

# Abbey Line Counts and Surveys

**June 2024**

FINAL REPORT

July 2024

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## Executive Summary

- E.1 The Railway Consultancy Ltd was commissioned by the Abbey Line CRP to carry out a further wave of passenger counts and surveys in June 2024, covering almost all weekday and weekend services. These surveys, for which the fieldwork was carried out by Transport Investigations Ltd, were comparable to a programme of previous survey work carried out by RCL at various periodicities dating back to 2006. Work included both the counting of passengers alighting and boarding (nearly) all trains at all stations, and interviewing passengers to understand their travel characteristics and views about the rail service.
- E.2 In terms of passenger demand, the numbers of passengers counted was at its lowest level recorded by us since 2006. Detailed examination of the data shows the decline to be very largely due to the reduction in peak-period commuting, brought about by Covid and other factors. In contrast, weekend travel has held up well and the Sunday traffic volumes recorded were the highest ever, partly driven by the temporary closure for engineering works of the alternative service from St Albans City. In total, we estimate annual Abbey line patronage to be around 375,000 ppa.
- E.3 Usage of the Abbey line is now dominated by passengers travelling 2-3 times per week (not daily) for commuting purposes, or weekly or less frequently for leisure or visiting friends & family. Despite the branch line nature of the route, and 25% of passengers having a car available for their journey, its speed is its key advantage compared to other modal alternatives, although its low price was also cited as a factor by 9% of respondents.
- E.4 However, the low quality of the service (both planned and in practice) remain a key source of concern to passengers. The (usually only hourly) frequency of the service, along with the poor levels of reliability (and, in particular, the high levels of cancellations and substitute buses) are the most important issues. Nevertheless, a range of minor issues which would be cheap and reasonable to implement soon were also raised, which WMT and the CRP are encouraged to address. These include better information to passengers (especially during disruption), poor train cleanliness and the current unavailability of contactless ticketing.

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### **Document control**

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# 1 Introduction

- 1.1 The Abbey Line runs a shuttle service on a single-track line between Watford Junction and St Albans Abbey. It was designated by the then-Strategic Rail Authority as a 'Community Rail Line' in July 2005, and has attracted funding as this from both Hertfordshire CC and the rail industry since. Supported also by the users' group Abfly, a range of marketing and promotion activities has been sustained ever since.
- 1.2 Amongst these activities has been an ongoing series of passenger counts and surveys, a programme with which the Railway Consultancy Ltd has been heavily involved. Conducted at least annually in the early years of the CRP, the last few years have seen only limited repeats, whilst undertaking face-to-face interviews on trains during Covid was impractical. However, now that traffic (particularly leisure traffic) has mostly recovered from Covid, it was thought useful to repeat the counts and surveys through another wave, undertaken in June 2024.
- 1.3 Fieldwork was undertaken by three colleagues from Transport Investigations Ltd (TIL) and covered all afternoon services on Tuesday 18<sup>th</sup> and morning services on Wednesday 19<sup>th</sup>, together with all trains on Saturday 22<sup>nd</sup> and Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> June. Unfortunately, an incident on the train in the mid-evening of the Saturday led to the conductor not feeling able to continue their shift, so the last three return journeys were cancelled. Otherwise, however, services ran well and useful results were obtained, including interviews with 388 passengers.
- 1.4 This report contains the summary results of the work carried out, with full details available in an Excel workbook shared with Hertfordshire CC. We describe first the counts (enabling us to calculate annual patronage, and examine trends compared to previous survey waves) and then the surveys (enabling us to understand travel patterns and the factors most determining travel choices in this corridor).

## 2 Passenger Counts

- 2.1 Surveyors counted passengers alighting from and boarding every train at every station. In offpeak periods, the 4-car train used on the line is reasonably empty, and this was a task manageable by one person, but a second surveyor assisted during weekday peak periods. We surveyed every weekday train once (across Tuesday/Wednesday) and every weekend train, with the exception of the last return journey on a Sunday evening (since it was difficult getting survey staff home after this). We also used counts from our previous survey wave as a best estimate of demand on the trains cancelled on Saturday evening. The total number of passengers counted equates to an estimate of only just over 7700/week.
- 2.2 Whilst those closer to the daily operation of the line may have been aware of this, we were disappointed to note that this is a substantial reduction in patronage since our last pre-Covid wave of work in November 2019. Aware of changed travel patterns on Mondays and Fridays, we had deliberately undertaken our weekday surveys on Tuesday afternoon/Wednesday morning. However, the maximum weekday count (on the 07:37 St Albans – Watford, arriving at Watford) was only 65, whereas historical figures have been nearer 100. As a consequence, total peak traffic during the weeks is now only broadly the same as total offpeak traffic (although the latter clearly covers a greater number of hours).
- 2.3 Consistent with reports from elsewhere on the rail network, however, weekend traffic was relatively buoyant, despite there being no Watford FC home football matches during the weekend surveyed. The two busiest services during the survey period were in fact on Sunday lunchtime, although this was partly due to the unavailability of mainline train services at St Albans City (because of engineering works), which led to our recording an all-time high level of Sunday traffic.
- 2.4 Incorporating data from our previous work for the CRP, the graphs below show traffic trends over the last 18 years, disaggregated by day of week and time of day. The detail shows that the pre-Covid commuting peaks have almost disappeared.

