but limited behavioural insight into specific transport experiences.

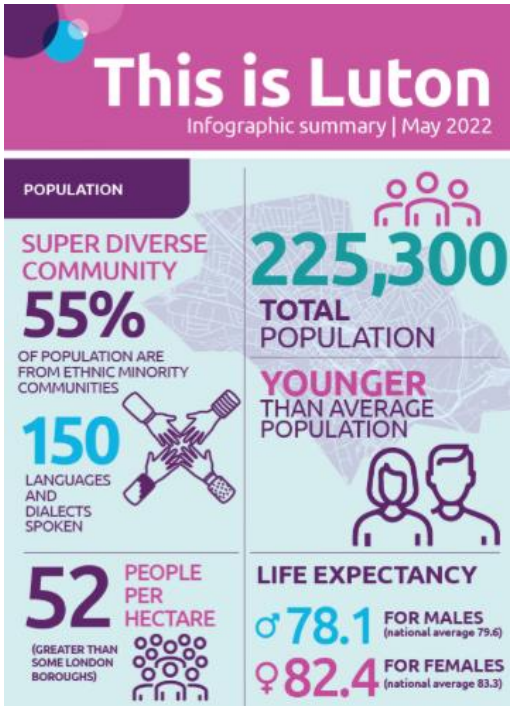
Despite these constraints, the combination of quantitative and qualitative data provides a meaningful snapshot of how cultural and linguistic diversity interacts with transport accessibility in Luton.

This mixed-methods approach allows the research to combine evidence of what the data shows (Census and policy) with how people experience it (survey). Together, they form a foundation for the next chapter, which presents the findings from both data sources and discusses their implications for inclusive transport policy in Luton.

4. Research Findings

4.1 Demographic Findings

Before exploring the survey results, it is important to understand the demographic and spatial context of Luton. Census data provides a useful baseline, revealing the diversity, mobility, and settlement patterns that influence how people use and perceive the transport system.



Source: luton.gov.uk

Luton's population of around 231,000 (ONS, 2023) is among the most diverse in England outside London. The town has long been a point of arrival for migrant communities, shaped by post-war labour migration, the expansion of London Luton Airport, and its relatively affordable housing market. This movement has created neighbourhoods with distinct cultural and linguistic identities. The town's compact geography, combined with high population density (over 5,500 people per km²), means that transport infrastructure must serve a wide range of users within a small, highly urbanised area.

The following analysis uses Census 2021 data to illustrate the composition and distribution of Luton's population by migration history, ethnicity, and language. These datasets provide a picture of the town's diversity patterns before turning to the qualitative evidence from survey results.

Figure 4-1 shows the distribution of people in Luton by length of residence in the UK. According to the 2021 Census:

- 22.1% of residents have lived in the UK for 10 years or more,
- 6.5% for 5-10 years,
- 5.3% for 2-5 years,
- 4.5% for less than 2 years, and
- 61.6% were born in the UK.

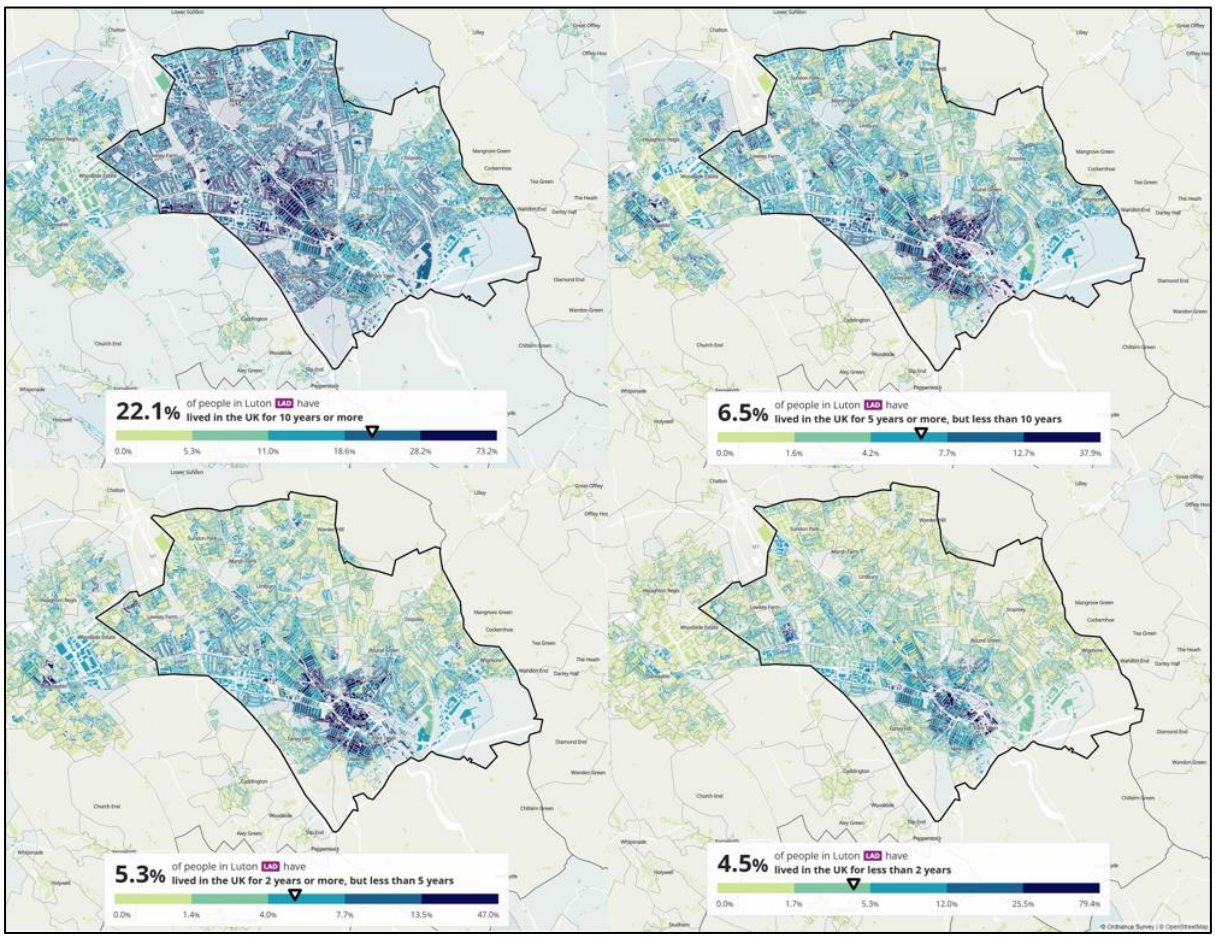


Figure 4-1: Length of Residence in the UK (ONS, 2021)

The data shows that nearly one in six residents has lived in the UK for under ten years, indicating a dynamic and recently arrived population. The highest concentrations of newer migrants are in the town centre.

Figure 4-2 revisits the map shown in the Introduction chapter, highlighting the diversity of Luton's population, showing two largest ethnic groups. 45.2% identify as White, and 37.0% of residents identify as Asian, Asian British, or Asian Welsh. The remaining population includes Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African (10.1%), Mixed (4.3%), and Other ethnic groups (3.5%). (ONS, 2021).

