

East Midlands Trains timetable change research

Transport Focus was pleased to be asked by East Midlands Trains (EMT) to explore passengers' awareness and understanding of the timetable changes to be implemented on the Midland Mainline in May 2018. Although the changes on EMT were mainly dictated by changes elsewhere on the network (Thameslink and Northern in particular) and there was no scope to alter the plans at this stage, we felt it was important that the views of passengers affected by the changes be heard – and to see that they were indeed aware that these changes were coming.

We undertook focus groups at four key locations (Sheffield, Leicester, Wellingborough and Bedford). We then distributed questionnaires to passengers aboard morning peak hour EMT trains to London and evening peak hour departures from London, as well as passengers at Wellingborough station (where, since the timetable change, peak hour passengers for Bedford are required to use a replacement coach service).

When we spoke to passengers in March, around two-thirds were already aware of the changes, albeit they did not know a great deal about them and were particularly anxious to get more detailed timetable information. In addition to EMT's posters and leaflets there had been substantial media coverage of the fact that peak hour services would not be calling at Bedford and Luton stations. Together these appear to have generated substantial 'word of mouth' activity which contributed to awareness at the southern end of the line. It may also explain relatively high mentions of the fact that the changes were 'being forced on EMT' and a sense that passengers wishes were being ignored.

Passengers mentioned that they did not understand why the changes were being made and did not understand the benefits – or even whether there were any benefits, either to themselves or to passengers elsewhere. Further to this, just 15 per cent supported the changes and just a quarter were satisfied with the information being provided.

Our initial questionnaire asked passengers for permission to contact them again after the timetable change and collected their email details to enable us to send out a link to an online questionnaire. 121 passengers (out of the original 707 we had received questionnaires from in March) responded to this short follow-up survey. It is to be expected that those negatively impacted by the timetable change will be more likely to respond to the second survey and we did receive a number of impassioned responses from passengers travelling to or from Bedford who are unhappy with the Thameslink service. There were also notable criticisms of the uneven pattern of services at various stations (including Wellingborough) and longer journey times overall. About the only positive feedback was that with trains no longer calling at Bedford and Luton, it was easier to get a seat on several services.

In the follow-up survey still only 17 per cent supported the timetable changes but 57 per cent were now satisfied with the information that had been provided. And one suspects that, in practice, a good number of those dissatisfied with the information were probably dissatisfied with the message content (for example, no EMT peak services at Bedford or irregular interval services) rather than with the way that the information had been communicated. We should also note that attitudes may well have been coloured by the ‘chaos’ on Thameslink, Great Northern and Northern at this time and the media attention this received. That said, a number of EMT passengers did express relief that their experiences had not been as bad as their colleagues’ using these other operators.

Transport Focus acknowledges EMT’s ‘courage’ in electing to assess passengers’ reactions to the May 2018 timetable changes despite this probably being ‘bad news’ for many (and especially passengers using Bedford and Luton stations). The research shows that, in the main, EMT did well in informing passengers and preparing them for the change. Timetable information might have been made available sooner, although the wider industry issues in agreeing the May 2018 timetable are well known and the bigger problem was for Bedford passengers wanting to know the Thameslink timetable rather than for EMT themselves.

There may still be opportunities to provide passengers with more information about the background to the changes and the future benefits of the Midland Mainline Upgrade. We also recommend that the industry looks to restore a peak hour service for passengers from the North to Bedford and Luton at the earliest opportunity as well as providing more regular calling patterns and reducing any lengthy gaps in the timetable wherever practicable. Passengers between Bedford and London deserve a reliable service from Thameslink and we shall continue to press for trains withdrawn in the 15 July interim timetable to be reinstated as soon as they reliably can be.

Some passengers have expressed a fear that the Bedford and Luton stops will never be reinstated or that this will not happen in 2020 as planned. For some this will be too late in any case, with a worrying 17 per cent of passengers in our follow-up survey saying they have already, or are considering, a change of job or residence because the journey has become untenable. Passengers and the industry alike will benefit from clarification of plans for the Midland Mainline, its suspended electrification programme and the services future franchisees will ultimately be expected to provide.

Guy Dangerfield
Head of Strategy