



Rail passengers' experiences and priorities during engineering works

October 2017

Forewords



Passengers understand that to have a safe and reliable railway, and to deliver improvements to capacity and journey times, engineering work has to take place. Some disruption to passengers is almost inevitable, but there are ways of minimising or reducing its impact.

We are pleased to have seen improvements in the industry's practices over time and to have worked with Great

Western Railway as major improvements are carried out on its network and with Northern as it plans for the Great North Rail Project¹."

Guy Dangerfield

Head of Strategy, Transport Focus



The Great Western route is seeing an unprecedented amount of engineering work from our partner, Network Rail. As we agree more and more periods of work to support the Great Western route upgrade, we refer regularly to the work that Transport Focus and ourselves conducted around work at Reading and Bath Spa about how best to communicate the planned disruption.

However the volume of work, including electrification and flood alleviation, as well as simple maintenance, led us to question whether our view as to when passengers think it best to undertake this work was still valid or have passengers grown

more accepting of week-long blockades. Possibly even more important is how the work is impacting passenger demand and leading to a possible disinclination to travel at weekends.

We have worked with Transport Focus to update the industry's knowledge in this crucial area and to compare the current research with the earlier findings.

Jeremy Clarke

Head of Research, Great Western Railway



By 2022 the Great North Rail Project (GNRP), part of Britain's Railway Upgrade Plan, will have delivered more than £1bn of improvements for passengers to transform train travel in the North. GNRP will have a major impact on the network, delivering vital improvements to services and the necessary infrastructure enhancements to permit introduction of Northern's new fleets of electric and diesel trains by early 2020. These will provide 2000 extra services per week, more seats and faster journey times. Before this can happen there is much work to be done and this will inevitably bring disruption for passengers. With help from Transport Focus, Great Western Railway and other operators, we are determined to identify

'best practice' in our ongoing quest to improve the customer experience offered during these works. We are committed to communicating plans more clearly, minimising disruption to passengers to the greatest extent possible, listening to customer feedback and acting quickly wherever possible. Forging a closer working relationship with Transport Focus is just one of the ways in which we plan to achieve these objectives and Northern is delighted to have helped fund and to have participated in this important research.

Peter Griggs

Customer Impact Manager, Northern

Background

'Less disruption during engineering works' is ranked seventh (of 31) priorities for improvement by rail passengers.² 'More trains arriving on time' is ranked third. Punctuality and reliability are clearly of major importance to passengers. The industry challenge is that upgrading the infrastructure to improve punctuality and reliability can require major engineering work.

Welcome investment by government in Network Rail's Railway Upgrade Plan³ means that there is a lot of engineering work happening on Britain's railways. As well as routine maintenance there are major projects to increase capacity and infrastructure resilience. There are also several electrification schemes designed to improve performance and the passenger experience.

Such valuable improvements for the future often come at the cost of disruption to today's passengers. The work requires extensive periods of overnight and weekend closures as well as, in several cases, extended 'blockades' over holiday periods or even the working week. These closures bring inevitable disruption for passengers.

In 2012 Transport Focus published *Rail passengers' experiences and priorities during engineering works*.⁴ This research was both quantitative (asking a large number of passengers their views using questionnaires) and qualitative (speaking to some passengers individually or in small groups). This research found that:

- passengers expected engineering works to be planned to have minimal impact on commuter services
- passengers had a clear preference to travel on a train rather than a replacement bus
- most passengers said they would accept a longer journey via an alternative route rather than changing on to a bus – this held good even when the diverted train took up to 40 minutes longer than a fast replacement bus
- there was a preference for work to take place during school holidays and in the summer rather than at the 'traditional' Christmas/New Year and Easter times
- passengers felt they were not being given sufficient information about disruption when booking tickets
- passengers reported a poor experience when transferring to or from replacement buses
- their experience of replacement buses led to calls for discounted fares and/or gestures such as complimentary tea/coffee.

We have noted many initiatives by the industry to listen to passengers' views and provide a better experience when disruption cannot be avoided – not least Great Western Railway (GWR) dedicating a team to manage the impact of engineering works on its customers and investing considerable effort in running some services via diversionary routes when the main line is closed at Reading.