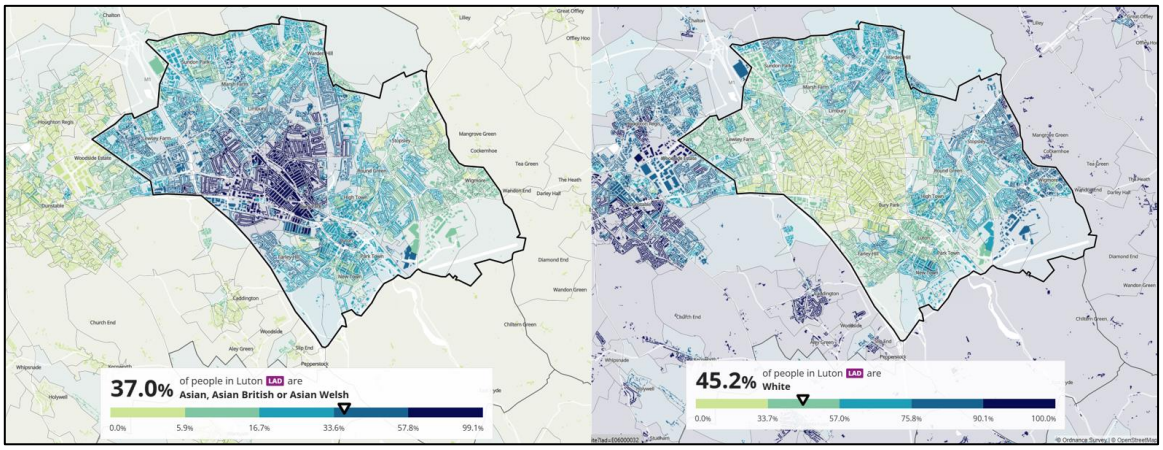


Figure 4-2: Ethnic groups in Luton (ONS, 2021)

This diversity has direct implications for language accessibility. According to Census Table TS024, only 76.5% of Luton residents reported English as their main language, compared with 91.1% across England and Wales. More than 150 different languages and dialects are spoken locally, with significant numbers of residents speaking Urdu, Polish, Romanian, Bengali, Punjabi, and others as seen in Figure 4-3.

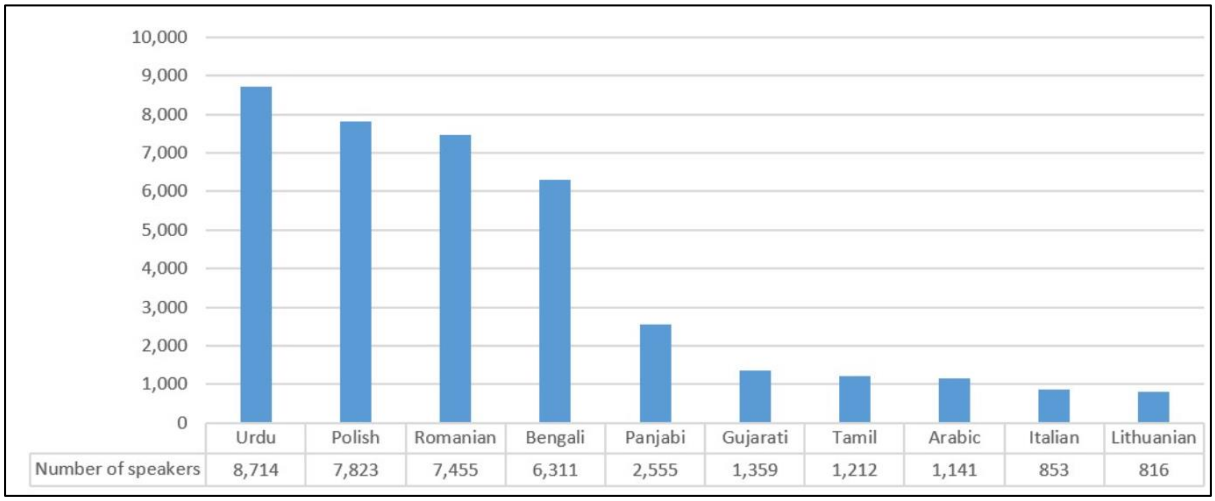


Figure 4-3: First language of Luton's residents, other than English (Census, 2021)

This linguistic diversity influences how people engage with transport information, signage, and digital systems. For example (from my personal experience), Polish-speaking communities might rely more on word-of-mouth information or social media pages rather than official transport apps.

Figure 4-4 shows travel to work arrangements of people living in Luton. Almost half (48.3%) of employed residents drive a car or van to work, confirming that private vehicles remain the dominant mode of transport across the borough. The maps reveal higher concentrations of car drivers in the northern and eastern suburbs, where housing density is lower and public transport accessibility more limited.

6.8% of residents travel as passengers in cars or vans, and 1.8% travel by taxi. While these percentages may seem minor in comparison, their spatial concentration is not evenly distributed. Both taxi users and car passengers are clustered in central and southern Luton, areas with higher proportions of Asian or Asian British residents, as shown in earlier demographic maps. This overlap suggests that shared travel and informal mobility patterns may be more prevalent within certain communities.

Such patterns could reflect several interrelated factors. Some household and cultural structures may encourage lift-sharing and reliance on family or community drivers. In these contexts, travel is often a social rather than individual activity, reflecting trust and familiarity within networks. Alternatively, for individuals who do not drive, travelling as a passenger or by taxi may be perceived as safer and more reliable than navigating public transport alone.

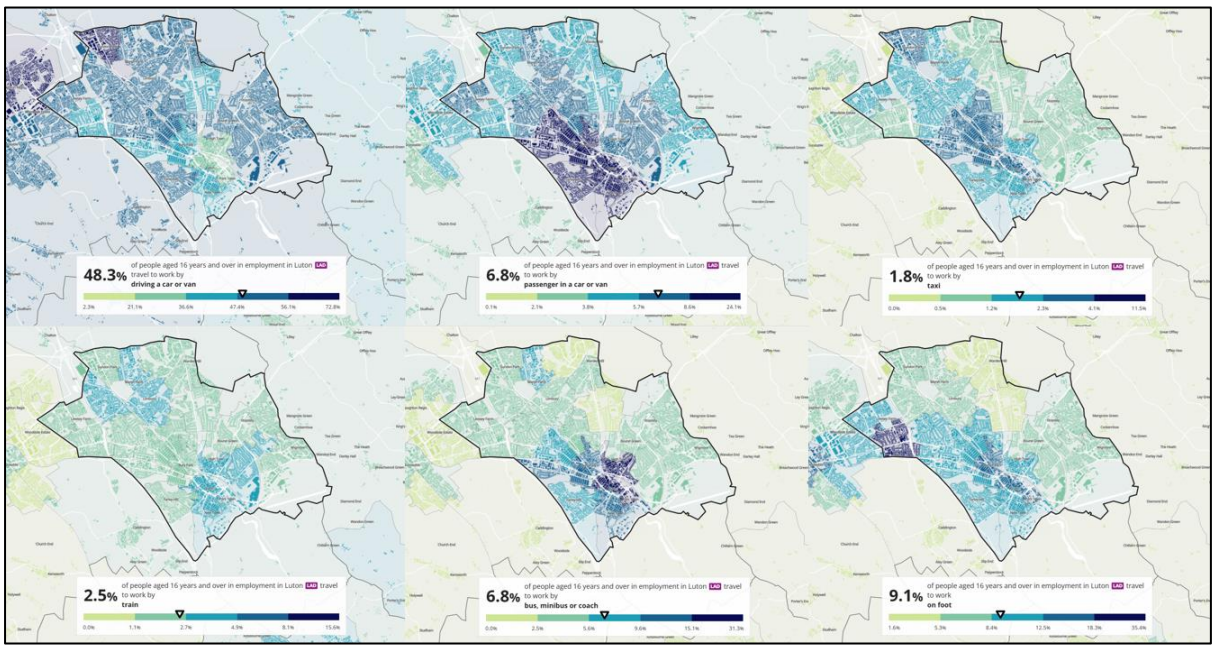


Figure 4-4: Travel to Work in Luton

Figure 4-5 showing indices of deprivation reveals a notable overlap between areas of higher deprivation and neighbourhoods with higher proportions of non-white or migrant populations, shown in previous maps. This pattern suggests that socio-economic disadvantage is often geographically concentrated and intersects with demographic characteristics. However, it is important to note that this relationship is correlational rather than causal. There are other factors, including housing policies, labour market inequalities, and patterns of migration that might contribute to both the concentration of minority populations and the persistence of deprivation in these areas. People in these communities may face multiple, overlapping challenges, such as poorer access to education, jobs, and healthcare. This shows that deprivation is shaped by wider social and structural factors, rather than by individual choices or cultural background.

