

Initial observations: railway engineering overruns Christmas 2014 [Update]

Passenger Focus welcomes the decision by the Office of Rail Regulation (ORR) to investigate the overrunning engineering works that affected passenger on 27 and 28 December 2014.

Passengers travelling into Kings Cross and Paddington were badly let down and we are pleased to contribute to the investigation.

What follows is our initial observation of the incidents and the way they were managed. It is not designed to pre-empt the full review but to help ensure that some of the key issues and questions from a passenger perspective are addressed as part of that investigation.

This builds on previous work published by Passenger Focus surrounding disruption, much of which focuses on the importance of providing passengers with timely and accurate information. This includes reports on previous engineering overruns¹, original research with passengers² and, earlier this year, an analysis of the industry response to a delay on Arriva Trains Wales services³.

The events

Engineering work was scheduled on the approaches to Kings Cross and Paddington stations over the Christmas Day and Boxing Day period. During Boxing Day it emerged that unexpected problems had been experienced with both pieces of work due to signalling issues at Paddington and a failure with engineering equipment at Kings Cross.

The reaction

Our research⁴ in 2010 (*Delays and Disruption – Rail Passengers Have their Say*) identified five key themes for passengers who experience unplanned disruption, which provide a passenger-centric model for assessing the delay. We will base our own subsequent investigations around these areas but we can already see some key themes emerging from the following:

- treat me with respect
- recognise my plight
- help me avoid the problem in the first place
- you got me into this, help get me out
- act joined up

¹ [ORR investigation into Network Rail's New Year Engineering Overruns](#). February 2008

² [Passenger information when trains are disrupted](#). Passenger Focus. May 2014

³ [Arriva Trains Wales - Valley Lines Disruption](#). Passenger Focus. 2014

⁴ [Delays and Disruption – Rail Passengers Have their Say](#). Passenger Focus. 2010

Kings Cross

Friday 26 December

In our initial report we referred to information first being released “early on Boxing Day (26 December).” This was based on the time displayed on the following tweet – shown as 8.52am.



We have since learnt that the time displayed in the tweet was the time in California, USA rather than the time in Great Britain⁵. This means that times shown in this and subsequent tweets have to be adjusted forward by 8 hours. This makes the time for the first tweet 4:52pm rather than 8.52am. We have also since learnt that the first public indication of disruption was placed on the East Coast website at 3pm on 26 December.

This has an impact on our initial conclusions as it significantly reduces the time available for the industry to react before the next day’s services were due to start. We have corrected timings/references in the text below to reflect this. We have, however, kept the rest of the text as was – we have since learnt more about events but this will be covered in new reports rather than retrospectively added here.

We return now to the original text.

However, having issued an alert as to the existence of the problem there then seemed to be a gap in providing any actual details, especially regarding what alternative arrangements had been made.

The following tweets illustrate the confusion and frustration experienced as passengers tried to find out whether they would be able to travel.

⁵ We understand that if a user is actually logged into twitter then GB times are displayed. If, however, the tweet websites are accessed on a computer without logging into an account then the times displayed default to a US (Californian) time zone - an eight hour difference.

mike @MikesAndRobots · 23 hrs
 @eastcoastuk any information on what is happening to trains that will be running tomorrow? Ridiculous lack of comms #KingsCrossTrains

RETWEETS 3 FAVOURITES 2 I ❤️ POTREY

10:16 am - 26 Dec 2014 · Details

The Legal Lab @TheLegalLab · 23 hrs
 @MikesAndRobots @eastcoastuk I know it's shocking. And I signed up for email alerts. Heard nothing

Steve Everett @Everett_SR · 23 hrs
 Just on @BBCNews that Kings X will be closed all day tomorrow. @eastcoastuk blaming @networkrail change at Finsbury Pk #KingsCrossTrains

RETWEET 1

GB time: 6.16pm

Bee Barker @hellobee · 21 hrs
 So so confused @eastcoastuk - do we need to travel to Finsbury Park for our train to Leeds? It's SO unclear on the website #KingsCrossTrains

Sarah Read @SC_Read · 22 hrs
 Lack of any info v frustrating @eastcoastuk Can advance tickets be deferred? Will services run north of Finsbury Park? #KingsCrossTrains

RETWEETS 2 FAVOURITES 3

11:39 am - 26 Dec 2014 · Details

GB time: 7.39pm

NRE seemed to bear the brunt of the initial twitter enquiries with East Coast twitter feeds coming on line later on Boxing Day.

