

Memorandum to the Transport Committee

Winter resilience in transport

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Passenger Focus is the official, independent consumer watchdog representing the interests of rail users throughout Great Britain and bus, coach and tram users across England, outside London.
- 1.2 Passenger Focus welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to the Transport Committee's Inquiry into winter resilience in transport.

2. Service disruption: rail passengers' attitudes and priorities

- 2.1 Analysis of the National Passenger Survey (NPS) shows that by far the greatest 'driver' of passengers' overall satisfaction with a rail journey is whether the train is punctual. At 42% it dwarfs all other factors. The largest 'driver' of overall dissatisfaction, however, is how well a train company deals with delays – 51%.¹ This gives a good indication of passengers' requirements during bouts of severe weather, which can be summarised as:

- Minimise disruption in the first place
- Manage it effectively if it happens

Minimising disruption in the first place

- 2.2 In recent years there have been a number of initiatives to ensure that the railway is less susceptible to snow and ice than it has been in the past, some led by train operators and some by Network Rail. For example, modifications to prevent snow damaging electric traction motors and heating the third rail at key locations to prevent icing.
- 2.3 It is impossible for Passenger Focus to judge whether what has been delivered so far is sufficient. However, it is worth noting that train performance (as measured by the Public Performance Measure) in winter 2012/13 was worse than 2011/12 – although factors other than the weather may have been involved. We therefore support the Office of Rail Regulation's requirement for robust weather resilience proposals in Network Rail's Control Period 5 (2014-19) Delivery Plan.

¹ Passenger Focus multivariate analysis of National Passenger Survey, Spring 2013

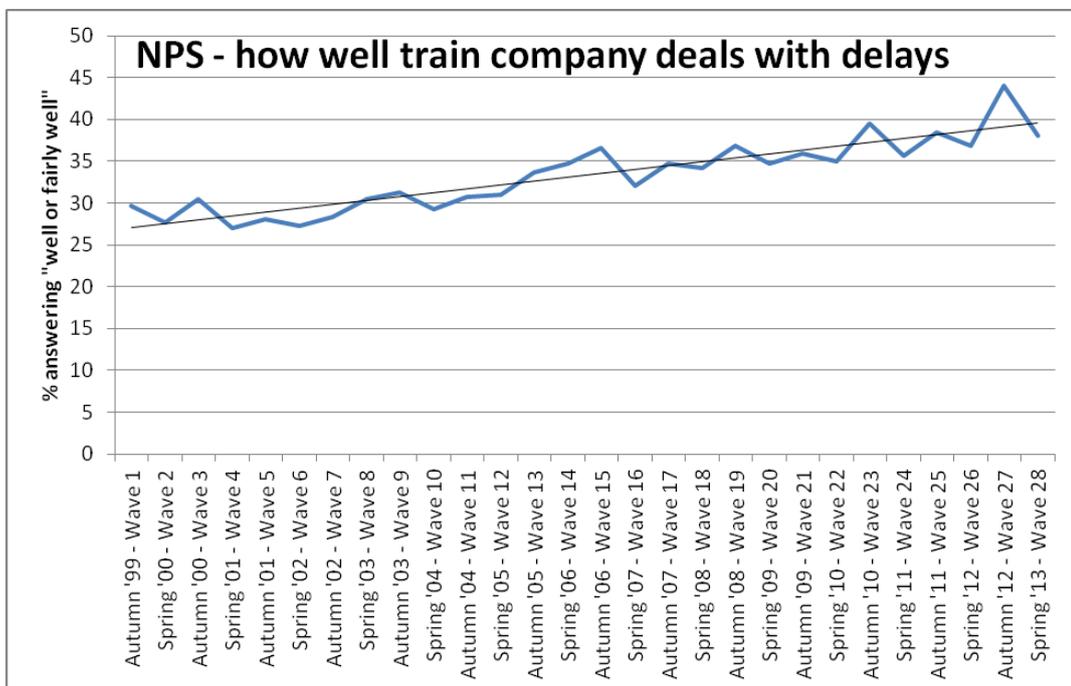
	Period 8 (mid Oct to mid Nov)	Period 9 (mid Nov to early Dec)	Period 10 (early Dec to early Jan)	Period 11 (early Jan to early Feb)	Period 12 (February)
2011/12	89.3	88.4	88.8	91.4	91.6
2012/13	88.9	85.4	88.3	87.3	91.0