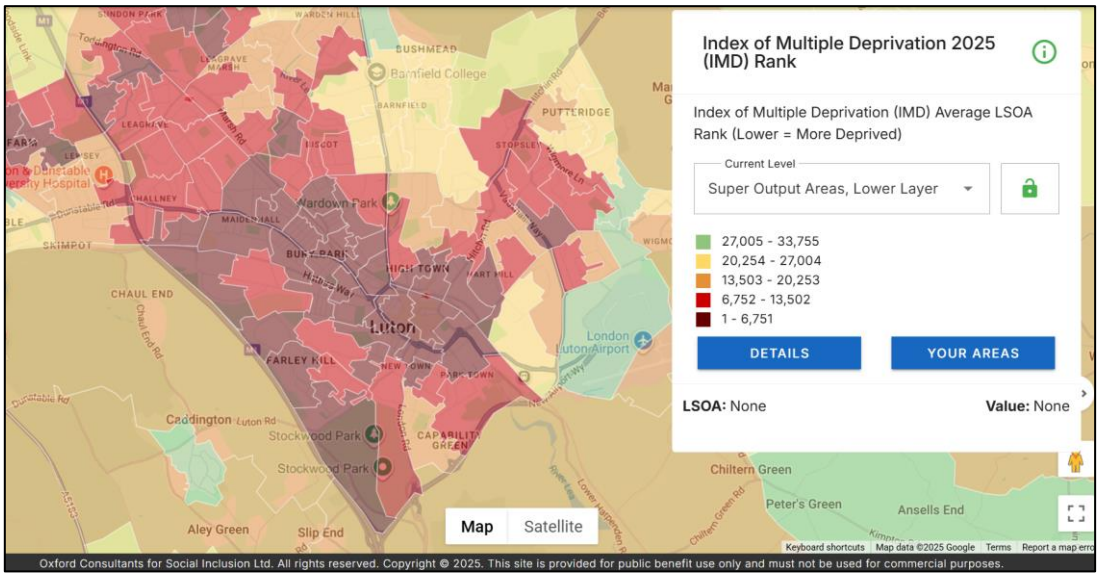


Figure 4-5: Indices of Deprivation (2025)

Combining these datasets provides a picture of transport dependency and vulnerability. This may amplify the effects of inaccessible or English-only transport information, reinforcing social and spatial inequalities.

This demographic picture of Luton illustrates critical points for inclusive transport policy. Some of these are:

- Relatively new population, with ongoing newcomers who may not yet be familiar with local transport systems or digital tools. This is where onboarding and welcoming communication become essential.
- Cultural and linguistic diversity meaning that public information, consultation materials, and digital services should reflect this diverse reality.

These findings support the rationale for examining culture, language, and confidence as key factors shaping accessibility.

4.2 Primary Data

An online survey was conducted, targeting residents and regular travellers in and around Luton. The aim was to understand how culture, confidence and language influence people's experiences of the local transport system.

Respondents were asked about their travel frequency and modes, ease of using different parts of the system, and confidence and sense of inclusion. Optional open-ended question captured additional reflections and suggestions for improvement. The full survey can be found in Appendix A.

Survey Results

Q1 - Travel Frequency

In question 1, most respondents reported travelling in or around Luton daily or several times a week, suggesting the survey captured regular users rather than occasional visitors. A pie chart of responses to "How often do you usually travel around Luton?" below shows that 23 (46%) of respondents travel daily, 15 (30%) a few times a week, 6 (12%) a few times a month, and 6 (12%) only occasionally.

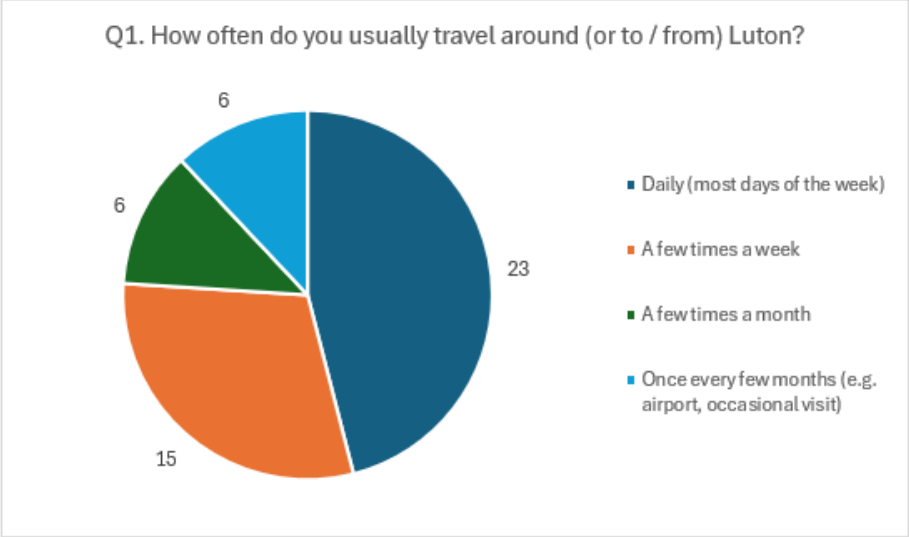


Figure 4-6: Travel frequency - Q1 Results

Q2 - Travel Modes

Question 2 shows modes of travel were varied, with car use (as a driver) being dominant with 34 responses (31%), followed by walking with 28 (26%) and train 23 (21%) responses. Then there is 13 people (12%) travelling by bus, and 8 people (7%) by car as a passenger. Only a small proportion (3%) reported cycling regularly. Nobody in the survey stated they use e-scooters.

This modal split reflects national trends where private cars remain the main mode outside large cities, but it also might suggest potential barriers to active or public travel.

Connecting Q1 and Q2, 16 out of 23 people who commute around Luton daily, selected car (driver) as their way of usually getting around Luton. 15 of them also selected walking, 10 selected train, 6 bus and 6 for car(passenger). The fact that almost all daily travellers selected more than one mode suggests that mobility in Luton is probably context-dependent. Individuals might choose different modes depending on trip purpose, distance, time of day, weather. More detailed survey questions would be needed in future research to answer that.

This pattern reflects a fluid approach to transport, rather than fixed travel habits. It also aligns with the survey comments: people walk locally, drive for convenience, use trains for longer trips.

