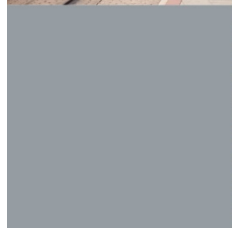
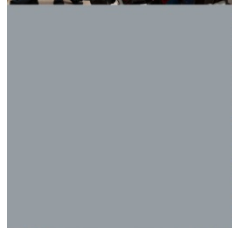
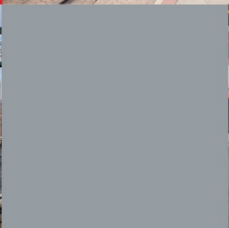
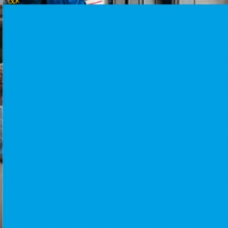
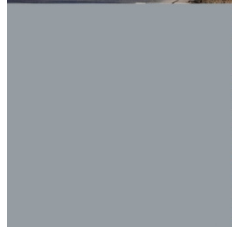
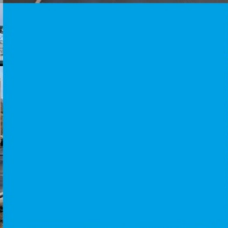


Routine railway maintenance: passenger perspectives and priorities

December 2017



Forewords

Maintaining railway infrastructure is critical – without it, the railway will not run properly. But of course these works cause disruption to services which have an impact on passengers.

We have carried out extensive research into passengers' views about disruption and know that a key requirement is to be kept well-informed. Transport Focus is pleased to have worked with Network Rail South East route to gauge passengers' knowledge of and expectations when it comes to routine maintenance of the railway.

Timetable changes to allow maintenance to take place contribute to public perception that the railways are not reliable because there is so much disruption happening. Indeed, passengers do not really distinguish between the different reasons for disruption, whether it be to carry out major improvements, or because infrastructure has failed, a train has broken down or there is bad weather. Routine maintenance is seen as one more thing that blights passengers' lives.

This research highlights that passengers do understand the need to keep the railway in good condition, once it is explained to them. Yet many are currently frustrated by poor communication of the alternatives – the plan B – if the service is altered. Passengers feel that the quality and even availability of information is inconsistent.

What do passengers want?

- **Tell us why the work is happening.** Passenger support for routine maintenance is stronger when they understand about the work and reasons it is necessary. The industry must be clearer about what is being done and why, with information provided as far in advance as possible.
- **Give us better information.** Providing accurate, timely and reliable information is key to improving the passenger experience – and they want this from an easy-to-access and reliable source.
- **Help us with plan B.** Alternatives if the normal service cannot run must be communicated clearly. In particular, passengers want to know about timetable changes at the time of planning or booking so that they can make choices based on the alternatives on offer.

Improving the passenger experience

Network Rail, Southeastern and Govia Thameslink Railway have signed up to a working group, chaired by Transport Focus, to tackle the issues highlighted in this research and so improve the passenger experience during disruption caused by routine maintenance work.

Anthony Smith
Chief Executive, Transport Focus

Understanding what passengers want means we can put their requirements at the heart of how we manage the railway. The results of this research will therefore be hugely valuable to Network Rail South East route as we develop our plans for the next few years, and I'd like to thank Transport Focus for the opportunity to work with them in this area. We will continue to build on this relationship as we move towards delivering our vision for the South East route – *Proud to be running the UK's most successful metro-style railway* – and we'll be sharing the results of this work with colleagues across the country so they can all learn from this crucial insight.

John Halsall
Route Managing Director, Network Rail (South East route)

Background

Network Rail carries out regular checks, maintenance, repairs and renewal work to help ensure the railway runs smoothly for passengers. Although necessary, these inevitably impact on passengers' journeys.

Transport Focus and Network Rail have worked together to understand passenger perspectives on these routine works, specifically in the South East route area. The findings will help Network Rail develop its strategic plan. It should ultimately improve the passenger experience and develop the best possible communications during timetable changes required to allow routine maintenance to take place.

This research asked about passengers' experiences, knowledge and expectations of routine railway maintenance, and covered:

- **general knowledge and attitudes** – what are passengers' views and experiences of how the railway works? What do they know about the need for regular maintenance? How much do passengers care about the condition of the railway?
- **timings** – when do passengers think work should happen, and how long do they think it should take?

- **communication** – how do passengers prefer to be kept informed?

These views were gathered from:

- **focus groups** – we ran focus groups with passengers in London, Sevenoaks and Brighton to understand their views and experiences
- **interviews at stations** – to capture views ‘in the moment’ we interviewed passengers at Bromley South, Tonbridge and Lewes stations.

Key findings

Passengers do not really differentiate between the reasons for changes to services, whether caused by things going wrong on the day, major improvement work, staffing issues, bad weather or routine maintenance. This finding is echoed in Transport Focus’s *Rail passengers’ experience and priorities during engineering works* report.¹

On top of that, compared with high-profile engineering works (for example, the rebuilding of London Bridge station), routine maintenance is almost always invisible to passengers; the service is exactly the same the next day. Routine maintenance is seen as pain for no gain, coupled with other factors, it contributes to the public’s perception that the railways are not wholly reliable.