East Coast Trains @eastcoastuk Follow

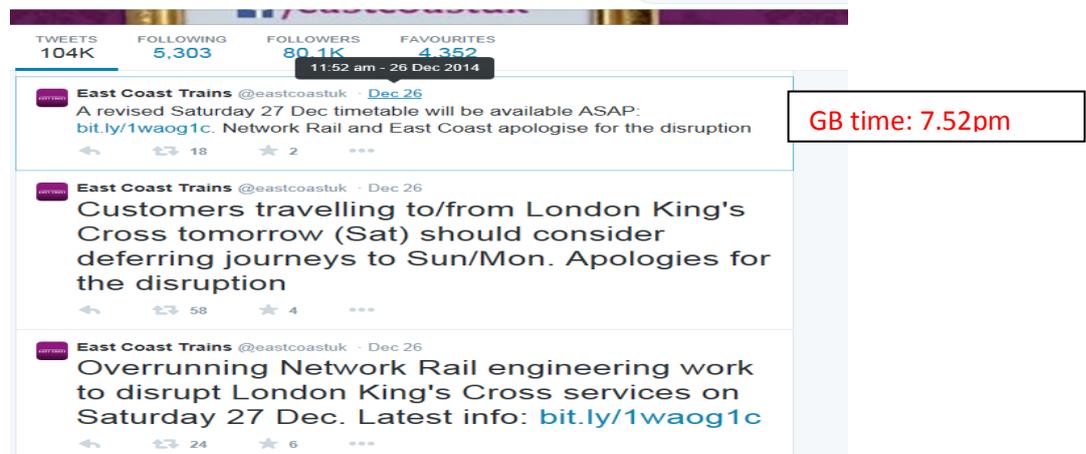
Overrunning Network Rail engineering work to disrupt London King's Cross services on Saturday 27 Dec. Latest info: bit.ly/1waog1c

RETWEETS 24 FAVOURITES 6

11:41 am - 26 Dec 2014

GB time: 7.41pm

Even then there seemed little in the way of concrete details with the core message being 'don't travel' and then 'watch this space for more information'.



This gap in providing details of the impact of the disruption continued throughout the **evening**, causing even more frustration amongst passengers.



Saturday 27 December

Much of the anger expressed by passengers on 26 December surrounds the lack of accurate information on whether services would depart from Finsbury Park and what trains would actually be running. This information did not seem to appear until 27 December when the East Coast website listed services scheduled to run to and from Finsbury Park.

It was reassuring to see that the website did have banner headlines alerting passengers to the scale of the problem and containing details of how to claim compensation for subsequent delays. Tweets also mentioned entitlement to compensation and the fact that passengers who were able to could defer travel until the Sunday or Monday.

Throughout Saturday 27 December the emphasis switched to the actual running of the trains. It quickly became clear that both the revised timetable and Finsbury Park station itself were struggling to cope with the sheer volume of demand.

The main thrust of comment at this time was the management of crowds at Finsbury Park, especially when the station was closed for a period of time due to overcrowding. There are numerous images on twitter of the queues (not reproduced here for copyright reasons and also because they were widely covered in the media).

Passengers queuing in freezing cold weather complained of a lack of information and a lack of visible staff.

Sunday 28 December

East Coast's website opened with news that the disruption had been cleared and that services were running normally.