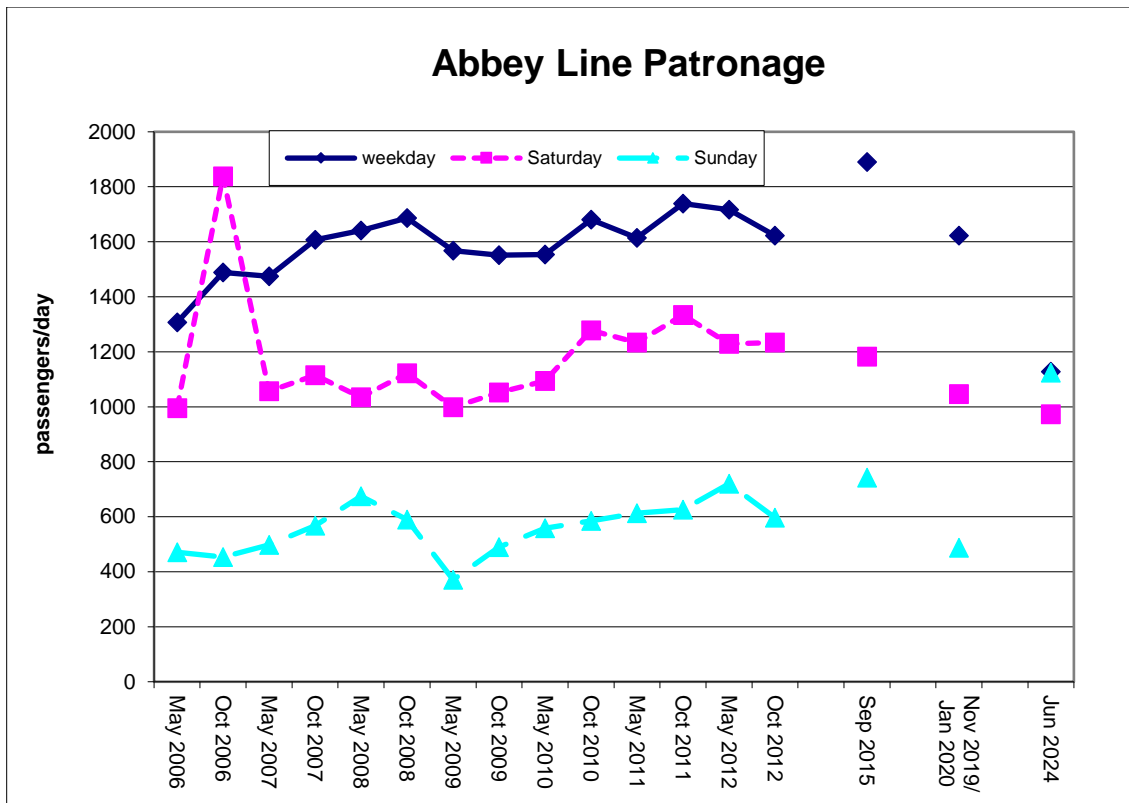


Figure 1. Traffic Trends by Day

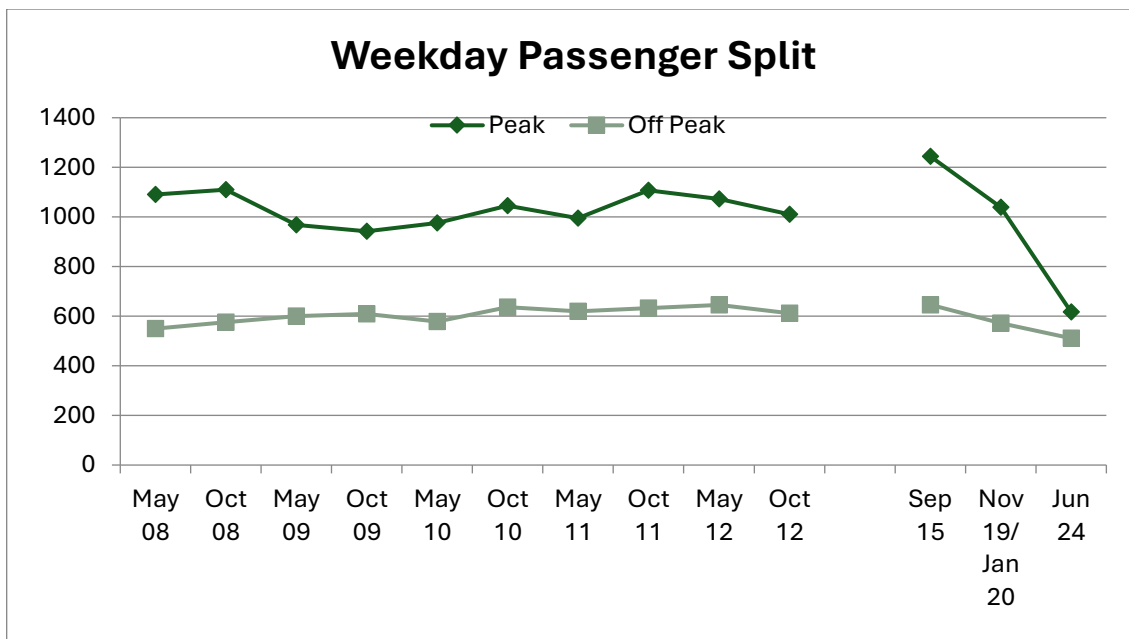


Figure 2. Peak and Offpeak Traffic Trends

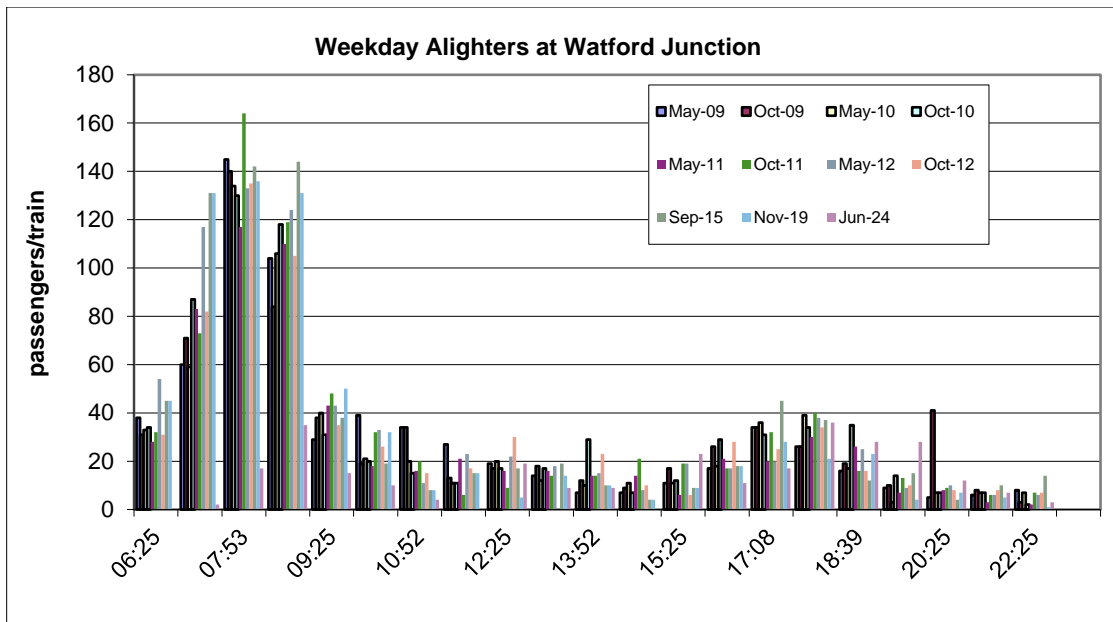


Figure 3. Train-by-Train Trends at Watford Junction

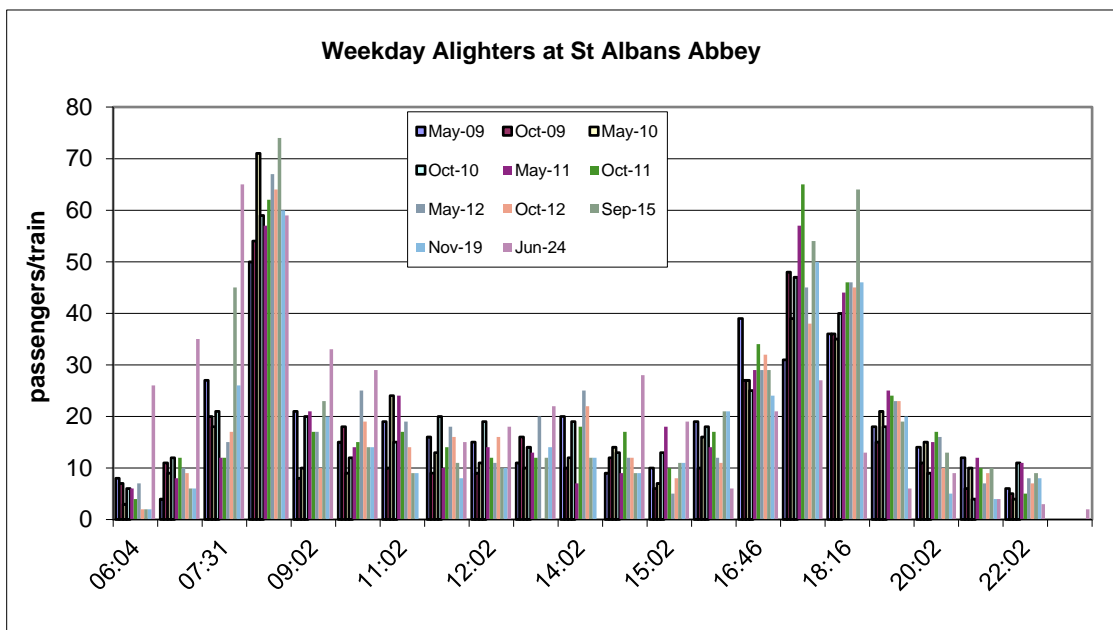


Figure 4. Train-by-Train Trends at St Albans Abbey

2.5 Taking into account days with no service (e.g. Christmas Day), Bank Holidays (with a Sunday service) and planned engineering work, and ignoring the boost from Thameslink being shut on the surveyed Sunday, we estimate that the Abbey line is currently carrying around 375,000 passengers per year. This is an average of about 17 per train. Sadly, this is the lowest estimate of any of our 17 survey waves of this line, with Covid having reduced patronage to slightly below where it was when the CRP was founded. One might surmise that issues such as train cancellations may also have contributed to the decline in traffic, and an understanding of the importance of factors such as that was therefore sought through passenger interviews carried out at the same time as the surveys. The results of those are discussed in the next section.