Source: Office of Rail Regulation online data portal

- 2.4 In terms of what more should be done, it would perhaps be helpful if, route by route, Network Rail and train companies were explicit about what further measures they *could* take to make the railway more resilient to severe weather (i.e. over and above those already in-hand and required to achieve Control Period 5 2014-2019 punctuality targets). Then the industry, stakeholders and government could consider what further improvements would represent value for money. A similar approach could be used to identify what more could be done to improve resilience to flooding, high winds, lightning strikes and exceptionally high temperatures.

Effective handling of disruption when it does happen

- 2.5 The NPS question which tracks opinion in this area asks passengers to rate the handling of delay. The long-term trend shows improvement, albeit modest and starting from a low base. The proportion of passengers saying that their delay was handed “well” was 38% in the Spring 2013 NPS.



Source: National Passenger Survey, 1999-2013

- 2.6 Passenger Focus research² suggests that various factors contribute to how passengers rate the handling of disruption, including:
- Their need for accurate, timely, consistent and useful information
 - Their desire that train companies show greater empathy and provide more practical help (passengers say “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; and act joined up”)
 - The need for greater focus on the welfare of passengers caught up in disruption, including when passengers are stranded on trains or at stations
- 2.7 Information at times of disruption is heading slowly in the right direction. Many more train companies now have ‘rainbow boards’ on their websites giving ‘at a glance’ status of the service; passengers following most train companies on Twitter receive markedly better information than in the past³; and it is now possible for pre-prepared ‘snow timetables’ to show through electronic journey planners the evening before. However, we continue to see inaccuracies, inconsistencies and ambiguities at times of disruption, whether the cause is winter weather or not. A remaining weakness is the inability to give an accurate estimate of how long a disruption will last, even some hours into an incident, let alone an indication of how long knock-on delays will continue to affect journeys.
- 2.8 **Information.** After observations over winter 2012/13, Passenger Focus highlighted – via the rail industry’s National Taskforce – four areas of continuing weakness in information provision during disruption:
- The difficulties train companies have in processing alterations to individual trains in a timely way (leading to inaccuracies and inconsistencies in the information passengers see online, through Apps etc.)
 - That train companies remain weak at giving a clear, meaningful and frequently-refreshed contextual overview of the state of their network at times of disruption
 - Parts of the industry continue to have a blind spot about giving an indication, broad or precise, about tomorrow’s service before passengers go to bed (for example, when severe weather has caused major delays on a Tuesday, making it clear that evening what passengers can expect on Wednesday morning)
 - Many train companies do not appear to be browsing their own and the National Rail Enquiries website during disruption to check it all makes sense and correct it as necessary

² [Information: rail passengers’ needs during unplanned disruption](#) (September 2011)
[Rail passengers’ experiences during the snow](#) (March 2011)

³ [Delays and disruption Rail passengers have their say](#) (December 2010)
[Short and Tweet: how passengers want social media during disruption](#) (June 2012)