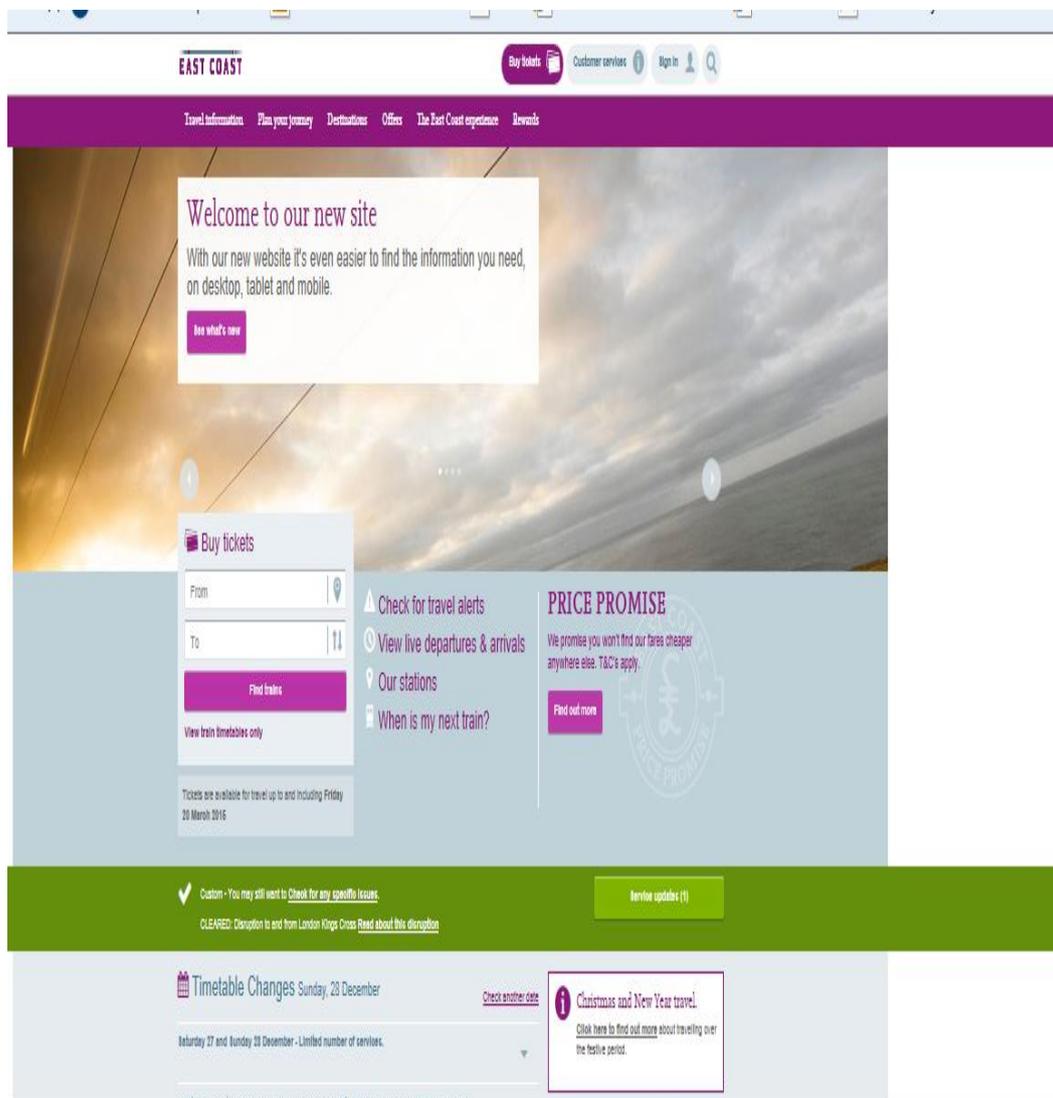
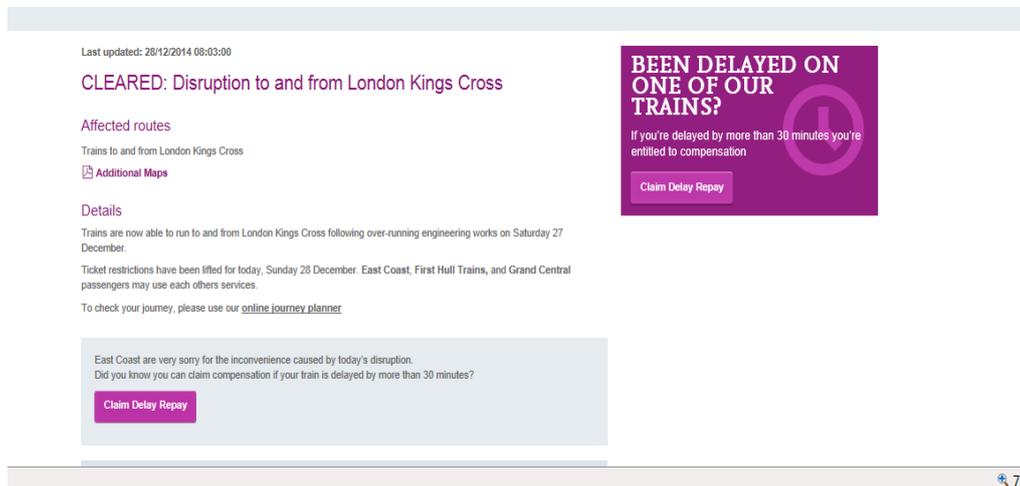


Image as of 8.40am on 28 December

It was interesting to see that, despite the scale of the previous day's disruption, there was no overt mention (or apology) on the front page other than as part of the green 'disruption cleared' message. It was only when clicking on this that there was mention of compensation.