### 3 Passenger Surveys

#### 3.1 Passenger and Journey Characteristics

- 3.1 Between undertaking on/off counts at stations, surveyors also interviewed passengers about their journey characteristics and their opinions about a range of issues affecting their journey on the Abbey line. Responses (but not necessarily to every question) were achieved from 388 passengers.
- 3.2 Despite the notable decline in peak-period patronage, commuting was still the most frequent reason for travelling; however, it only comprised just over 1/3 of trips. Leisure, and Visiting Friends & Relatives each contributed about ¼.

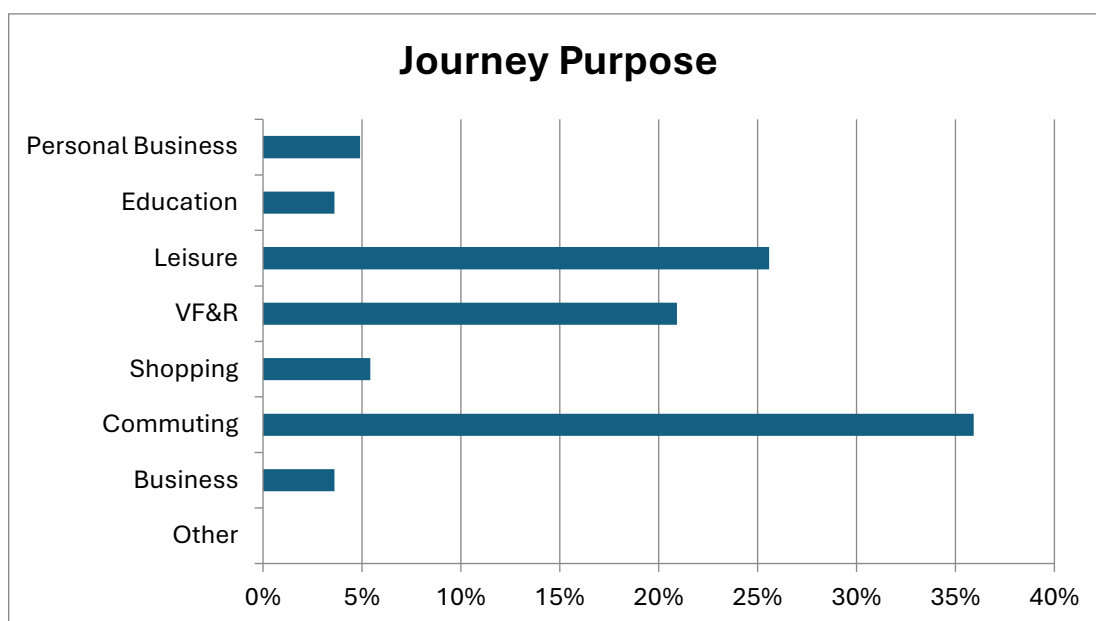


Figure 5. Distribution of Journey Purposes

- 3.3 Associated with the decline in commuting, under 20% of passengers were found to be travelling daily, with slightly more doing so 2-3 times per week, but nearly as many travelling only infrequently. 8% of passengers were making their journey for the first time.