We also note the efforts by Merseytravel/Merseyrail in providing replacement cross-Mersey bus and ferry services (including carrying bikes) during the Wirral Loop Line closures, and are pleased to have worked with Network Rail (NR) and South West Trains (SWT) to understand passenger information needs and monitor awareness in the run up to the part-closure of Waterloo station in August 2017.

With so much infrastructure work being undertaken (and much more planned) and an ongoing debate over whether to take extended possessions so as to complete work in as short a time as possible, we wished to establish if the earlier research was still valid. We wanted to find out whether passenger attitudes had changed in the intervening years, and whether the amount of disruption on some parts of the network – notably the Great Western Mainline – was affecting customer perception of the railway being 'open for business', especially at weekends.

Accordingly we decided to update the previous research. We carried out qualitative research to explore passengers' current attitudes and behaviours, and to see if there was sufficient change to need to update the quantitative research. We worked with GWR, with a focus on its network and then added an alternative perspective by working with Northern in both Leeds and Manchester. Northern saw the research as an opportunity to implement its franchise commitments regarding planned disruption and to provide an up-to-date passenger perspective to help its newly-appointed Customer Impact Managers. We are grateful to both operators for supporting this valuable work.

This report looks at passengers' experiences and expectations based primarily on the findings of the 2017 research update; all quotes come from passengers who took part in this most recent study. The research agency's full presentation of the findings is available on our website.⁵ The report also draws on our growing body of published research on the issue.⁶ It concludes with a review of the continued relevance of the recommendations we made in 2012.

Together with GWR and Northern we have concluded that the major part of the 2012 work remains valid and that there is little justification for further quantitative research at this time.

² We regularly publish research on passengers' priorities for improvements. These figures are from 2017 research, due to be published shortly. The previous report is at: <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/rail-passengers-priorities-for-improvements-october-2014/> ³ See: <https://www.networkrail.co.uk/our-railway-upgrade-plan/> ⁴ <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/rail-passengers-experiences-and-priorities-during-engineering-works/> ⁵ <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/rail-engineering-works-agency-2017> ⁶ In addition to the 2012 piece referenced above, we published *Planned rail engineering work – the passenger perspective* (2015) in which we tracked passenger awareness in advance of works at Reading and Bath Spa along with their experiences during the works. We also published *Passenger information when trains are disrupted* (2014) and have since worked with Merseytravel/Merseyrail and Network Rail/South West Trains on other large infrastructure projects. All our research is published on our website at: <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/rail-research/>

Summary

Passengers' experience of disruption

Our research shows that passengers continue not to differentiate between planned disruption (like maintenance and renewal work) and unplanned disruption (such as infrastructure failures or broken-down trains).

To them it matters little whether it is planned or unplanned; whichever it is, it means disruption to their journey and that is first and foremost in their minds. And when they hear the term 'engineering work' many passengers tend to think of routine maintenance rather than large-scale infrastructure projects – they accept the work as being necessary, but without any particular understanding of what work is being undertaken.

One passenger commented that the only difference for him was that with planned work, there were at least buses already on hand and no lengthy wait for these to be organised! However passengers also recount experiences of over-running engineering works (typically on a Monday morning) which serve to blur the planned/unplanned distinction even further.

This all serves to reinforce our view that no one size fits all and every project and every possession has to be planned with the local context in mind and what this means for the passenger experience.

"The only way I'd know is the difference in the organisation in terms of replacements. We all know that if it's planned, there's probably going to be a coach there waiting for you, whereas if it's unplanned you might be waiting half an hour, an hour waiting for them to organise everything."

Leeds, commuter

"They put on buses... but it takes ten minutes to get to Oxford from [Long] Hanborough, but the bus would take up to 45 minutes, and then we had to wait to get to the train to London. So my hour and five minute journey to London could turn into two, two and a half hours. So on occasions I would actually get in my car and drive."

Oxford, leisure and business traveller

"I trust them. I know I'm contradicting myself, but the bus I did use, the staff were very friendly. To be fair, it was only at the stations it stopped. It was straight in and straight out. So in a way, it was good, but it does take up a lot of time."