The screenshot shows a webpage with a light blue header. Below the header, there is a section titled 'CLEARED: Disruption to and from London Kings Cross' with a sub-section 'Affected routes' listing 'Trains to and from London Kings Cross' and a link for 'Additional Maps'. A 'Details' section follows, stating that trains are now able to run to and from London Kings Cross following over-running engineering works on Saturday 27 December. It also mentions that ticket restrictions have been lifted for Sunday 28 December and that passengers can use other services. A link to an 'online journey planner' is provided. To the right of this text is a purple banner with the text 'BEEN DELAYED ON ONE OF OUR TRAINS?' and 'If you're delayed by more than 30 minutes you're entitled to compensation', with a 'Claim Delay Repay' button. Below the main text is a light blue box with an apology from East Coast and another 'Claim Delay Repay' button. The footer contains a small icon and the number '7'.

Subsequent signal failures on the line led to the disruption header being placed back on the home page.

Issues for the investigation to address

The delay between the announcement of a delay and the revised timetable/plan setting out the precise impact of the delay

- Was a contingency plan prepared – if so, why did it take so long to publicise details and, if not, why not?

The provision of customer support from East Coast

- There were complaints about the lack of information/support from East Coast customer services (both on phone and via social media). This may have been because there were no services running on Boxing Day and therefore no (or few) staff on duty. Should there be customer service support on standby at such times?

Suitability of arrangements at Finsbury Park

- The original engineering plans allowed for some services to start/end at Finsbury Park rather than Kings Cross. When the decision was made to extend the use of Finsbury Park was there any move to increase staffing provision and to introduce some form of queuing system?

Use of alternative routes

- The information published explicitly stated that East Coast tickets would not be valid on East Midland Train (EMT) services to/from St Pancras – right next door to Kings Cross. We understand from subsequent correspondence that

this was because EMT services were already expected to be very busy and that they did actually allow passengers to board and travel. Nonetheless, as presented to passengers, this did not present a picture of a joined-up railway.

Paddington

Many of the same issues/themes mentioned above are also relevant to First Great Western (FGW) services into Paddington and so have not been repeated again.

However, what stands out from the Paddington disruption is the ever-shifting estimates of the extent of the delay.

Initial information about a delay, posted on 27 December, referred to delays to the first services out of London. **[NB. Original report referred to this being posted late on Boxing Day].**

First Great Western @FGW · Dec 27
Over-running rail works mean services specifically between Paddington & Greenford are suspended until further notice.

11:59 pm - 26 Dec 2014

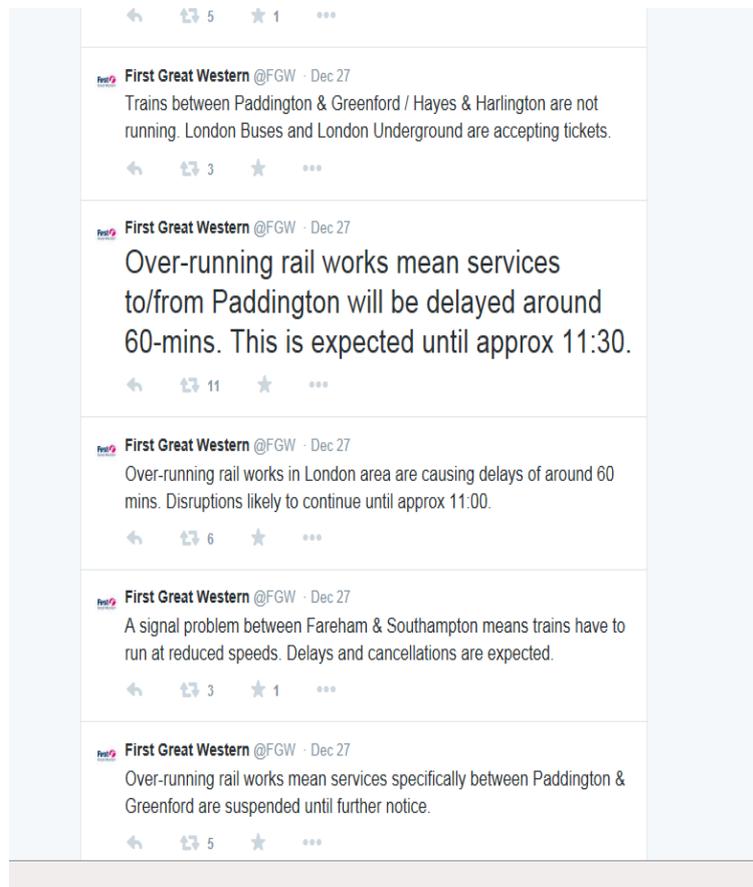
First Great Western @FGW · Dec 26
As a result of over-running rail works, the first services out of London Paddington will be subject to disruption.

