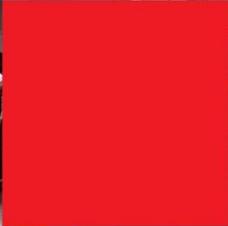
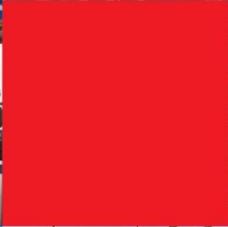


Lost property

July 2015



1. Why is lost property important?

Every year passengers lose a huge number of items. Many of those passengers never manage to locate their items, even when they are handed in. Complaints and appeals we receive on the subject are varied, seeming to indicate that there are problems at every stage of the process for managing lost property.

In reality there is not one process for managing lost property on the rail network. There is no centralised guidance about managing lost property, and each train operator devises its own system. Systems vary in quality, and their ability to repatriate lost property in a customer-friendly way. For many passengers finding property is made more difficult by the fact that each system is unique, and does not communicate with other systems.

It appeared that passengers were often getting a bad deal, and so we set out to see how the system could be improved. We did this by:

- reviewing complaints we had received from passengers
- talking to the industry
- looking at the way others manage lost property
- defining our own recommendations for a service that works for passengers.

2. Passenger Complaints

Sometimes the lost property system works well for passengers. Every year thousands of people successfully locate their lost property, and get it back. Apart from straightforward cases, we are also aware of cases where train staff have proactively looked for lost property, and returned it to the owner.

Mr S left his Kindle on the train, and only noticed after the train was about to depart. Staff contacted on-board staff who found the device and ensured it was returned to the passenger. He felt he had received great service.

In other cases, even though the passenger did not get the property back, they felt they had received a good service.

Ms J rang to report lost property, and found the process very simple. Call centre staff took down the details efficiently, and said they would search for the property. They promised to call back if they found it. They also promised to keep in contact until they did find the property. They regularly advised the passenger they had been unable to locate the property. After some time they phoned to advise they still hadn't found the property, and that they were now going to close the case if the passenger agreed.

Unfortunately not all cases have such a positive outcome. In some cases it would appear that the company is at fault. In other cases, passengers blame operators when there could be other explanations for their loss. Whether complaints arise from flaws in the process, or in recording, operators who have weaknesses in their system have an opportunity to review and improve customer service.

Some complaints refer to luggage storage systems on trains that can at times lead to the loss of property, in many cases due to theft. Although this is not strictly about lost property it does fit into the wider issues passengers face when trying to ensure the safety of their property when travelling by rail.

We have received a number of complaints about the loss of property from trains, when passengers are required to store their goods in areas where they cannot protect them. This can simply mean leaving large items in the luggage area at the end of the carriage. On crowded trains it is especially difficult to monitor the items, and regrettably some passengers report finding their property stolen.

In other instances passengers have been required to store luggage or expensive bikes in the guard's van. This area is unlocked and therefore susceptible to opportunistic thieves. Passengers report the loss to the company, but cannot prove the item was ever placed in the guards van, so they have no grounds to claim compensation.

Some passengers have asked for CCTV footage to assist with identifying the offender or demonstrating the property was stored as they had reported. Passengers state that they have failed to receive assistance in obtaining the footage.

In another case passengers were changing trains and had booked assistance. They were assisted off the train, but the assistants failed to collect all of their luggage. The luggage was never found and the elderly passengers lost property of sentimental value, as well as clothes they needed for their holiday.

If passengers are required to leave luggage in unprotected areas, such as guards vans, they should at least be given a receipt for the item. In the short term, operators should review storage systems to seek ways of improving security.

More frequently, losses occur because passengers have inadvertently left or dropped an item on a train or station. As every operator has a lost property service, reporting the loss should be easy, but this is not necessarily so.

Ms T lost her hat on the train and wrote to the operator. Two weeks later she got a reply advising that it didn't handle lost property. The service was outsourced and she was advised to contact that company. She did so by email but received no reply. She phoned on numerous occasions using the customer service number, but got no response. Having received this complaint, staff from Transport Focus tested the agent's customer service number. Calling at all times of the day and in the evening they were unable to obtain a response. The line rang for three minutes and then cut them off. Staff also found out that the agent did not reply to emails unless the lost item was found.

Another passenger also reported being unable to get a reply to phone calls made to the same lost property office at a large London station.

Some passengers have raised issues about the way goods are stored when they are handed in. This sometimes relates to the way items are dealt with before they reach the lost property office.

Ms D left her fleece on the train. A member of station staff recalled it being handed in due to the fact it had a distinctive logo. However, the property was not in the lost property office.

In this case it is possible that the member of staff was mistaken. However, because property is not routinely registered when found by train or station staff, it is possible for items to be lost in transit to the lost property centre where it is registered. Items can easily be placed in a 'safe place' to be taken or sent to the lost property office at a later date. These items are easily forgotten, and can even be thrown out if they are not identified as lost property.

Ms L accidentally left her iPod on the train. When she got on the next train she advised the conductor who contacted the conductor on the previous train. She was advised the item had been found, and that it would be sent to a certain lost property office. When she went to the lost property office she was told that the item was not there and no record could be found to support her account. No responsibility was accepted by the operator.

Once again the ability to register a lost item as soon as it comes into the possession of the operator would avoid these situations.

Once an item has arrived at the lost property office passengers sometimes report encountering problems. For example, passengers sometimes complain that goods are missing when they get luggage returned.

Ms B inadvertently left her luggage on the train. She reported it to station staff who sprung into action and her luggage was found and returned to her just five hours later. Unfortunately the presents and Prosecco that had been in the luggage were missing.