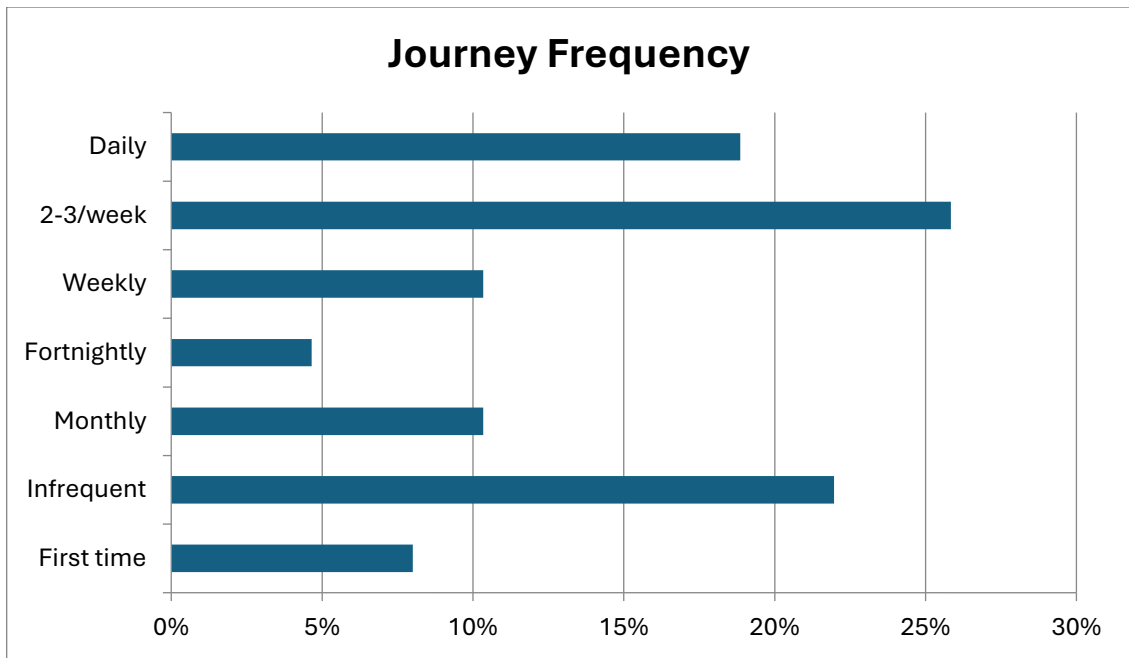


Figure 6. Distribution of Travel Frequencies

3.4 Again unsurprisingly given the decline in commuting, single and return tickets dominated the types of tickets held. However, over 10% of passengers interviewed did not have a valid ticket at the time of interview. Some of these would subsequently have paid on the train, but we would infer that several % of passengers will remain ticketless, and therefore not appear in traffic statistics derived by WMT. We also note that several passengers were found using contactless payment on the line, despite the fact that it is not yet available.

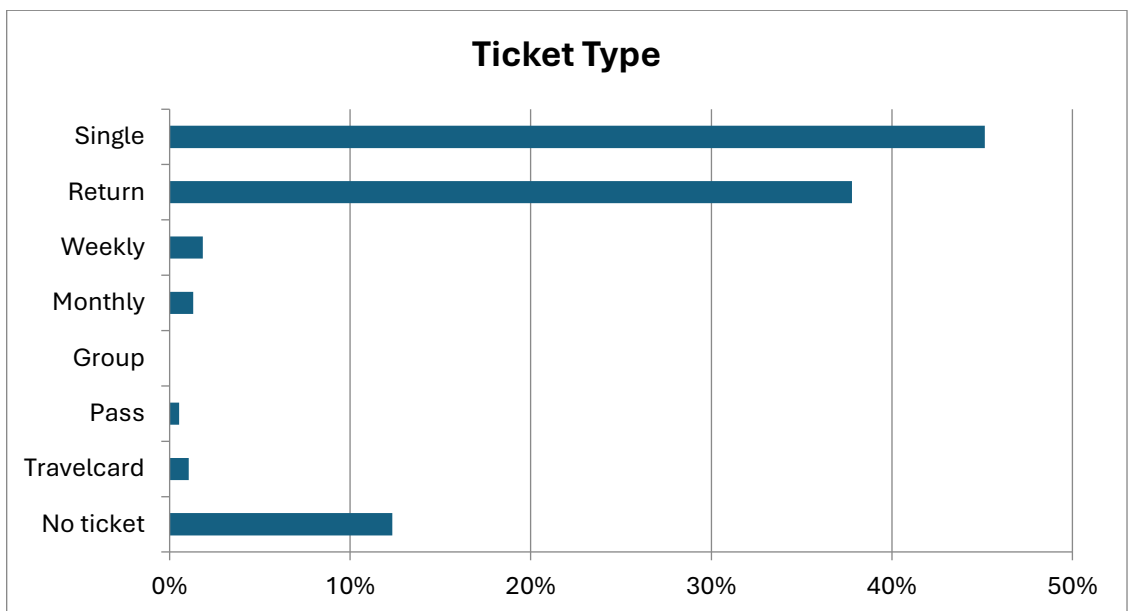


Figure 7. Distribution of Ticket Types

3.5 25% of respondents had a car available for their trip, but decided to use the train. This is encouraging, in demonstrating that the railway does indeed have a competitive offer.

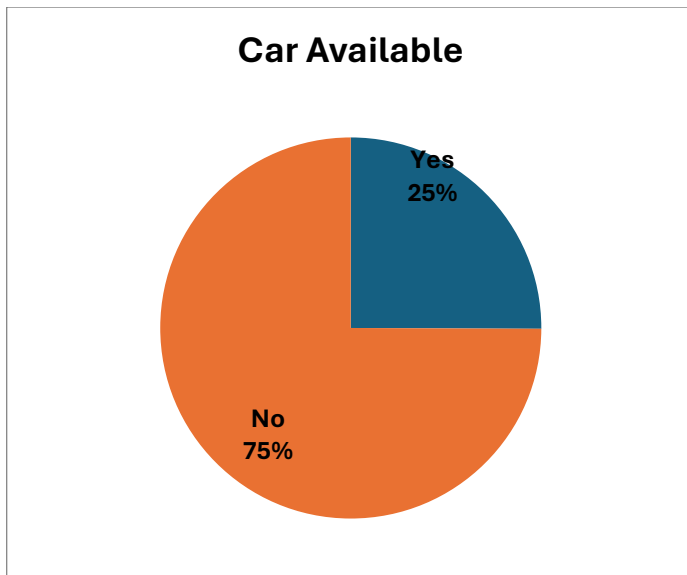


Figure 8. Car Availability for Abbey Line Passengers

3.6 Over half the respondents had accessed the Abbey line on foot, with a further 20% doing so by other train service. Although the vast majority of the latter were via Watford Junction, we once again found use of the Abbey line by passengers who had made part of their journey on the Midland Main Line, and changed stations at St Albans.