These views are exacerbated by poor understanding and awareness of how the railway network is managed – in fact, passengers rarely consider the fact that railways need to be maintained.

“If I know exactly what they’re doing, I have a bit more patience.” London, leisure passenger

“Regular maintenance is important ... What they’re doing is okay because otherwise there’d be more train crashes.” Brighton, leisure passenger

“It might ease people if they know engineering works were for your safety, rather than just thinking is it strikes again.” Brighton, leisure passenger

“I didn’t know they did these things.” Sevenoaks, commuter

The current experience and perception of routine maintenance works is largely negative. Most passengers are not frequently inconvenienced by routine maintenance. However, when they are affected, their experience is rarely positive, with the impact often being felt by infrequent users late at night or at weekends. Poor

¹ *Rail passengers’ experience and priorities during engineering works*, October 2017
<https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/rail-passengers-experiences-priorities-engineering-works/>

information is the key sticking point. Passengers feel that information about the timetable changes is often inconsistent and difficult to access, while advice about 'plan B' is seen as inadequate.

"There's one announcement that really winds me up, saying there are no trains and ... to make a plan B but not telling you what the plan B is!"

Sevenoaks, commuter

"There have been occasions when ... I've had to get the bus, and it's never very clear where the bus is going from." Brighton, leisure passenger

Poor information means that passengers' experience of this type of engineering work is often framed in a negative context. As a result, routine maintenance is seen as poorly managed and can even cause real anger.

"I've got to the point where if I'm flying out of Gatwick, I'll drive now – I just don't trust the trains anymore." Brighton, leisure passenger

Yet passengers do support the need for routine maintenance if they are prompted to think about it. Although all forms of engineering works are viewed negatively, when asked directly about routine maintenance there is clear support and understanding of the need to carry this out even if it causes disruption.

Often, a combination of the 'heat of the moment' initial reaction and the lack of information can lead to a negative response. With a degree of trust and open discussion with passengers, there can be some tolerance towards the disruption that results from it. Even a basic understanding of the works and the reasons it is necessary can improve passengers' experience.

"These things do need to be done, it's for our safety isn't it?" Sevenoaks, leisure passenger

"They have to keep the trains running don't they? It means the train doesn't fall off the track." Lewes, leisure passenger

"I don't think people think about maintaining things, they think it's about fixing things; if they knew this, they might be more tolerant [towards the disruption]." Sevenoaks, leisure passenger

"We didn't realise they did all these things, and it makes a difference." Sevenoaks, commuter

Passenger opinion varies about how much detail they want regarding routine maintenance works. Clear descriptions of what is being done and why would be a good first step in building trust and helping passengers understand the need for routine maintenance. Passengers also said that highlighting the safety and reliability

benefits of routine maintenance in communications would resonate with some passengers.

Passengers want a clearer and more reliable website and app that they can trust to provide accurate information on engineering-related disruptions. They want to see full details of planned work across a route and the implications to passenger journeys to help them plan around it. The TfL website was highlighted as a good example, where information is consistent, clear and easy to understand.

Conclusions

Once asked to think about it, and when provided with some basic understanding, passengers recognise the importance of routine maintenance of the railway. This research shows that there is room for improvement in the communication with passengers about this type of engineering works, built on the foundations of accurate information and clear, consistent advice about what to do instead. Paying greater attention to explaining what is being done will help passengers accept the need for disruption and help improve perceptions of the railway.

Information must be accurate 12 weeks in advance and timetable changes should be flagged up to allow passengers to choose whether to travel, or help them work around the changes if they do. Passengers want a 'one stop shop' with easily-accessible, consistent information about timetable changes as a result of routine maintenance, together with details about alternatives. Many passengers do not trust that existing information channels are reliable and accurate.

Recommendations

Transport Focus makes the following recommendations in light of this research:

- **Network Rail should continue to carry out most routine maintenance overnight.** Passengers consider it most sensible to do work overnight, so current practice broadly aligns with expectations.
- **When routine maintenance disrupts the timetable, Network Rail should explain what is being done and why it is necessary.** This will help passengers understand the need for routine maintenance, something they may not otherwise think about.
- **When routine maintenance disrupts the timetable, information must be timely, accurate and prominent.** Passengers want accurate, clear and more detailed information about maintenance work, accessible through a wide

variety of channels. Information should be provided at least 12 weeks in advance so passengers can plan journeys and book tickets with confidence.

- **When alternatives to the normal timetable are provided, communication of the options should be improved.** Passengers want alternative travel options to be clearer and available at stations and online.

In addition, we signpost the existing Transport Focus recommendations in this field set out in our *Rail passengers' experience and priorities during engineering works*, October 2017 publication.

Next steps

A cross-industry delivery group has now been established to begin implementing the recommendations contained in this report. This group will consist of Network Rail and train operating companies in south east England, and will be chaired by Transport Focus.

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