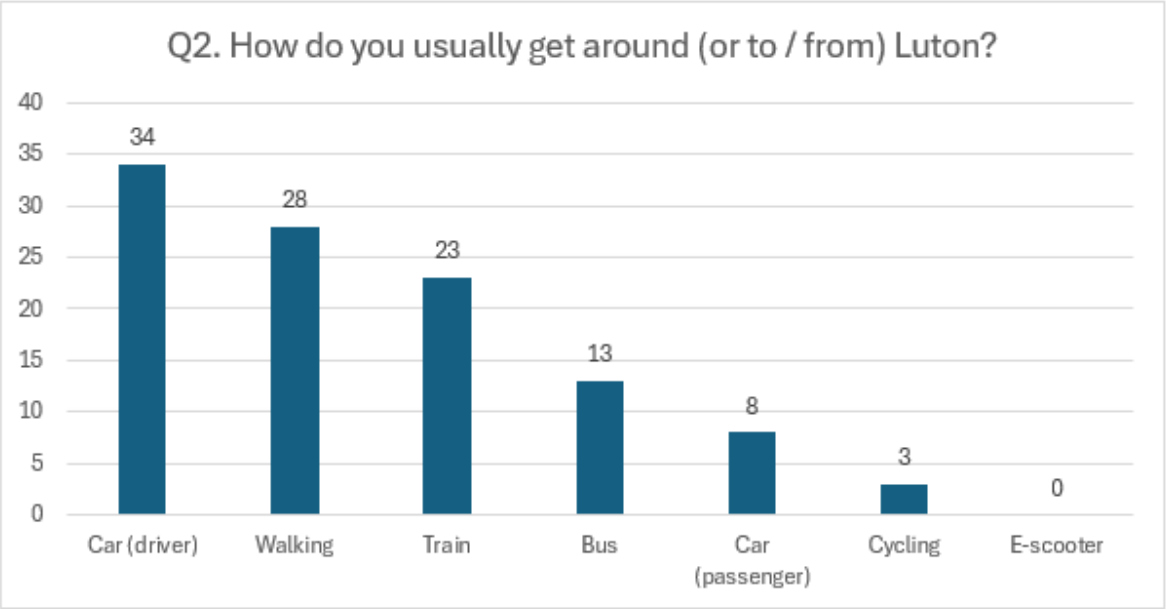


Figure 4-7: Travel modes - Q2 Results

Q3 - Language

Question 3 explored language preferences for receiving transport information. English was selected by all respondents, but many also indicated comfort with Polish, Urdu, Arabic, and others. From these responses, 29 people selected only English (59%), 20 people (41%) selected English and at least one other language. This reflects how diverse Luton is and highlights the importance of inclusive communication design, for example community-based information campaigns or multilingual digital tools.

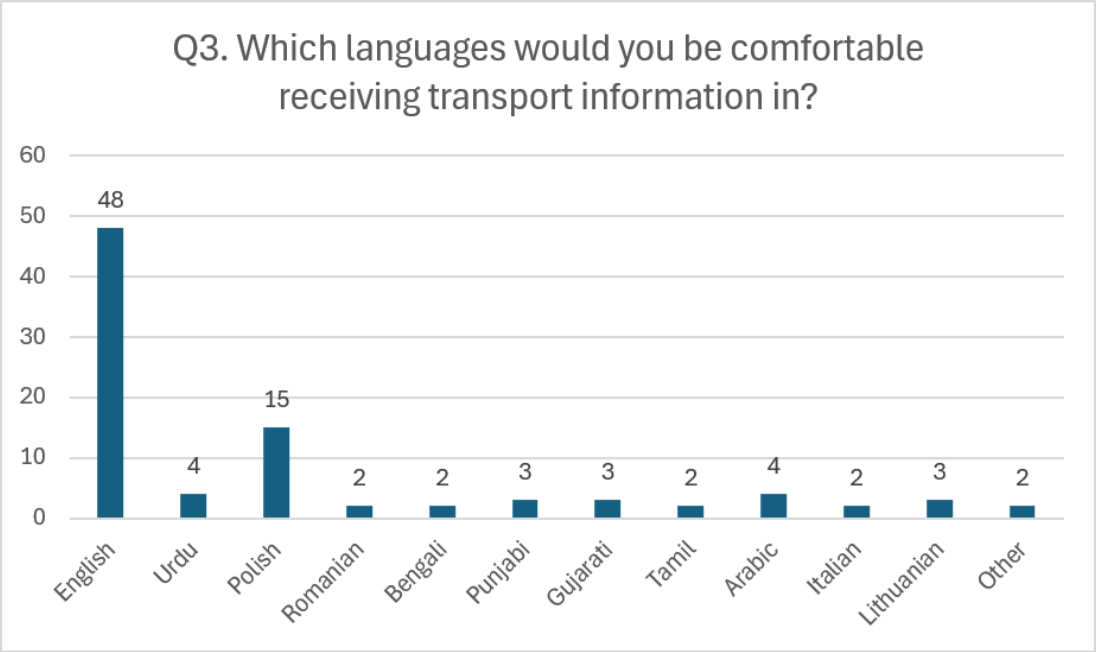


Figure 4-8: Language - Q3 results

Q4 - Ease of interacting with the travel systems

In question 4, respondents rated how easy they found various tasks on a 1-5 scale. The bar chart below shows that the respondents find asking staff/drivers for help most difficult. Buying bus tickets, understanding bus stop signs and use of travel apps/websites is also perceived as difficult or somewhat difficult for a notable proportion of respondents. Interestingly, buying train tickets and understanding train station signs received the highest proportion of "very easy" responses.

This may reflect a mix of interpersonal and digital barriers, hesitation to speak in English, uncertainty about digital ticketing, or previous negative experiences. The difference between use of buses and trains perception might be caused by several factors.

Multiple bus operators with different apps and fares create confusion, and the absence of an information point increases reliance on drivers. This can make it difficult for passengers to ask questions without feeling rushed or self-conscious, especially if they are not confident in English. Train stations, by comparison, typically have ticket office staff or other staff members by the barriers, providing more accessible human assistance.

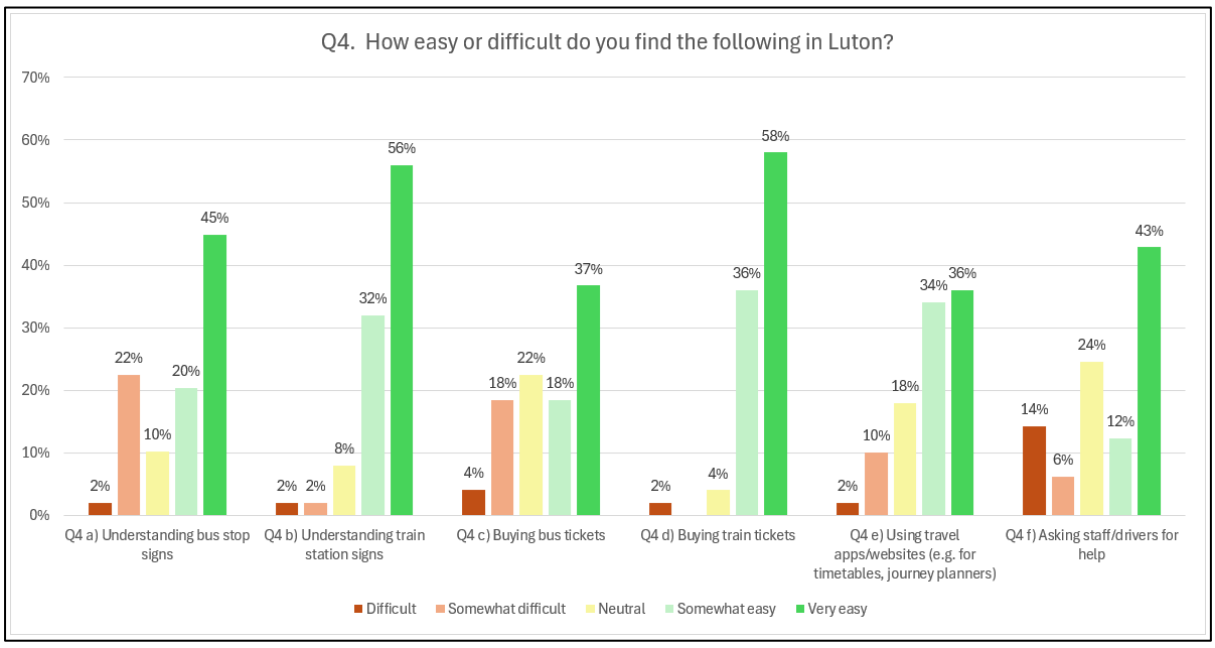


Figure 4-9: Ease of interacting with the travel systems - Q4 results

Figure 4-10 shows responses to Q4 separately for two groups: respondents who selected English only in Q3, and respondents who selected English plus another language. Across both groups, the dominant response for every task is "somewhat easy" or "very easy". Asking staff for help, using travel apps and understanding bus stop signs show the largest drop in "very easy" responses among multilingual respondents, and more "difficult" or "somewhat difficult" selections.

That could indicate that people from a diverse background might feel more uncomfortable approaching staff, and that digital tools may be confusing or inconsistent for that group.

