



'Encouraging edge of morning peak travel' research findings and policy considerations

October 2006

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Introduction

During week day peak travel periods (8-9 a.m.) key London rail commuter stations are suffering increasing congestion and overcrowding. This is unpleasant for passengers now and because London passenger numbers are forecast to increase the situation is expected to get worse. The long term solution to the problem - the physical remodelling of stations and track to cope with greater demand – will be costly and disruptive to the travelling public. A short-to-medium term option is to try and change the travel behaviour of peak time passengers to travel at off-peak times where spare capacity exists.

Passenger Focus commissioned a small scale qualitative research project to establish whether passengers would be willing to shift travel patterns and, if so, what would persuade them to do so.

Focus group research

A series of five focus groups were carried out with passengers recruited at Waterloo station on the basis that they currently arrived into the station between 8.00am and 9.00am and believed they could travel before or after this time if they wished. The focus groups explored:

- what would motivate passengers to change travel patterns (i.e. arrive into Waterloo before 8.00am or after 9.00am); and
- what are the key barriers to changing travel patterns

The full report from the focus groups is available on the Passenger Focus website.

Key findings of focus groups

The main findings from the focus groups were:

- some passengers in each of the focus groups felt that they could be incentivised to change their travel times
- the control that passengers had over their journeys depended on several factors the most important of which were work commitments and the distance they travelled to get to Waterloo. It was felt to be harder to persuade those with longer journeys to change their behaviour than those with shorter journeys
- passengers were more prepared to be flexible in the Spring and Summer months rather than in the Autumn and Winter
- passengers will not change their journey times if they feel that an off-peak service is going to be unreliable. This is critical. A minority expressed the view that this was likely to be the case and because there were fewer trains at off-peak times the unreliability was more of a problem especially if travelling with the intention of arriving after 9am
- security at railway stations was not a top of mind issue despite extensive media coverage. However it gained in importance as a deterrent to travelling at off-peak times as soon as it was discussed
- financial reward was also not top of mind amongst passengers in terms of the incentive they felt would be most likely to change their travel behaviour but once it was mentioned by an individual in a group it became the dominant incentive. Discounts in the region of 25%-30% were sought by passengers

- passengers wanted to feel that they were being rewarded for ‘good behaviour’ rather than penalised for ‘bad behaviour’ They resented pricing strategies that penalised peak travel and ticketing strategies that forced them into travelling at certain times. They liked the idea that the reward for off-peak travel might accrue in some way and that tickets could be flexible enough to reward them when they travelled at off-peak times and not penalise them when they didn’t. This led inevitably to a discussion about how this could be done and the importance of ticketing systems similar to the Oyster card.

Quantitative data

Passenger Focus’ wider quantitative research on fares (Passenger requirements of rail fares’ July 2006) asked commuters across GB the likelihood that they would be able to shift their travel times in order to avoid the busiest periods of the day (morning and evening peaks). They were then asked their likelihood of doing so if, by way of compensation, the cost of their travel was reduced by a). 10% and b). 20%. The results from this survey are also available on the Passenger Focus website.

These findings were corroborated to some extent by Passenger Focus’s wider quantitative research on fares. These are shown in the table below.

Potential for Shifting Travel Times

	Likelihood that would be able to travel earlier / later to avoid busiest periods	“Likelihood of travelling avoiding the busiest periods”	
		If cost of ticket reduced by 10% %	If cost of ticket reduced by 20% %
Very likely	5	10	24
Fairly likely	14	7	24
Neither	9	8	10
Fairly unlikely	32	34	12
Very unlikely	41	40	27
Base (all travel during rush hours - responding)	487	358	278

A minority of commuters who currently travel in the peak hours indicated that they were very or fairly likely to be able to travel earlier or later to avoid busy periods. Although a minority this represents nearly one in five commuters. Those expressing the highest likelihood of shifting travel times in order to receive the 20% fares discount include 16-25 year olds, those with household incomes of under £30k and those with commutes lasting in excess of an hour (presumably those with more expensive journeys).

The level of £ cost discount appears to have a significant impact on commuters likelihood of travelling at different times.

It is notable that the focus groups suggested that commuters making shorter journeys were more likely to be able to change their travel behaviour, whilst the quantitative fares research indicated that those making longer journeys were more likely to be able to change journey times. It is possible although not certain that passengers responding to the survey only gave the matter limited thought and a financial incentive could be of a high value for expensive long distance season tickets, whilst those participating in the focus groups were invited to consider barriers to changing travel behaviour and considered the often very early starts they make to their journeys in the morning.

Policy implications

The research indicates that there is support for the concept of 'early/late bird' incentive schemes as a short-term means of reducing congestion/crowding. While neither piece of research was detailed enough to draw any conclusions as to by exactly how much congestion could be alleviated, there is enough evidence to suggest that incentives should be actively considered.

Passenger Focus believes, therefore, that train companies should explore the potential for an incentive scheme, especially before considering more punitive measures to restrict demand through measures such as increasing peak fares or restricting ticket validities. Passenger Focus also believes that franchise specifications issued by DfT should also include options for such incentive schemes.

The research also has implications for the ticketing structure. The focus group findings clearly point to the need for any system to be flexible. Existing Early Bird schemes have tended to specify an arrival time (e.g. you must arrive before 07.30) with season ticket-holders travelling outside this time penalised with an excess fare. The research indicates that commuters do not want to be tied down – they want to be rewarded for those days they travel outside the peak rather than be penalised when they travel within. The idea being that passengers accrue a benefit by avoiding the peak – the more often they do so, the higher the overall benefit. This would require a relatively sophisticated ticketing system capable of recording actual journey details. It is likely, therefore, that any successful introduction of an early/late bird scheme for commuters would need to be linked with the roll-out of smart-card technology (i.e. ITSO/Oyster). This makes it crucial that the technology includes (or at least includes the option for) scope for an early/late bird scheme.

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