Leeds, leisure and business traveller

Passengers' experiences of engineering works are varied. Some have used alternative transport provided by the operator (bus, coach, taxi), others have used alternative scheduled local buses, trams or coaches, or have gone to a different station or taken a different route. Others have used their own vehicles or got a lift, while some opt not to travel when they discover work will disrupt their journey. Passengers' experiences vary by location, in part due to the alternatives available to them (both rail and road), but also their journey purpose and basic geography – especially where river crossings are involved.

Whatever passengers choose to do, disruption has varying degrees of impact on their journeys and their lives. At the very least, they suffer inconvenience and an upset to the routine of 'just getting the train' which can become stressful. It can impact on their well-being either through physical discomfort of alternative modes or an extended absence from home and family – getting home late can mean missing the children's bedtime or finding one's dinner in the dog. Lost time can mean missing a connection



(train or bus) or missing the start of a football game or a concert. It can mean being late for work, with a reputational or financial impact – potentially lost wages, or if trying to avoid that, the expense of paying for petrol and city centre car parking or taking a taxi.

For those on low wages and who may not have ready access to a car, taking a taxi is the last resort and can mean working for several hours just to pay for the taxi and, essentially, keep one's job. Among season ticket holders, a few believe that a monthly or annual ticket is not justified if there is going to be a significant period of disruption, such that they decide to switch to monthly or weekly tickets to avoid paying for travel when it is not possible.

"I only ever buy weekly now... it got to me that I'd forked out all that amount of money for one, and then a couple of times there were engineering works."

Reading, commuter

"I travelled only when I had to. So I have staff in Swindon so I went there only if I really needed to have face-to-face meetings. So I probably went on half a dozen journeys less."

Newport, commuter

When to undertake engineering work?

There is no good time to conduct planned engineering work – passengers accept and acknowledge this basic truth. They say that work should be scheduled so that it inconveniences the fewest people – which generally means them.

As a result, overnight work is seen as the best option as it is thought to inconvenience fewest people. Even then, if 'overnight' means the work starts before the end of normal service, it is recognised that this has consequences for shift workers and those returning from a night out, be that the theatre, a football match, or catching up with friends. And there is a fear of overnight work overrunning and the disruption moving from planned to unplanned as morning commuters become victims.

"I suggest that work is carried out at night time to minimise the disruption as much as possible... People do not travel overnight whereas when work is carried out over... weekends it continues to cause disruption yet in my opinion to a different clientele and more the likes of families etc. To close the railway would be completely unfeasible... Working through the night would therefore not impact commuters."

Portsmouth, commuter

Although 'overnight' is, in a sense, the obvious answer, rail passengers accept that weekend engineering work has become a fact of life. While it may inconvenience leisure travellers, they acknowledge that weekend work has fewer consequences for the archetypal commuter – although there are plenty of commuters who do not conform to the stereotypical nine-to-five, Monday-to-Friday model.

"The weekend is the time when they do the main, sort of, body of the work and yes, if there's going to be a diversion or a bus then it's going to be that."

Reading, commuter

Many passengers are following the railway's advice to 'check before you travel' – especially at weekends. In a way, this is relatively easy for leisure travellers as they often won't know the train times and will need to look these up – even then, on metro routes with a frequent, regular service passengers may just expect to 'turn up and go'. Commuters, on the other hand, rarely think to check before leaving for the station – and often not even then.

"I have had a few occasions where it's affected me, so I did start going online and just trying to, I think I looked at Northern Rail, whoever I'm using I'll just go on their website and see if there's anything because they have a bit that says, you know, what's planned."

Manchester, leisure and business traveller

"I tend to do, kind of like, a night before thing. So, if I know that I've got to be in London by 8:30, at 10 the night before, I'll go and look, are there delays?"

Oxford, commuter

"I'll check in the mornings going out because it's just, like, as I have my coffee I'm just, 'That needs doing', but I never think to check when I'm leaving work."

Reading, commuter



"I think, if there have been any signs up or anything then you do, but generally I just don't. I mean, there's a train every half an hour, so I don't tend to plan."