While multilingual respondents do not appear structurally excluded from Luton's transport system, their responses indicate a more cautious, less confident engagement with tasks requiring interaction or interpretation. This highlights a key challenge for inclusive transport planning: ensuring that systems not only function for diverse communities but also feel navigable, welcoming, and supportive.

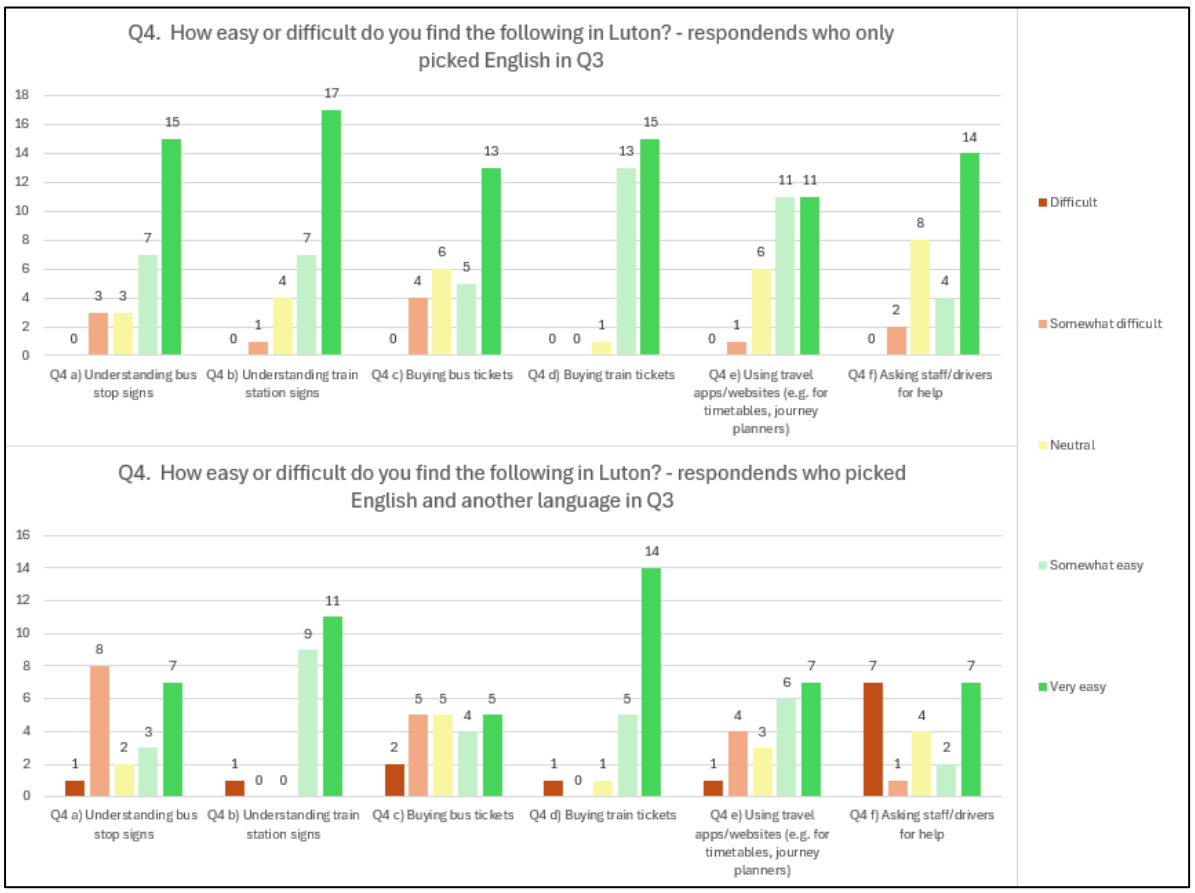


Figure 4-10: Language and interaction with the travel system (Q3 x Q4)

Q5 - Issues and Difficulties

Question 5 asked which factors had recently made public transport harder to use.

The most frequently cited issue was poor reliability (21 respondents). When services are unreliable, passengers, especially those with limited English or lower confidence, may find it harder to plan or trust the system.

Unclear ticketing and payment systems were the second most common concern (14 respondents). This supports earlier findings on difficulty in buying bus tickets. The complexity of multiple operators, varying mobile apps, and differing fare structures doesn't help the perceptions of integration and transparency.

Closely following were lack of staff help or training (13) and cost (13). For those less confident speaking English or new to the UK transport system, the ability to ask a human for guidance can be very important. Cost concerns also reflect national affordability challenges and underline the socio-economic dimension of transport inclusivity.

Safety concerns (11 respondents) were also significant.

Relatively few respondents selected "accessibility needs not met" (4) or "apps/websites not available in my language" (3), and only one cited "language used in signs/announcements." This could imply that linguistic exclusion is less visible than indirect barriers such as unclear ticketing or absent staff. However, it may also reflect underreporting, individuals who struggle with English or digital access may be less likely to complete an online survey.

Overall, the data highlights reliability, communication, human support, and affordability as some of the obstacles.

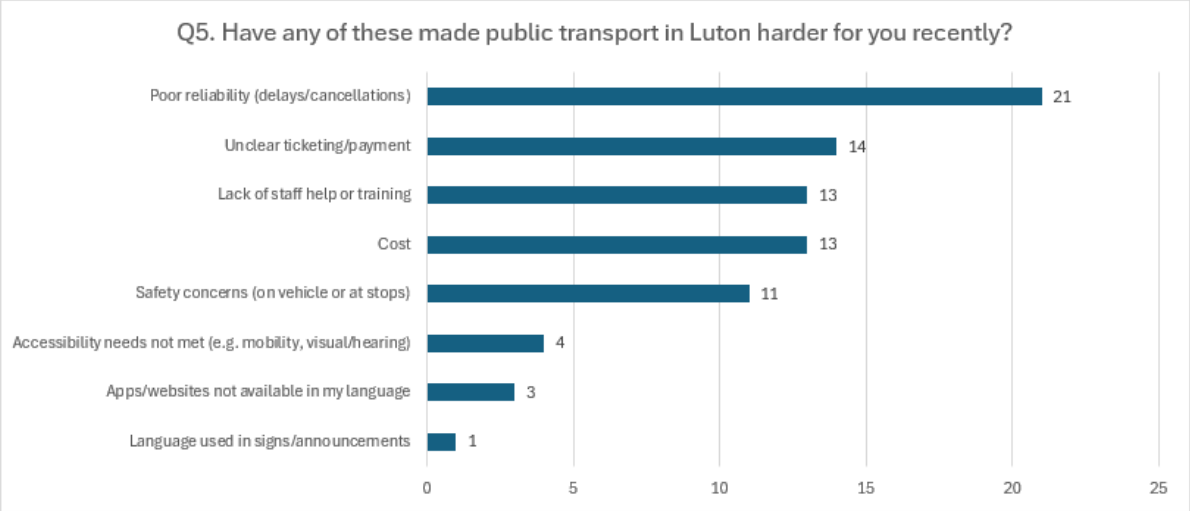


Figure 4-11: Issues/Difficulties - Q5 results

Q6 - Confidence

Question 6 assessed confidence and comfort using public transport based on four statements covering confidence in planning journeys, feelings of safety, ability to find accurate information, and whether the system feels welcoming to people from different cultural or language backgrounds.

The overall pattern shows moderate confidence, with most people selecting the middle neutral category rather than the extremes of strongly agree/disagree.

Most respondents either agreed (32%) or remained neutral (30%) when asked if they felt confident planning journeys. Only 4% strongly disagreed.

Safety emerged as a concern throughout the survey. Only 8% strongly agreed they felt safe, and 32% agreed. 24% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 36% selected neutral. The high proportion of neutral responses might be because safety perceptions can be context-dependent, or variable by time of day. Comments later on in Q8 reinforce this, referring to poor lighting, or concerns for women travelling alone. This reflects wider patterns: respondents who listed safety issues in Q5 also tended to give lower confidence scores in Q6.