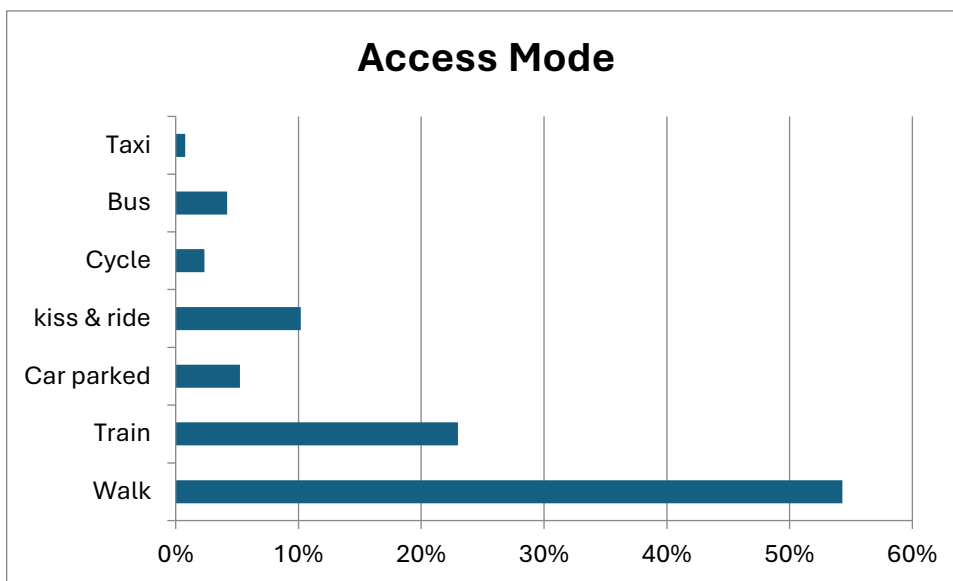


Figure 9. Distribution of Access Modes

3.7 Respondents not walking or cycling were asked why they were not cycling. This question did not elicit many answers, but 12 people claimed that it was too far to cycle to the station, 8 noted that they didn't have a bicycle, 4 that they didn't cycle, and (perhaps the one issue that might be addressed locally) 5 that the cycle paths to/from the station were of insufficient quality.

### 3.2 Reasons for Using Rail

3.8 In terms of understanding the strengths of the line, passengers were asked to provide reasons why they used the Abbey line, and then to give a satisfaction score (out of 10).

- 3.9 For those responding that using the Abbey line was “easier” (or “more convenient”), it is unfortunately difficult to work out in which element of the journey the Abbey line has the advantage. However, 7 people responded that they lived near the station, so that access to the rail network was not at all onerous.
- 3.10 There were various versions of ‘no choice’, including those who could not drive, those whose car was currently unavailable, those noting that the alternative bus service did not run at weekends, and those using the Abbey line to/from St Albans because of engineering works on the line through St Albans City.
- 3.11 Despite the acknowledged problems with the train service over the last year or so, several respondents were still noted as choosing the Abbey line because it was more reliable than the alternatives. Supporting comments referred to the disadvantages of the alternatives of bus services or car use (e.g. road traffic congestion or parking problems).
- 3.12 Similarly, although price was an issue for some respondents (see below), and the railway cannot compete on price with local buses with their current £2 maximum fare, several respondents had chosen rail because it was cheaper than the alternatives.
- 3.13 Several respondents mentioned the ability to use the train in specific circumstances e.g. to work en route, carry a bicycle, or after having had a drink. Aside from those with a general preference for rail (or just finding it more comfortable), 8 respondents specifically mentioned travelling by rail because of its environmental credentials (even if the average loadings of Abbey line services do not maximise these).