Oxford, leisure and business traveller

Rail passengers have little appetite for extended 'blockades' – and many have little understanding as to why these might be necessary. The assumption is that weekend closures, even if these are over several weekends, will be sufficient to complete the work. Weekday closures are viewed as unacceptably disruptive – particularly for commuters. Passengers can be persuaded of the need for lengthier closures if the reasons for the work are adequately explained. However this is more easily achieved when it is a shorter length of line that is closed and/or decent alternative options are readily available.

"We knew the tunnel was closed for six weeks. There was no 'It's open for two, it's closed for two, it's open for two.' It was really easy to get your head around."

Newport, commuter

There is little sign that repeated blockades on the GWR network have resulted in passengers here being any more open to such arrangements. And with lengthier closures, passengers show a heightened interest in knowing the reason for the work.

Generally, passengers' focus is on understanding when and where work is happening and what this means for their journey; the reason for the work and the benefits ensuing are generally an afterthought, a 'nice-to-have'. However, when disruption becomes extensive (weekday closures or multiple weekends) passengers show a particular desire to know the reasons for the work and the longer-term benefits that will accrue.

"I think it, sort of, helps you a bit better to understand, if you know what they're doing and why they're doing it, rather than just say, 'We're doing work', and not knowing what it is. I don't know, it just sits better."

Manchester, commuter

"Unless it was something really exciting and interesting like electrifying the lines, and then getting you into London in less than an hour."

Bristol, commuter

With more extensive periods of planned work, there is little consensus as to when closures should take place. Passengers dislike the concept of Christmas/New Year and Easter holidays because of the impact on people travelling to family gatherings and who may have few options but the train.

"I find it bizarre that they do so much engineering work between Christmas and New Year when people are trying to get to see their family."

Newport, commuter

"I think when they say, 'From January to March,' or whatever, you know straightaway, you think, 'Well, that's April.' For some reason you think, 'It won't be March.'"

Manchester, leisure and business traveller

"I don't really trust many engineers' time frames, when they say they're going to close them for a certain time, you always think, 'This could go on either days or weeks!'"

Reading, leisure and business traveller

On balance, the school summer holidays are felt to be 'least bad', in part because it is anticipated that the closure will be for just a part of the holiday period and not its full extent – meaning that travel will still be possible at some point.

"The school summer holidays and half terms are the ideal time of year for planned engineering works. I initially baulked at that, but then we figured that actually, the roads are a lot quieter in school summer holidays and half terms as well. The one route into Cornwall notwithstanding. My commute to work is halved just by being in the school holidays. So, actually, if you're taking people off trains and putting them on to the roads, it's not so bad."

Oxford, commuter



Managing disruption

All our research shows that passengers expect as much notice as possible of planned engineering works. For extensive weekday work, particularly during the summer holidays, advance notice may allow people to book annual holidays around the work.

At the very latest, they expect to be told about disruption when planning a journey and booking a ticket – so the timetable, including any replacement buses, needs to be fixed at the point advance tickets are released for sale.

Passengers regard it as unacceptable to sell tickets without alerting them to any disruption to the journey – this includes pointing out if the journey time will be extended and if a bus or coach is involved. But beyond this, there is agreement that all available media channels should be used to inform the public about forthcoming works, including social media, on trains and at stations (posters and potentially videos) and directly to passengers through SMS or email. Infrequent rail users present a particular challenge if relying on station-based communications.

Passengers have poor perceptions of rail replacement buses – this is an area where they can be influenced as much by their experiences of unplanned disruption as planned. A few acknowledge that with planned disruption things are generally better organised, but there remains uncertainty for some as to how long the journey will take and whether there will be room on the bus for everyone.

"Because I had to get a rail replacement bus, it wouldn't have been that much longer, but then as it happened, it was unforeseen, there were some road works as well. So then the bus couldn't get through. It had to go a different direction, and then I missed the connecting train. So it was quite big. It probably added an extra hour on."

Leeds, leisure and business traveller

Passengers experience various difficulties with replacement buses, starting with knowing where to go for the bus and which bus to board. This can be well managed at stations where passengers are required to change mode – although even then train and platform staff are sometimes seen as poorly informed, even if bus marshals are helpful and know what's what. It can be a different matter at intermediate stops – particularly if the stop is at some distance from the station or the station is unstaffed.