- 2.9 **Empathy and practical action.** The tendency of train companies to sometimes give the impression that they do not “treat me with respect [as a paying customer]” is a particular problem at times of service disruption, whether caused by winter weather or anything else. Passengers also get the impression that the rail industry can be slow with practical action to minimise their inconvenience. Passenger Focus continues to highlight specific areas that contribute to these impressions, including:
- That few, if any, train companies or independent ticket retailers routinely alert passengers with tickets booked on specific trains that are cancelled. This has both an emotional and a practical impact. The emotional is that some passengers conclude “you knew you’d cancelled it, you knew I was booked on it, you’ve got my email address, but you couldn’t be bothered to tell me!” The practical impact is that it denies passengers the opportunity to reorganise their arrangements, perhaps to leave earlier to ensure arrival at the original time.
 - That aspects of the National Rail Conditions of Carriage and terms and conditions applying to Advance tickets do not adequately protect passengers faced with uncertainty about making a journey at times of disruption, in particular during severe winter weather. Passengers who have already bought tickets – including those that are normally non-refundable – have no automatic right to avoid the risk of becoming stranded. The ticketing rules make passengers decide to ‘risk it’ or defer their journey and rely on the reasonableness of the train operator to refund them after the event.
 - The frequency with which trains stop unexpectedly between stations and it takes longer than two minutes for a member of staff to acknowledge the fact, despite “within two minutes” having been recommended good practice for many years. Research suggests that making such an announcement within two minutes sends an important message to passengers: “someone in authority knows we’ve stopped, and they cared enough to acknowledge it”.
- 2.10 **Welfare of passengers.** Occasionally, the way disruption is handled gets close to the line between poor customer service and failure to safeguard the welfare of passengers. Incidents at Kings Cross on 19 February (200 passengers forced to ‘sleep’ overnight on a train in the station⁴); at Virginia Water on 9 May (passengers arrived home around midnight having left Waterloo at 1720 after a tree fell across the railway); and at Pewsey on 4 August (Penzance to Paddington train stuck for 5 hours). Incident reviews often find a culture of “don’t worry, this problem will sort itself out in half an hour”, with no parallel “but what about the passengers if it doesn’t?” Since the Kings Cross incident, Passenger Focus has written to all train companies about late-night service disruption, and most have replied that their arrangements would have prevented a similar incident. Nevertheless, incidents keep happening which, if they had coincided with extreme winter weather (or extreme heat), could have led to serious passenger welfare issues.

⁴ [Passenger Focus letters to the Office of Rail Regulation and Department for Transport regarding East Coast disruption on 19 February 2013](#)

- 2.11 **Information needs – extreme weather.** Passengers' information requirements during disruption caused by winter weather are largely the same as during any other disruption. However, when snow has fallen passengers have an extra requirement – because they have reason to suspect that trains *may* be affected. Train companies still have more to do to help passengers answer the initial “can I get there?” question when they open their curtains to snow, or hear about it on the radio. This is as much about reassurance that all is *well* as it is about warning of disruption. For commuters, the question “and will I get home again?” will also be in their mind.
- 2.12 **‘snow timetables’ – commuter networks.** Passenger Focus is in principle persuaded by the argument that, faced with a horrendous weather forecast it is in passengers' interests if commuter train companies run a timetable they are confident can be delivered despite the weather. Attempting to deliver the impossible and failing spectacularly does not help anybody. With effective communications it should be possible for train companies to get the message to commuters that a ‘snow timetable’ will run tomorrow, with full details of what that means made available quickly. However, ‘snow timetables’ must still meet the needs of passengers – in terms of continuing to run trains from all stations wherever possible and providing enough coaches that passengers do not get left behind. Passenger Focus felt that South West Trains did not quite get this right when they implemented a ‘snow timetable’ in January 2013 and they have undertaken to review arrangements for the coming winter. There is always the potential that the forecast snow does not materialise and passengers conclude that the train company has reduced the service unnecessarily. To reduce that risk, the time by which it must be decided whether to run a ‘snow timetable’ the next day should be as late as possible, while still allowing the revised times to show in journey planning systems that evening. The industry should also enhance its capability to restore the normal timetable, or elements of it, if it becomes clear the ‘snow timetable’ is not needed.
- 2.13 **‘snow timetables’ – long-distance operators.** In contrast, Passenger Focus supports the position taken by some long-distance operators, e.g. CrossCountry and Virgin Trains, that the full timetable should be maintained wherever possible. Infrequent, long-distance passengers are more difficult to warn that a different timetable will be in operation, and retiming the 11:00 to 11:08, for example, would cause considerable confusion – not least to those whose ticket is for the 11:00 and no other train. Re-writing the timetable with fewer trains taking longer than normal also risks the (reasonable) accusation that it has been done not in passengers' interests, but purely to boost punctuality statistics.