Confidence in finding accurate, up-to-date information (e.g., diversions or delays) was mixed. 34% agreed and 12% strongly agreed, 20% disagreed and 18% strongly disagreed. This result aligns with Q5, where "poor reliability" was the top barrier (21 respondents). Some comments in Q8 mentioned buses running late without updates and the absence of live display boards at stops.

36% agreed and 12% strongly agreed that the system feels welcoming to people from different cultural or language backgrounds, 32% remained neutral, and 20% disagreed.

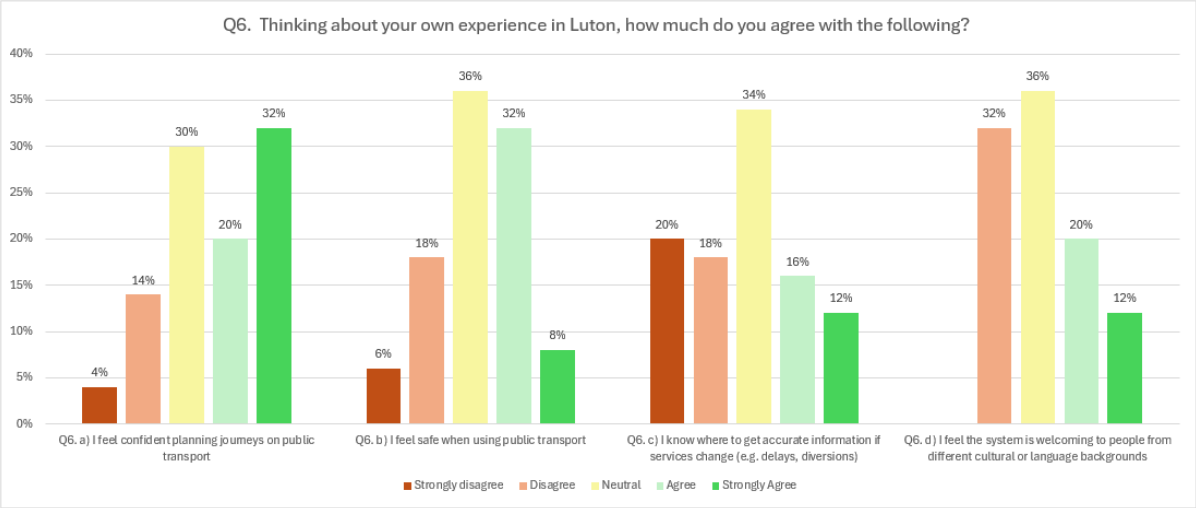


Figure 4-12: Confidence - Q6 results

Q7 - Improvements needed

Question 7 asked the respondents to select up to three options that would help the most to improve transport in Luton. The top three options were:

- Better real-time updates (39)
- Simpler, more accessible payment/ticketing options (24)
- Safer waiting areas and vehicles (22)

These results echo wider calls for integration between policy (inclusive communication, easy to understand and find updates), people (confidence and understanding), and places (safe, well-maintained environments).

The safety perception interpretation could aligns with previous demographic findings, with people opting to travel by car, as a passenger or in a taxi in certain areas. People, especially women, may feel safer or more comfortable travelling with known drivers (family, community members) rather than alone on public transport, especially outside daylight hours.

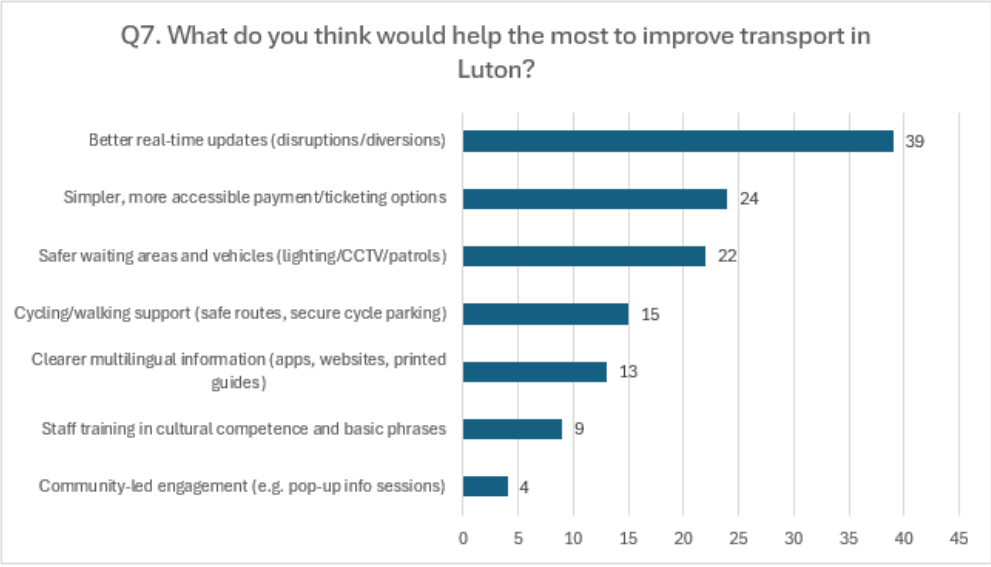


Figure 4-13: Improvements needed - Q7 results

Q8 - Open Comments

Question 8 allowed open ended responses to "Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences using transport in Luton?". 18 respondents shared additional comments. Full list of the comments can be found in Appendix B. Although the comments varied in focus and detail, the key themes were:

- Reliability and service coverage
- Safety and environment
- Cost and fairness
- Communication and information clarity
- Accessibility and inclusion

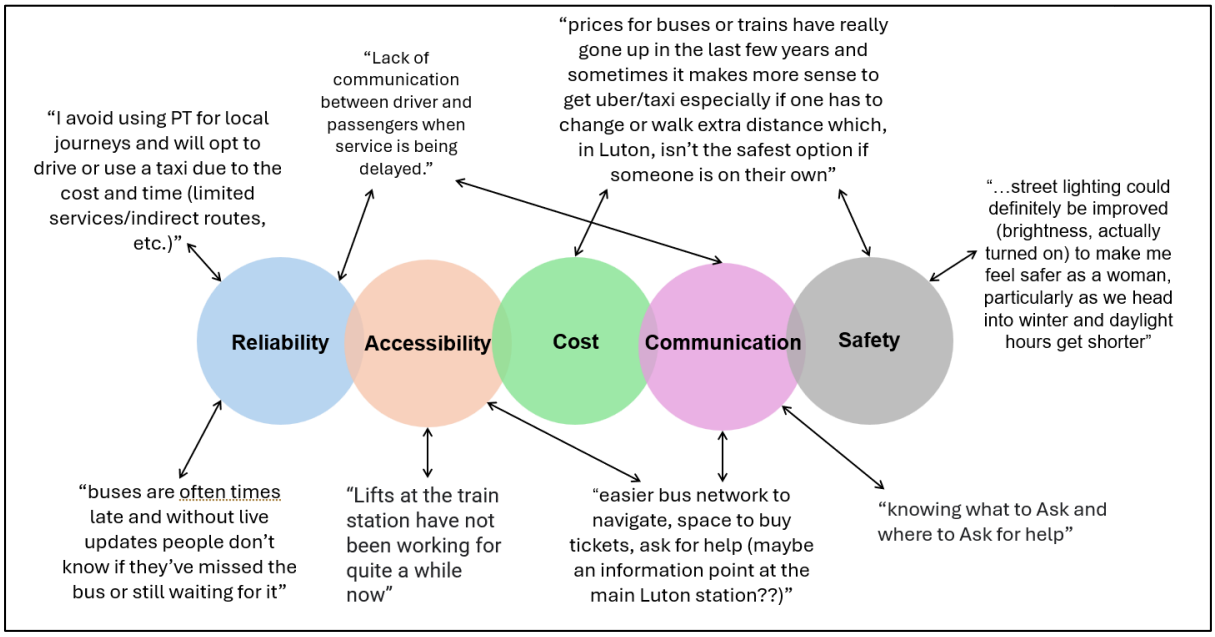


Figure 4-14: Open Comments - Q8 results

These qualitative findings reinforce patterns already observed in the quantitative results, particularly those concerning reliability, unclear ticketing, and confidence in using public transport

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusions

This study examined how effectively Luton's transport network serves its diverse communities, and what could make it more inclusive. Through the demographic analysis, policy and literature review, and an online survey, I have noticed some key themes come out.