Buses and coaches can present problems for disabled passengers, the elderly and those travelling with children, heavy luggage, prams/buggies or cycles.

Buses are also criticised for their comfort, crowding and lack of luggage space, toilets and refreshments. Probably because they are used to the train and less used to a bus or coach, passengers criticise the time taken to board or wait for passengers to get to the bus/coach and then for the time the journey takes.

As well as being seen as slower than trains, there is a fear that buses will stop more frequently and that road traffic will add to the delay – making arrival times unpredictable and creating angst around missing onward connections.

"At Saltaire station, because the bus can't get down, the coach to the actual station, so it stops a few streets away, there's nobody there to tell you where it is. There needs to be somebody stewarding at the station to direct people."

Leeds, leisure and business traveller

"I found it to be a nightmare because one little one will turn up and, as you said, wait for it to fill up, and then the next one will come in, like, another twenty minutes. By that time, you could have got half-way there and it's just frustrating."

Manchester, commuter

"I've generally found that station staff are normally really quite pleasant and good and nice and apologetic."

Oxford, commuter

"It's the uncertainty isn't it? When you get on a bus, you just don't know how long you're going to be on there."

Newport, commuter



In the preceding paragraphs we have followed industry practice in talking about rail replacement buses. Passengers who have the good fortune to travel on a rail replacement coach are generally less negative in their feedback. Coaches are seen as faster, more comfortable (if not luxurious) and will often have toilets, albeit that the majority of passengers overlook the needs of less able passengers.

The transfer between modes is still an inconvenience and journey times are still extended but, overall, coaches are felt to deliver a better experience. Reinforcing the perceived difference but introducing another dimension, when both buses and coaches are in use, there can be a sense of being a second-class citizen if you are unfortunate enough to be the one on the bus!

"Coach sounds a bit more comfortable... Bus is, sort of, your bus around Reading, you've got your stops for locals."

Reading, leisure and business traveller

"The coach was comfortable and I was given a free coffee to take on board."

Exeter, commuter and leisure traveller

With their attitude to replacement services in mind, it should be no surprise that passengers are keen to stay on a train if at all possible. Even if the train journey takes longer because of using an alternative route, fast and slow trains sharing the one line, or fitting in with other trains during single-line working, it is still a train with the facilities a train offers and it avoids the rigmarole of switching to a bus or coach and often back again. It's only if the extended journey time exceeds 30-40 minutes that some passengers start to favour road transport.

"I would rather sit on the train for an extra 40 minutes than having the hassle of having to get off the train half way, get all of my luggage off."

Plymouth, commuter

"Sometimes if you aren't in a particular rush it can just be easier to stay put. I also have a four year old who gets travel sick in cars and buses but not trains so I would take the longer train journey."

Portsmouth, leisure traveller



Impact on passenger attitudes and behaviour

Passengers' own experiences during planned disruption tend to determine whether they think this has been handled well or not. Those with minimal disruption and who had had significant advance notice often speak positively of how the work had been managed. Those with more negative views are more likely to have been unaware of the work in advance or to have experienced negative interactions with staff; they can also form the view that operators are trying to get away with the minimum service they can provide.

Many passengers do change their behaviour because of an awareness of possible planned works. These changes include increased checking of journey details before travel, but also changing times or days of travel, buying different tickets, changing modes or avoiding weekend/Sunday evening travel altogether.

"If I book anything at a weekend, I'm cautious, because I got caught with a lot of bus replacements when I was younger."

Bristol, commuter

In some cases these changed behaviours continue even after the conclusion of the work, but overall there is no clear evidence that extensive disruption reduces passengers' likelihood of travelling by rail or their confidence in the railways. Their day-to-day experience is more likely to determine their overall attitude than engineering work specifically.

"My travel habits have not changed at all due to planned engineering works. They don't hugely impact the journeys that I have to make by train."

Exeter, commuter

There is general acceptance of the need for safety-critical maintenance and a recognition that with improvement works it can be necessary to accept 'short-term pain for long-term gain'.