GB time: 7.59am
27 December

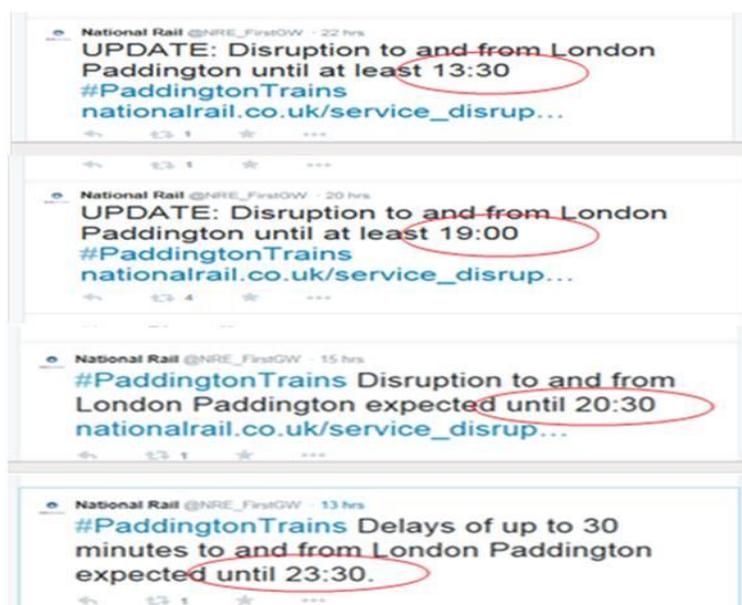
First Great Western @FGW · Dec 26
As a result of signalling issues, there are disruptions to/from services via Southampton Central - with delays & short notice cancellations.

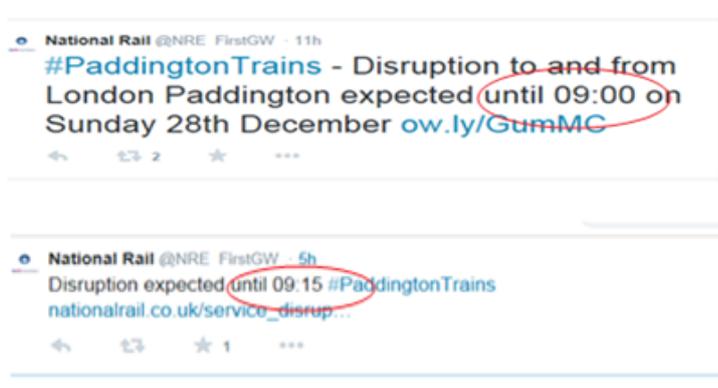
First Great Western @FGW · Dec 25
Wherever you are spending your Christmas, we hope you have a wonderful day!
Happy Christmas everyone.

Subsequent tweets on 27 December extended the estimate until 11am and then 11.30am.

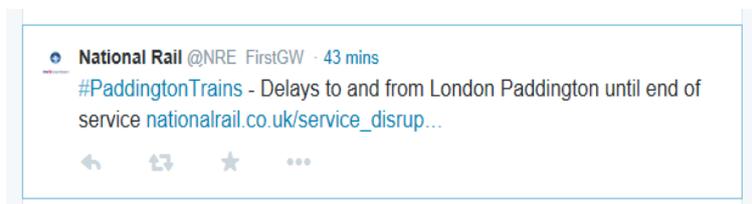


It is perhaps not surprising that the initial estimate was corrected as engineers got to the bottom of the problem. However, as can be seen from the following succession of tweets, this continued throughout the day.





This then continued early on the Sunday (28 December) - with the last message seemingly giving up with individual estimates all together



Issue for the investigation

Why did the estimated delay keep being extended?

- Passengers want information and, in some senses, any information is better than none. However, passengers rely on the information provided to rearrange plans or make alternative arrangements and the lack of consistency was particularly frustrating.

Passenger Focus will continue looking into this and looks forward to contributing to the formal investigation.