Luton's demographic profile is both rich and complex. The town's cultural, linguistic and socio-economic diversity creates varied mobility needs that are not always fully reflected in the design of current transport services. Census patterns and survey responses point to differences in confidence, ease of use, and overall perceptions of public transport.

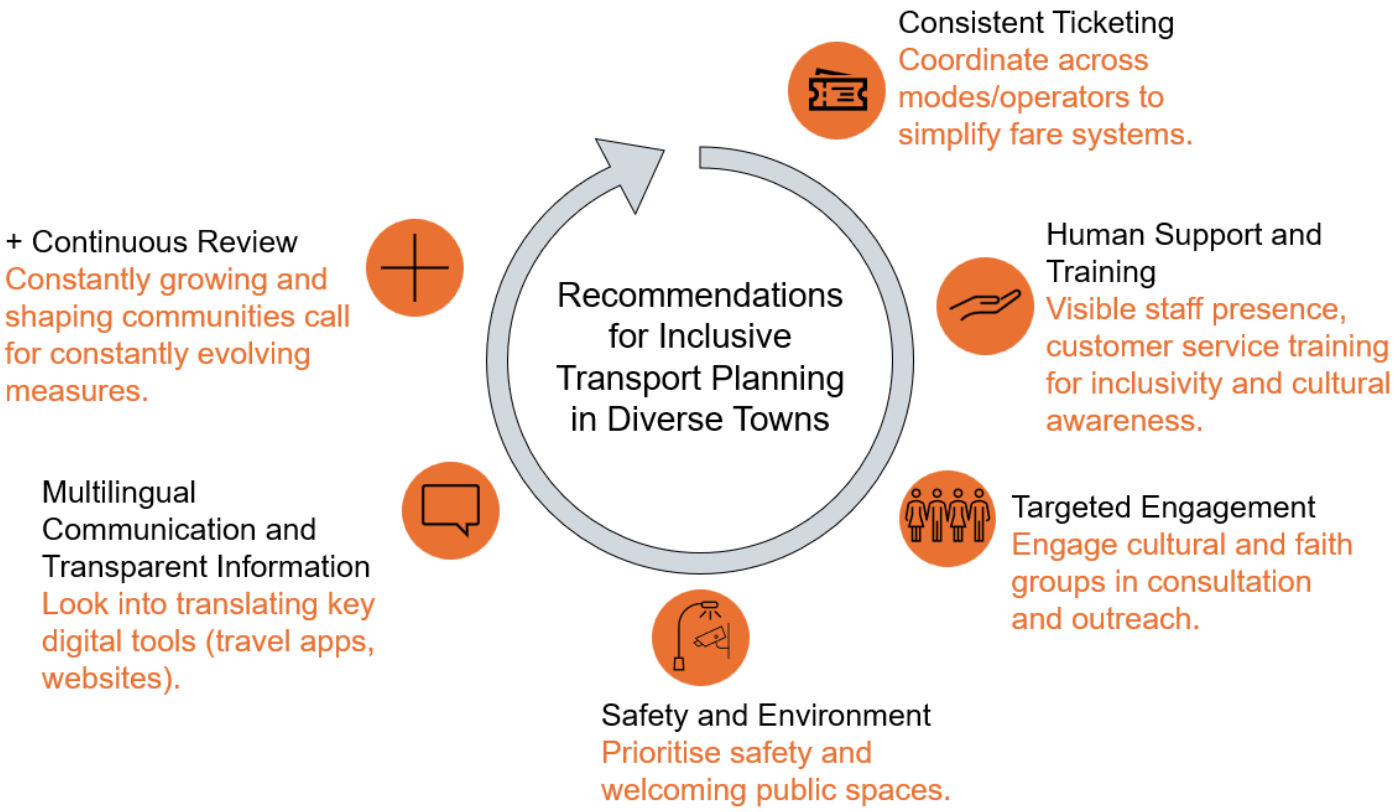
Some barriers relate less to the physical infrastructure and more to information clarity, human support, safety, and service reliability. Respondents highlighted difficulty accessing real-time information, uncertainty when asking staff for help, and concerns about personal safety. These issues echo broader literature on inclusive transport planning, which emphasises that exclusion often results from cultural or communicative mismatches rather than formal access barriers.

Inclusivity also extends beyond language. Lighting, safe waiting areas, direct routes, and affordability influence whether people feel they belong in the system. Creating an inclusive network therefore requires policy, places and people to work together.

As Luton develops its new LTP5, there could be an opportunity to include these insights. Clearer communication, better-integrated tickets, safer environments, and sustained engagement with local communities. An inclusive system depends on continuous listening and ongoing adaptation.

5.2 Recommendations

The recommendations follow the evidence gathered through this study and reflect measures that would support more inclusive and integrated transport for Luton's communities. Importantly, these recommendations are also transferable to other diverse towns facing similar challenges around communication, confidence, and accessibility.



Consistent Ticketing

Multiple operators, separate apps, and inconsistent fare structures are a source of confusion for users. A coordinated approach to ticketing, whether through integrated day passes, shared digital platforms, or unified fare information, could improve transparency. Simplified ticketing particularly benefits new arrivals, those less confident in English, and passengers unfamiliar with local operators.

Similar towns with different modes of transport and multiple operators would benefit from consistent fare information and shared ticketing products.

Human Support and Staff Training

Survey responses showed that asking staff for help was one of the most challenging aspects of using public transport. This shows a need for improved frontline support: clearer customer service standards, cultural-awareness training, and where possible a more visible staff presence at interchanges.

Any town with a high proportion of multilingual or newly arrived residents will benefit from intentional, human-centred support practices.

Community Co-Design and Targeted Engagement

Culturally grounded outreach through community centres, faith groups, schools, and local organisations can improve the relevance of transport information. Co-design workshops can help planners understand why certain groups prefer particular modes and what inclusive improvements would actually be used.

Place-based community engagement is applicable to any diverse urban area and ensures local knowledge shapes policy.

Safety and Environment

Safety concerns were reported across the survey (e.g., poorly lit walking routes, bus stops, travelling after dark). Improving lighting, visibility, stop design, and the general maintenance can increase the perceived and actual safety of users. This is essential for active travel uptake and to support those who rely on buses or walk to stations.

Safety is a universal issue for inclusive mobility. Better lighting, cleaner stops, and more legible environments would benefit most towns.

Multilingual Communication and Transparent Information

Although only a small number explicitly reported language as a barrier, cross-question analysis shows that multilingual respondents were more cautious across interacting with or interpreting the transport system. Translating key digital tools or ensuring signage uses plain, universal English could improve user confidence. Partner organisations could help to make sure translations are appropriate, not simply literal.

Any location with a migrant or multilingual population would gain from inclusive communication strategies.

Flexibility and Continuous Review

Luton's communities (like many across the UK) are dynamic, with changing migration patterns, new linguistic groups, and evolving travel behaviours. Transport plans should therefore be regularly reviewed, with updated communication, addressing emerging barriers, and monitoring how inclusive design measures perform over time.

This principle supports resilience and responsiveness for all local authorities, ensuring transport policy adapts to shifting demographics and expectations.