"Say if I'm on my normal nine to five train, I just turn up. If I'm going somewhere else, I constantly look at Northern Rail to see what time they're due."

Leeds, commuter



Regular unplanned disruption has a more serious impact than occasional planned work where there is advance notice given. Passengers' likelihood of travelling has typically not changed, although there can sometimes be a cumulative effect of planned engineering on the attitudes of frequent rail travellers on those lines that have suffered the greatest volume of work and associated disruption. Even then we note anecdotal reports that depressed passenger levels on the West Coast Mainline during significant improvement work a few years ago quickly returned to normal, or above, once the work was completed and the benefits started to be delivered.

Awareness of the reasons for planned work and the benefits to be anticipated is mixed. In the latest research GWR passengers with prolonged exposure to planned works during upgrades to the Great Western Mainline were more likely to know the reasons for the disruption but Northern customers typically showed limited, if any, awareness. Commuters tended to be more aware than leisure or business passengers. There was, however, virtually no awareness of Network Rail's overall Railway Upgrade Plan.

"[It would be] a good thing if they did explain to the public what actions they have put in place, 'Yes we did this wrong, and this is what we're going to do right next time.'"

Newport, leisure and business traveller

"They just said modernising the rail or something."

Newport, leisure and business traveller

"I think it needs to be kept safe. Planned works are fine, as long as you know about it. It's absolutely necessary. I'd rather they do the works."

Leeds, leisure and business traveller

"The fact that they haven't told me exactly what was going on made me feel quite resentful of the operator really."

Portsmouth, commuter

Recommendations

In 2012 we made three principal recommendations to the rail industry. Having reviewed our 2017 research we believe it is appropriate to restate those recommendations and to note the extent to which these still hold good – or don't.

- **In 2012 we recommended:** "That the rail industry should make a further step change towards using replacement buses only as a last resort. Replacement buses will deter 55 per cent of passengers from travelling by train altogether, and introduce a 'weak link' in the journey for those who persevere... The options involving less impact on passengers (such as overnight working, single-line working or diverting around) must be considered in collaborative discussions between Network Rail and train companies and, where appropriate, eliminated for valid, transparent reasons. Only then should options involving buses be entertained."

In 2017, while acknowledging the efforts that some operators have made, we believe that keeping passengers on trains wherever possible should remain a key objective for the industry.

- **In 2012 we recommended:** "That National Rail Enquiries (NRE), train companies and online retailers must do more to help passengers make an informed choice when a bus or diverted train is involved. On many websites the fact that a journey involves a bus is not immediately apparent, requiring a further 'click'. No websites currently caution passengers that they are being offered a diverted train, despite the 'product' being materially different from normal (for example, in journey time or intermediate stopping pattern) – information which many passengers will need to make an informed choice."

In 2017, we acknowledge that NRE and others generally indicate potential disruption to a journey, although we believe there is more to be done including making this information more obvious and more easily accessed. That a bus or coach may be involved for all or part of a journey is often not as prominent as it could be. The fact that a train is being diverted is generally only apparent from the extended journey time – this could be missed by passengers who are unaware of what the 'normal' journey would be.

We suggest that more details about replacement bus or coach services can be provided beyond simply indicating that part of the journey will be by bus. Passengers would welcome knowing whether it will be a bus or a coach,

where it will depart from, whether staff will be on hand to provide assistance with luggage and provide directions, and whether/where the bus will stop en route. In some circumstances it may be appropriate to indicate alternative public transport options beyond the replacement bus.

With so many passengers relying on online journey planners for timetable information and to book tickets, the industry must also ensure that it meets its obligation to publish accurate train times 12 weeks in advance.

- **In 2012 we recommended:** "That train companies must deliver better customer service when passengers transfer from train to bus and vice versa. Areas to consider include:
 - **On the train journey to the interchange station.** Better information, greater staff presence on the train to answer queries and provide reassurance, and more empathy from staff. Train crew may not perceive the journey to be disrupted – they are doing what their diagram says and they are on time – but passengers may have a different view.
 - **At the interchange station.** Greater staff presence to provide information/reassurance, to assist with luggage, guide passengers to the buses. Also, improved signage of the route from platform to bus.
 - **Boarding the buses.** Staff presence to answer questions, give reassurance and provide help loading luggage. Labelling of buses with destination and calling points and providing bus drivers with an overview of what is happening so they can provide basic information to passengers.
 - **The specific needs of passengers with disabilities, whether related to mobility or another impairment.** How well are Assisted Passenger Reservation Service bookings delivered during engineering works? Are arrangements adequate for disabled passengers travelling without having booked?"

