

Open Data Consultation
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Dear Sir/Madam

Making Open Data Real: A Public Consultation

Passenger Focus welcomes the opportunity to respond to the open data consultation. We are the independent watchdog for Britain's rail passengers and, since April 2010, have also had responsibility for representing the interests of bus and tram passengers outside London and coach passengers on scheduled domestic services. Our response to this consultation reflects the particular perspective from which we operate and the needs and aspirations of the specific groups we represent.

Why transparent and open data matters to passengers

The fundamental issue for passengers stems from the fact that information enables choice and facilitates decisions about travel options. For some, the existence of adequate and timely information can be a pre-requisite to using public transport services at all. Open data is also an important lever for empowering consumers (many of whom are paying significant sums of money for their purchases), ensuring the accountability of service providers and driving up standards.

Passenger appetite for improved availability and disaggregation of information has been an increasingly significant theme across many areas of our work. It is entirely understandable that passengers, who generally travel on particular routes, and often on specific services, rather than across entire networks, will want data germane to them rather than at such a high level that it is irrelevant to their own experiences and needs. These legitimate interests underpin Passenger Focus support for the Government's policy of making more information available on industries that are publically funded. Passenger Focus fully recognises the importance of this growing agenda and has consequently designated 'Transparency' as a national work-stream for 2011-12.

Findings from passenger research

Passenger Focus, with the Office of Rail Regulation (ORR), undertook research to acquire a deeper understanding of passengers' and others views on the issue of increasing the extent of the information available about the rail industry's performance¹.

The findings indicated that passengers considered there was a role for increased information. They saw the benefit chiefly coming by virtue of its existence and availability, believing that this

¹ Putting rail information in the public domain, Passenger Focus and Office of Rail Regulation, May 2011



would increase the transparency of the rail industry and lead to improvements through the industry being under greater scrutiny. The role of scrutiny and challenge was generally seen as one for appropriate representative bodies empowered, and with the experience, to take the passenger agenda forward to make operators more publically accountable.

Passengers wanted information broken down to accurately show and reflect their experiences of their own train travel. The overall averages of train operators' performance were seen to mask highs and lows across services, times of day and different points along the route. Passengers recognised that for information to be useful and provide potential to drive change data would need to be available at route-level and with localised details.

A range of measures were felt to capture passenger experience. These included: punctuality and reliability, investment, comfort, fares, staff, station facilities and journey time. Passengers felt that this should be updated at least every three to six months and provided by a 'trusted source'. Simplicity in the presentation of information was also seen to be key.

The importance of applying open data principles to public transport providers

Public transport provision is an essential component of the effective economic, social and environmental functioning of the country. Access to and information about transport services is required by, quite literally, millions of people each day and even greater numbers on a weekly, monthly or occasional basis.

Whilst we recognise that some rail operators pay premiums during at least part of the life of their franchise and are private companies; they are contracted and entrusted to provide important services which operate on the publically funded infrastructure provided by Network Rail.

Bus operators, too, provide essential services operating on our public road network. Some of these are commissioned by local authorities but all are necessary for connecting people to work, home and leisure destinations.

The significance of public transport services is such that there should be an expectation that the principles and requirements of open data should be applied to all involved in their provision.

Enshrining open data requirements within industry strategies and contracts

A wealth of data is already collected by the rail industry in the course of operation. Much of this could easily be made accessible, whether in raw format (for personal interrogation or translation via application developers) or more formally published.

The rail industry has already acknowledged passengers' legitimate interests in a range of data areas. Some of the more progressive operators are already taking steps towards publishing a wider spectrum of data and making this available at a disaggregated level. However, to achieve the full benefits of the open data agenda and to ensure that relevant information is provided across the board, Passenger Focus advocates that, alongside other measures, franchise contracts and the metrics for Control Period 5/Periodic Review 13 are specifically used to embed open data principles and requirements within the frameworks governing the rail industry.

Availability of bus information

The bus industry lags behind the rail sector in terms of available information yet passenger needs will be comparable. The key issue is the lack of useful, service based punctuality data.



Transport for London (TfL) delivers this in London but elsewhere it is virtually non-existent. Passenger Focus advocates the extension of open data principles to this sector and would be an active contributor to discussions about how this can best be achieved. With public subsidy and fare payers contributing significant sums to the industry it is right that tax payers and fare payers get access to useful punctuality and reliability info.

In conclusion, Passenger Focus welcomes the steps the Government is taking towards a presumption of open data across many sectors and supports the presumption in favour of release of information. We look forward to making our contribution to the next steps in the open data strategy.

Yours sincerely

Mike Hewitson

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Head of Passenger Issues