3. **Bus passengers' attitudes and priorities**

3. 1 While bus passengers would clearly rather there is no disruption in the first place, they recognise that bus services will inevitably be impacted when significant snow

and/or ice affects the road network. Nevertheless, bus passengers do expect that reasonable steps will be taken to ensure that buses continue to run, and as reliably as possible, wherever it is safe to do so. Whether pressure on local authority 2013/14 budgets will reduce the priority attached to gritting principal bus routes/ access to bus garages this winter remains to be seen.

3. 3 Passenger Focus published research earlier in 2013 looking at bus passengers' experiences of delays and service disruption⁵. Although covering experiences of delays resulting from many different causes, i.e. not just severe winter weather, a number of the findings and recommendations are relevant to this Inquiry. The research found that improvements in two key areas would change passengers' experiences during disruption – information and driver attitude. Passengers spoke about feeling 'powerless' standing at a bus stop not knowing if a bus will come – as one research respondent put it "it's mental torture sometimes at bus stops working out whether to stay or whether to go". Passengers also said they wanted bus drivers to behave more as the bus company's customer service representative, providing information, showing empathy and expressing regret.
3. 4 Passenger Focus's recommendations in the light of this research include:
- Real-time information. That it should be a specific Government objective to establish real-time information systems in all parts of the country – that is, the 'back of house' infrastructure to gather vehicle location information that can be presented in real-time to passengers through a variety of media. It should not be a postcode lottery whether or not your local authority believes real-time information is important.
 - Information at the bus stop. That one of the uses for such systems should be to provide physical real-time information displays at more bus stop than currently have it. Passenger Focus is not suggesting that every stop could ever have a physical display, but that local authorities and bus operators should be wary of assuming that Apps will make them unnecessary any time soon. Even when pressed to consider the costs of physical displays, passengers were clear that the ability to walk up to a bus stop, glance up and see what is going on is what they really want – for some, in addition to having the information via their phone.
 - Information on your smartphone. That where reliable real-time information does exist, efforts should be made to raise passengers' awareness of the fact. Notwithstanding the strong preference for real-time displays at bus stops, many passengers could already benefit from live information via Apps – but do not appear to know that it is possible or how to do it.
 - Experience on the bus. That the bus industry should take further steps to foster a customer service culture among drivers, for which the shorthand "recruit for attitude, train to drive" is sometimes used. The ability of a bus driver to show

⁵ [Bus passengers' experience of delays and disruption](#) (April 2013)

genuine regret and empathy towards a passenger who has been waiting in the snow for 30 minutes is important. It may be that neither the bus company nor the driver were in any way responsible for the delay, but many passengers feel that bus companies don't care enough about them during disruption.

3. 5 If there is disruption to bus services caused by severe winter weather, good information is key to minimising the impact on passengers. Information that allows passengers to make an informed decision – be it to set out earlier, not attempt to travel, find a different way to get there – should be a key objective for bus companies and/or local authorities. Providing assurance that buses *are* running, if potentially with delays, is important as well: when it has snowed passengers have reason to doubt it.

4. Conclusions

- 4.1 Rail. The NPS shows that for rail passengers the way disruption is managed is moving slowly in the right direction, but there remains a considerable way to go. It is important to ask what more could be done to improve the railway's resilience to snow and ice. When disruption occurs information that allows passengers to make an informed choice about what they do is vital. During winter 2012/13 passenger information was better, but it was far from perfect and this paper mentions a number of areas in which further improvement is needed.
- 4.2 Bus. When bus services are disrupted, for any reason, passengers' key requirement is for information about what is going on – and yet many feel there is no effective means to find that out. How would a passenger working in their office find out that a bus company had decided it would suspend operations at 16:00 because heavy snow is forecast? In some cases it is true: without a system tracking the location of buses in real-time, there is no means to find out exactly what is happening – but in others Apps exist, but few passengers appear to know about them. A quick win for the bus industry would be to raise awareness about Apps and other sources of information where reliable real-time systems are in place.
- 4.3 How public transport operators manage service disruption, including that caused by severe winter weather remains an important area of work for Passenger Focus. If snow and ice causes disruption this winter we will monitor how well train and bus companies cope, including in the vital area of passenger information.

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