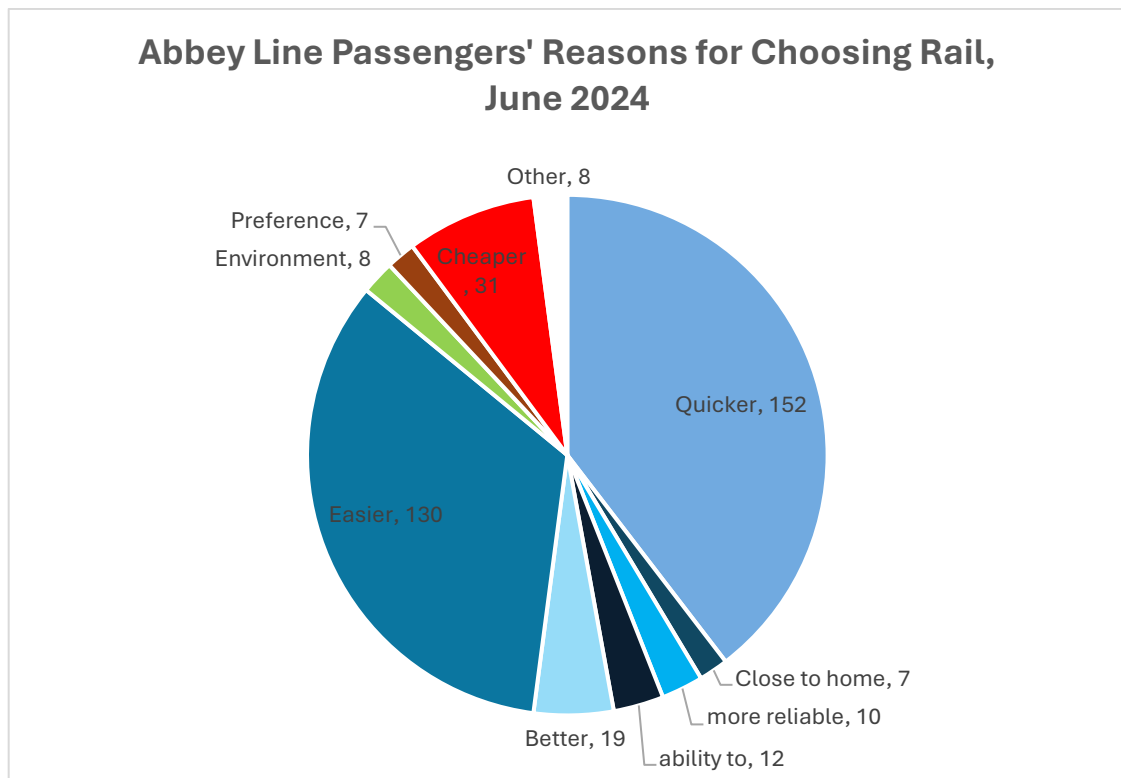


Figure 10. Rail Travel advantages for Abbey Line Passengers

### 3.3 Customer Satisfaction and Desired Improvements

- 3.14 For customer satisfaction, a weighted average score of 8.05 was achieved – this is worth tracking over time, but is not directly comparable to other quoted data (e.g. for train operating companies as a whole) and also (by definition) excludes those passengers whose satisfaction with the service is so low that they have stopped using it.

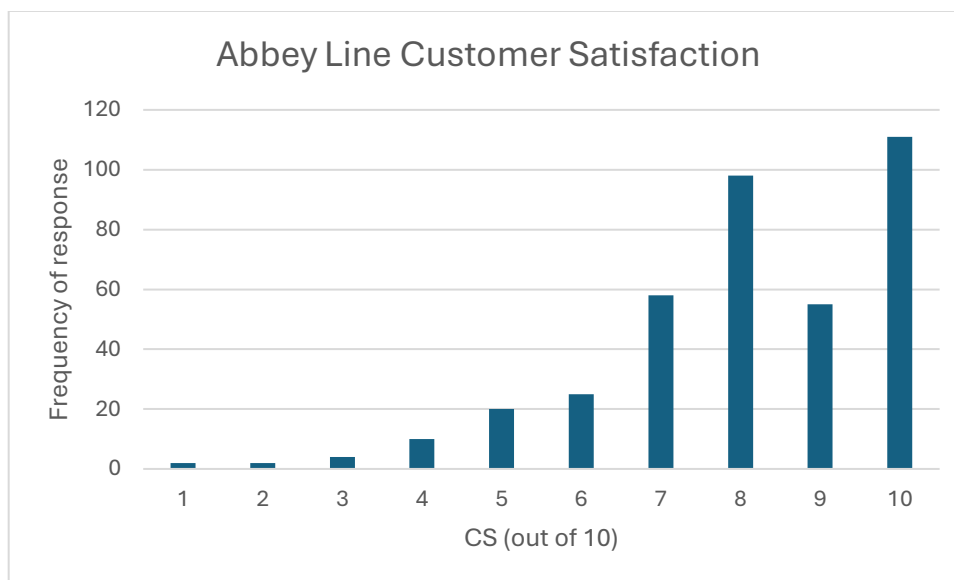


Figure 11. Customer Satisfaction Scores on the Abbey Line

- 3.15 Respondents were then asked two open-ended questions, relating respectively to general improvements which might be made to rail services, and then to what specific (physical) improvements on the line might be made which would encourage them to do so further. Although many respondents did not mention anything in particular, passengers were allowed to give up to three answers, and a total of 339 comments were received. We have endeavoured to group these into appropriate categories for comment. A colour-coded summary of these is shown in Figure 12 below, with issues associated with the planned service shown in a range of blue colours and its actual operation in a range of green.
- 3.16 By far the most frequent comment (1/3 of all responses) was that regarding service frequency, potentially exacerbated by the post-Covid timetable only being hourly in the interpeak period. Specifically, many passengers expected a half-hourly service, although a few more knowledgeable ones mentioned the lack of a passing loop at Bricket Wood as being the underlying factor. Other issues with the timetable included a desire for more through trains to/from London, the better timing of connections at Watford Jc and (despite a later train having been introduced) a later later train.
- 3.17 The second most frequent comment (62 passengers) concerned service reliability – and that excluded a further 34 mentions of cancellations and 9 complaints about bus substitutions. An issue which should be actionable by WMT would be to address the 21 responses about poor information and communications, including signage to platform 11 at Watford Junction, and the way in/speed at which information about service disruption is passed on to customers.
- 3.18 In terms of rolling stock, WMT is also encouraged to address the issue of train cleanliness, with this unusually being mentioned in response to the (dustiness of) seating areas and not

specifically in relation to toilets (although those not being available was mentioned). Passengers also desired improvements to on-train facilities such as better wifi, sockets for phones etc.