Overall, these recommendations highlight that inclusive transport is not a single intervention but a continuous process of listening, simplifying, communicating, and designing for real lived experiences. Improving integration between policy, places and people requires local authorities to focus not only on infrastructure, but also on human support, trust-building, and cultural competence. The findings and recommendations from Luton's context can provide a template for other diverse towns seeking to make public transport more accessible, equitable, and welcoming for everyone.

6. Reflections

As a Polish resident of Luton, I recognise several of the barriers discussed in this paper. Early on, I struggled with ticketing, routes, and unclear information, and I've seen how language confidence can make everyday travel feel intimidating. Cycling offers another example: while I enjoy it, friends and relatives often view it as unsafe or unsuitable, shaped as much by cultural expectations as by infrastructure. These experiences underline how confidence, culture, and communication influence travel choices.

The research offers useful insights, but the methods carry limitations. The online survey reached a relatively small, digitally confident and largely English-speaking group, meaning those with weaker English or limited digital access are likely under-represented. A broader sample, targeted outreach, and partnership with community groups would help capture a wider range of voices.

Another limitation could be seen in the scope. Although the study focused on language, culture, confidence, and information, it paid less attention to disability, poverty, and gender, factors that strongly affect perceptions of safety and accessibility. Future work using mixed methods or co-design approaches could address these gaps.

However, the study highlights an area often overlooked in UK transport planning: cultural and linguistic inclusion, which deserves more attention in increasingly diverse towns. Similar research could therefore make a valuable contribution nationally, especially in rapidly diversifying towns.

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Appendix A – Survey

How Can Luton's Transport Work for Its Diverse Communities?

Purpose: I am carrying out this survey as part of the Transport Planning Society (TPS) Bursary competition.

Data use: The results will contribute to my research paper on how well Luton's transport system serves its diverse communities, and what practical improvements could make it more inclusive. Your views will help shape recommendations for transport planners and local authorities.

Time: ~5 minutes.

Anonymity: No names or contact details are being collected.

Voluntary: You can stop the survey at any time.

Q0. Do you consent to take part in the survey under the terms above?

- ◯ Yes, I consent.
- ◯ No (end survey).

Q1. How often do you usually travel around (or to / from) Luton?

- ○ Daily (most days of the week)
- ○ A few times a week
- ○ A few times a month
- ○ Once every few months (e.g. airport, occasional visit)
- ○ Rarely / never

Q2. How do you usually get around (or to / from) Luton?
(Select all that apply)

- ☐ Bus
- ☐ Train
- ☐ Walking
- ☐ Cycling
- ☐ E-scooter
- ☐ Car (driver)
- ☐ Car (passenger)
- ☐ Other: _____

Q3. Which languages would you be comfortable receiving transport information in? *(Select all that apply)*

- [ ] English
- [ ] Urdu
- [ ] Polish
- [ ] Romanian
- [ ] Bengali
- [ ] Punjabi
- [ ] Gujarati
- [ ] Tamil
- [ ] Arabic
- [ ] Italian
- [ ] Lithuanian
- [ ] Other: _____

Q4. How easy or difficult do you find the following in Luton?

On a scale 1–5:

1 = Difficult, 2 = Somewhat difficult, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Somewhat easy, 5 = Very easy.

Q4 a) Understanding bus stop signs

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very difficult	○	○	○	○	○	Very easy

Q4 b) Understanding train station signs

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very difficult	○	○	○	○	○	Very easy

Q4 c) Buying bus tickets

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very difficult	○	○	○	○	○	Very easy

Q4 d) Buying train tickets

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very difficult	○	○	○	○	○	Very easy

Q4 e) Using travel apps/websites (e.g. for timetables, journey planners)

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very difficult	○	○	○	○	○	Very easy

Q4 f) Asking staff/drivers for help

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very difficult	○	○	○	○	○	Very easy

Q5. Have any of these made public transport in Luton harder for you recently?

- [ ] Language used in signs/announcements
- [ ] Unclear ticketing/payment
- [ ] Apps/websites not available in my language
- [ ] Lack of staff help or training
- [ ] Safety concerns (on vehicle or at stops)
- [ ] Poor reliability (delays/cancellations)
- [ ] Accessibility needs not met (e.g. mobility, visual/hearing)
- [ ] Cost
- [ ] Other: _____

Q6. Thinking about your own experience in Luton, how much do you agree with the following?

On a scale 1-5:

1= Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

Q6. a) I feel confident planning journeys on public transport

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly agree

Q6. b) I feel safe when using public transport

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly agree

Q6. c) I know where to get accurate information if services change (e.g. delays, diversions)

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly agree

Q6. d) I feel the system is welcoming to people from different cultural or language backgrounds

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly agree

Q7. What do you think would help the most to improve transport in Luton? *(Select 3 at most)*

- [ ] Clearer multilingual information (apps, websites, printed guides)
- [ ] Simpler, more accessible payment/ticketing options
- [ ] Better real-time updates (disruptions/diversions)
- [ ] Staff training in cultural competence and basic phrases
- [ ] Community-led engagement (e.g. pop-up info sessions)
- [ ] Safer waiting areas and vehicles (lighting/CCTV/patrols)
- [ ] Cycling/walking support (safe routes, secure cycle parking)
- [ ] Other: _____

Q8. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences using transport in Luton?

Your answer

Appendix B – Q8 Comments

Q8. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences using transport in Luton?

Lack of communication between driver and passengers when service is being delayed , better service requirements.in regards to bus conditions also bus fare a not fairl priced , especially one day bus passes
Lack of a lift in station are an issue
I walk a lot to improve my health and the street lighting could definitely be improved (brightness, actually turned on) to make me feel safer as a woman, particularly as we head into winter and daylight hours get shorter
Lifts at the train station have not been working for quite a while now. Bus ticketing is not clear, with single/return/all day tickets and different prices from different operators. Sometimes I have safety concerns as a woman on bus stops or even just walking home from the train station.
Paying for drop off at Luton Airport is ridiculous for a transport interchange and leads to bad behaviour with cars waiting in inappropriate locations for passengers to clear arrival procedures and make their to the drop off zones.
Make it cheaper, make bus stops better lit, have signs about manners on the bus - not playing music or having loud video calls
A lot of buses go to/from the town but there isn't many that go from different points of Luton to others and not go through town. It would make more sense to avoid going to town sometimes specially if going from Leagrave/Sundon Park area (don't know about other areas) towards Kingsway, or Dunstable and M1, there isn't really any buses that go in that direction without having to go to town. Or towards Houghton Regis/Leighton Buzzard. A lot of workplaces are there, but people without cars have to take extra time to travel to town first. Ideally there should be buses to the airport that go further than Luton town as well in my opinion without having to change. Secondly, buses are often times late and without live updates people don't know if they've missed the bus or still waiting for it, and some don't use apps and may not be using a smart phone at all, which really is the only way to check it as there isn't live update tables on the bus stops. Thirdly, prices for buses or trains have really gone up in the last few years and sometimes it makes more sense to get uber/taxi especially if one has to change or walk extra distance which, in Luton, isn't the safest option if someone is on their own
the times public transport stops operating and how often busses run could be better
Wear and tear on roads, eg potholes. Traffic flow is problematic
I avoid using PT for local journeys and will opt to drive or use a taxi due to the cost and time (limited services/indirect routes, etc.)

I think for the amount we pay monthly the train station is shocking, it is one of the worst I have been to.
I think safety is first! I would recommend to make sure that is safe anytime of the day and night
The general road surfaces could do with regular resurfacing on bus routes and even road widening to ease congestion and not hold up traffic where busses travel. More brighter street lighting on popular walking routes would be appreciated. Can start with the cycle route along the A6 barnfield college to Luton town centre.
I dont speak good english, I understand some but I dont ask for help; buses can be made easier
knowing what to Ask and where to Ask for help
There's a strong sentiment of not feeling safe. Crime needs to be eradicated, but the places also need to look appealing to make all want to take public transport
easier bus network to navigate, space to buy tickets, ask for help (maybe an information point at the main Luton station??)