When such incidents occur passengers often assume rail staff have removed goods. Frequently goods have been stolen before the luggage is found, or perishable goods have been removed by rail staff for hygiene purposes. Occasionally rail staff may store valuable property, such as money found in wallets, separately from luggage for safe keeping. Better recording by the operator about the condition of luggage, and the contents at the time it comes into an operator's possession, would avoid passengers feeling suspicious about the way rail staff have dealt with their property. It would also ensure on the rare occasions where rail staff have improperly tampered with items that, the matter is easily detected.

At times when a passenger has made a lengthy journey, recovering lost property can be challenging. They may have used several train operators' services, and changed at stations run by different companies. Frequently passengers do not even know which operator runs the services they have used.

Mrs G was traveling to see her grandchildren with a suitcase containing presents and her best clothes. The suitcase went missing while she was on the train. Her son-in-law phoned and visited various companies and lost property offices but staff knew nothing and he reports some were unhelpful. Later she received a letter advising her that her luggage had been found and advising it could be obtained at a specific station. The passenger has considerable difficulty in travelling and so she rang to confirm the luggage was still there before making the journey. She was assured the goods were waiting, however, when she arrived she found they had been destroyed as per the operator's terms of holding.

Ms J is disabled and she booked assistance for her journey. After several changes she discovered one of her cases was missing. She was given a number to ring. The owner of the guest house where she was staying rang the number for her and the case was located. As the passenger was unable to go to the station to collect the item she had to pay a courier £70 to collect the case for her.

These cases illustrate a number of challenges related to the lost property system. Firstly, with no centralised database, locating goods can be challenging. Secondly, there is an issue around storage. The found item may be stored far away from the passenger's home or destination. Transportation of heavy items can be costly, while picking them up in person can be costly in terms of fares and time. Finally passengers are frequently unfamiliar with the terms and conditions under which their goods are held.

These cases demonstrate some of the points in the management of lost property where better customer service could be given.

3. The industry's perspective

The attention paid to the matter of lost property varies across the industry. Some operators have focused resources on improving services, and some do well. Others are in the process of reviewing systems, while some have not yet fully embraced the issue. All of the operators face the same challenges. These challenges include:

- An extensive rail network covering a wide geographical area which can lead to property being found and registered long distances from the location of the owner. Physical repatriation of large items across distances without high costs may be challenging.
- Property may be found across thousands of stations and trains, by company staff, agency staff and members of the public, and has to be moved to a lost property centre.
- There are large quantities of lost property to be collected and stored.

- Registration systems may be dated.
- Each operator's system sits in a silo, and is unable to check other operators' systems for property that has been reported lost.

This list is indicative of the issues faced by operators. However, there are further issues. It is hard to test how successful the system is in repatriating property to passengers. The reason for this is some passengers cannot find and collect their items, whilst others may not wish to locate and collect their items. In the latter case the reason may be inertia, or even a desire to claim insurance money and purchase new items.

It is not possible to quantify how much unclaimed property falls into the latter category. However, it is self-evident that a centralised database would help resolve both issues. Everyone we have spoken to in the industry to date supports the idea of a centralised database.

A centralised database would assist passengers in searching all operator records from one access point. Such a database would also allow operators to develop a system of rapid registration of found items.

Currently many items that are lost are incorrectly categorised as stolen. This potentially distorts crime figures and leads to deployment of resources to resolve an issue which does not really exist.

If all operators recorded the serial numbers on electronic items, and this information was passed to British Transport Police (BTP), then repatriation could be increased. While this is possible under current systems, it isn't standard practice across the industry. Arguably the process of communication with BTP would be facilitated by a centralised database, and by standardised reporting and recording processes.

4. Recommendations

Having considered all of the issues we are able to identify core stages of the process of lost property management. We have highlighted these stages and made suggestions which we believe should be included in any franchise specification.

Beyond that we are pressing all train operators to review their current processes and to incorporate our proposals when planning new systems. We are urging the Association of Train Operating Companies (ATOC) to facilitate the development of a centralised database for use by all operators.

The key factors in developing a positive passenger focused system are as follows:

- Register and track an item of lost property from the point it comes into their possession and allow it to be open to enquiry within 24 hours.

- Provide secure storage from the point an item is handed in at the station until its arrival at the location where it will be held securely.
- Register the item with an accurate description including any distinguishing marks, brands or serial numbers.
- Make it simple for the passenger to try and locate items. A minimum of a phone number and an online service should be provided, and a reasonable response time advertised and adhered to.
- Include rechecking of the register on a regular basis and inform the passenger promptly by their preferred method of contact if their item is located.

Transport Focus also recommends that operators do the following:

- ensure any charges to reunite the passenger with their item are capped at a reasonable level
- actively seek to increase the number of items repatriated to their owner
- define a process for dealing with 'live incidents' in which a passenger reports that they have left an item on a train that is about to depart
- demonstrate how the system can facilitate work with British Transport Police to identify any items held by the operator that have been reported as stolen
- demonstrate how the system will be monitored and measured within their business to ensure it is effective in meeting the above objectives
- actively work towards the establishment of a national lost property system, and, if established, participate in the scheme.

There is a real opportunity for operators to join together and provide passengers with a streamlined and improved system for being reunited with lost property. It offers the advantages of reducing the reporting of 'phantom thefts' on the rail network and will increase passenger confidence in travelling by train.

There may also be opportunities for operators to rationalise the cost of processing and storing lost property. All of these factors are positive for passengers, the taxpayer and operators. While we welcome the initiatives already taken by the industry, we will continue to press for further action in this important area.

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