- 3.19 Aside from wider concerns about fares (and even a desire that fares should be free for children), respondents raised several specific concerns about difficulties with ticket machines, whether these were general (e.g. don't accept cash) or specific (not working on a particular day). However, there were several requests for contactless payment to be rolled out to the Abbey Line, extending it from Watford. As this is a request known to be in line with Government/ rail industry policy, we would encourage its speedy implementation.
- 3.20 Various further comments were made, including 18 miscellaneous issues we have categorised as 'other'. Full details of all of these are available within the accompanying Excel file.

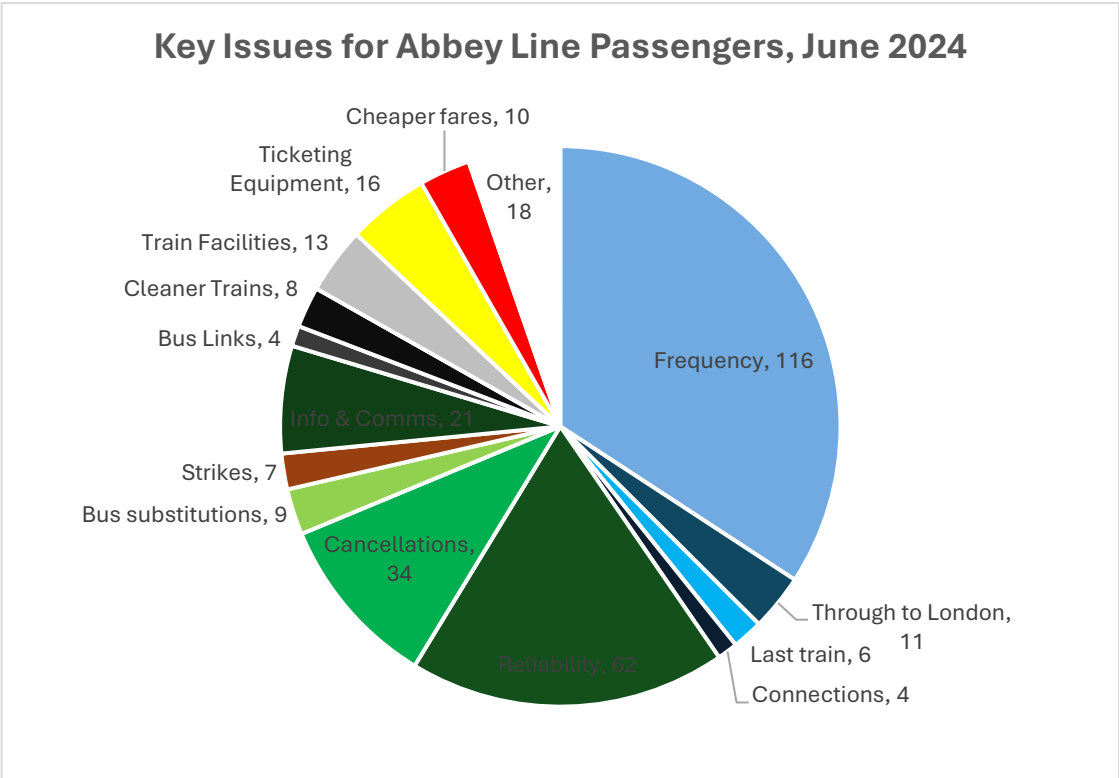


Figure 12. Concerns/ Areas for Improvement on the Abbey Line

- 3.21 In terms of following up issues with passengers, it may be helpful to note that only 116 respondents were aware of the line's CRP status, compared to 270 who were not.

## 4 Conclusions

- 4.1 The number of weekly passengers estimated from counts carried out on the Abbey Line in June 2024 was only just over 7700/week. These counts were comparable to a programme of previous survey work carried out by RCL at various periodicities dating back to 2006, but the latest figures were at their lowest level recorded by us. Detailed examination of the data showed the decline to be very largely due to the reduction in peak-period commuting, brought about by Covid and other factors. In contrast, weekend travel has held up well and the Sunday traffic volumes recorded were the highest ever, partly driven by the temporary closure for engineering works of the alternative service from St Albans City. In total, we estimate annual Abbey line patronage to be around 375,000 ppa.
- 4.2 Usage of the Abbey line is now dominated by passengers travelling 2-3 times per week for commuting purposes, or weekly or less frequently for leisure or visiting friends & family. Despite the branch line nature of the route, its speed is its key advantage compared to other modal alternatives.
- 4.3 Over 10% of passengers did not have a ticket when surveyed, although others may have purchased later during their journey. Most passengers do not have a car available for their trip and arrive at Abbey line stations on foot (or by a connecting train at Watford Junction).
- 4.4 However, the low (usually hourly) frequency of the service remains a key source of concern to passengers, along with the poor levels of reliability (and, in particular, the high levels of cancellations and substitute buses). Nevertheless, a range of smaller issues were also raised (notably better information to passengers (especially during disruption), poor train cleanliness and the current unavailability of contactless ticketing), and WMT and the CRP are encouraged to address these.