In 2017 we can only reiterate this recommendation. Our research shows that passengers' experiences are mixed and that there is still more to be done to provide the customer experience that passengers expect.

- **In 2012, in addition to the principal recommendations above, we noted that:** "There is an appetite among some passengers for summary "What is being done?" [and] "How do I benefit?" information to be available when engineering work takes place. The

way Transport for London describes disruption caused by its Tube Upgrade Plan was cited as good practice in the [2012] research. We encourage the rail industry to consider how it can allow passengers to understand how they will benefit from the short-term pain.”

In 2017, while we note the efforts being made to promote the benefits of many improvement schemes, this rarely happens with routine engineering such as track renewals. Nor is there generally a post-disruption ‘thank you’ or explanation of what was achieved during the work.

Passengers’ primary requirement when learning about engineering disruption is to understand what it means for them – when is it happening, what impact will it have on their journey and what alternative arrangements will be in place. Once this need is met, learning the reasons for the work, and what the benefits will be, helps passengers reconcile the short-term pain with the longer-term gain.

Some major schemes provide newsletters, social media content, videos and poster campaigns to keep passengers informed about progress. Nevertheless there is rarely any information provided after an engineering ‘possession’ to say what has been achieved. Indeed, in some circumstances passengers may even notice a deterioration in the service if, for example, a temporary speed restriction is imposed until the work is completed or the track beds in. **We suggest the industry considers what opportunities there might be after the work to acknowledge any inconvenience caused and to trumpet what was achieved during this time** – even if this is ‘mundane’ detail such as 500 metres of worn out track being replaced in the interests of comfort and safety.

- **In the 2012 report, the qualitative research was conducted in Oxford and showed widespread awareness of scheduled Oxford to London express coach services, with some passengers indicating that if the railway from Oxford to London was closed a scheduled coach was preferable to a ‘railway bus’.** We said that: “part of this is about eliminating the risks and hassle around transferring from train to bus or vice versa [and that] part of it may be the rail industry’s tendency to charter good quality coaches but refer to them as buses – with connotations of vehicles more suited to a short journey within a town or city... We encourage the industry to reflect on whether the quality of vehicles used on planned replacements is good enough and, where appropriate, consider using the word coach in textual descriptions and online journey planning data.”

Our 2017 research has explored rail passengers’ perceptions of replacement buses and coaches. It has shown a clear preference for a coach for all but the shortest journeys and we therefore recommend that the industry tries to use coaches whenever possible and to refer to them as such in disruption information. Our one caveat to this, and it is a crucial one, is that the needs of elderly passengers and those with mobility impairments must be kept in mind and appropriate arrangements made for anyone who has difficulty boarding a coach. It is not acceptable for wheelchair users to endure an extended wait while an accessible taxi is sourced.

Conclusion

Our latest research has shown that there has been little change in passengers’ perceptions and expectations of railway engineering works since 2012, and that their experiences during planned disruption remain varied. As noted above, our 2012 recommendations remain just as pertinent in 2017. We encourage anyone with an interest in planning engineering works to read our report⁷ in the knowledge that it has been shown still to be current.

We are pleased to see that many passengers are following the industry’s ‘check before you travel’ guidance, and **not** to have found any clear evidence of passengers choosing simply not to travel at weekends. With continued disruption across parts of the network due to the volume of engineering work to be completed, we shall continue to keep an eye on how the industry handles planned disruption and how this influences passengers’ experiences.

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Transport Focus is the operating name of the Passengers' Council

Transport Focus is the independent consumer organisation representing the interests of:

- all users of England's motorways and major 'A' roads (the Strategic Road Network)
- rail passengers in Great Britain
- bus, coach and tram users across England outside London.

We work to make a difference for all transport users