

Independent national passenger watchdog

Passenger Voice

Rail, bus, coach and tram



Autumn 2011

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Anthony's Editorial: Value for money?



No one could disagree with the aim of the recent Government-sponsored review into value for money on the railway – lowering the

costs of the industry should benefit both taxpayers and passengers. However, in tackling this problem it is crucial to avoid choking off the very passenger demand that is driving the current railway boom. The suggestions for a high peak price within the peak and a move to a more book ahead long-distance railway could cause widespread resentment and ignores the great power of frequency in attracting passengers. But for many passengers frequency

needs to be matched by flexible tickets – that's how passengers want to use the railway, so why not encourage it? Passenger Focus will be playing a active part in the Government's welcome fares review – putting passengers at the heart of the industry must be way the forward. This was never more true as the first of three years of inflation plus three per cent fare rises kick in. It's going to be a bleak midwinter for some passengers.

Coaching?

Reported in more detail below is our first piece of coach passenger research – by and large very positive. Coach travel is a bit of a secret, but can offer great value for money for passengers and Government. It seems a pity that more attention is not given to coach filling some of the gaps between railway lines.

Coach passengers report high satisfaction

Coach passengers report high levels of satisfaction according to recent research undertaken by Passenger Focus. The research was designed to get a better understanding of coach passengers' needs and experiences, how complaints were handled and identify improvements which could be made.

The findings were very positive; many passengers were happy using coaches and would continue to use them in the future. The cost of travel was low and there were benefits such as comfortable guaranteed seating, and a stress-free journey. This made passengers feel they received excellent value for money. There is a good opportunity here to promote coach travel and encourage others to discover its benefits.

Rail ticket websites need work

Online retailing is fast becoming the default channel for buying train tickets for longer journeys. Passenger Focus recently published research into how easy passengers find it.

Key conclusions are that train companies and other online retailers need to do more to help passengers avoid paying more than they need to. For example, making clear the price and validity implications of selecting 'flexible' or 'open' return.

Passenger Focus has recommended that websites should prevent passengers buying train-specific tickets for trains where cheaper tickets are valid. Other recommendations include that websites provide easy access to details of a particular ticket validity, and to clear details of the routes you can use with a ticket marked 'route any permitted'. The report also recommended changing terminology to remove confusion and improve functionality – for example making it immediately clear that a 'child' is aged five to 15 years.



London Midland praised for social media

Passenger Focus sponsors the 'putting passengers first' award at the National Rail Awards and this year's winner was London Midland for their twitter feed, giving passengers information when services are disrupted.

Passenger contacts

The passenger team at Passenger Focus handles around 18,000 passenger contacts per year, including 2,500 escalated rail complaints (appeals).

A Passenger Focus 'appeal' case:

A group of six passengers were travelling between Edinburgh and Newcastle. On the journey they could not find their tickets and were issued with an Unpaid Fares Notice which cost £195.00 per adult and £97.50 for a child in the group. The next day the lead passenger found the tickets

and asked the company to reconsider the demand. The passenger's appeal was declined and as additional costs had been incurred in the process the total increased to £1,282.50 which the passenger reluctantly paid.

The passenger referred the case to Passenger Focus who, following representation on the passenger's behalf, secured a refund of nearly £1,100 from the company involved. The passenger was delighted with the service and assistance offered by Passenger Focus.

South West Trains put in place new measure to deal with unplanned disruption

Passenger Focus has welcomed South West Trains' announcement of new measures to improve their response to disruption on the rail network.

This follows a review of the cable theft incident between Farnborough and Woking, in June this year, which resulted in severe disruption for around 80,000 rail passengers.

Getting buses moving

A new Passenger Focus project designed to help improve bus punctuality is now underway. Working closely with the bus industry, the local authority sector and central government, the Bus Punctuality Project aims to strengthen our collective understanding of what holds buses up and what can be done to make them more reliable. We are looking to establish pilot schemes covering about 20 bus routes in five local areas, and will seek to draw up detailed action plans to address problems that emerge from an analysis of performance data. We have written to all councils inviting participation. Regional seminars will be organised next summer to discuss our initial findings.



Rail Utilisation Strategies update

Passenger Focus has conducted specific regional research on passenger satisfaction. This has fed into two Department for Transport consultations - West Coast Main Line Refranchise and the West Midlands and Chiltern Route Utilisation Strategy.

Passenger Focus response to 'Initial Industry Plans'

Passenger Focus has welcomed the publication of the first all rail industry 'Initial Industry Plans' – the first step in working out what governments might buy and passengers might expect from 2014 to 2019.

Anthony Smith, Passenger Focus chief executive, said: "Passengers want value for money fares and a reliable, frequent service with a good chance of getting a seat. An industry plan is welcome, but what passengers will want to be clear about is what is the passenger plan? What does this all mean for train performance, the ability to get a seat and fares? Passenger Focus will read this plan carefully and respond on behalf of passengers, based on the extensive research we undertake."

Passenger Focus said that any attempt to cut rail industry costs should keep the focus on improving passenger satisfaction and keeping the pressure off future fare rises. Simply reducing visible staff or cutting train lengths will save money, but will put off future passengers – the costs reductions must be genuine efficiency. Anthony Smith, Passenger Focus chief executive, continued: "Us passengers are already doing our bit. Some of the highest rail fares in Europe, inflation-busting rises for the next three years and passengers already investing over six and a half billion pounds into the railways every year. Now it is over to the rail industry and Government. Passengers cannot keep subsidising industry inefficiency."

The plan is detailed. While any plan must start with high-level aims many passengers will be wondering what this means for their train, their service, their route. Greater breakdowns of investment, performance improvements and train performance data will all help passengers understand what this might mean for them.

Watchdog warns of up to 13% fare rises in 2012

Rail passengers will face the first of three years of inflation-busting fare rises in January 2012. The RPI figure released in July 2011, confirms that the new formula for Government-capped fares will mean an average rise of 8%*. However, train companies can set fares on individual routes by up to an extra 5%**.

David Sidebottom, Passenger Focus director, said: "Having some fares regulated is clearly in passengers' interests. However, the way that train companies are allowed to set fares on individual routes is deeply unfair. Some passengers, who may have seen no investment or improvements, can get hit year after year. Passenger Focus will forcefully advocate change to this system in the Government's forthcoming fares review."

*most regulated fares in England will rise by RPI+3% in January, Scottish fares remain at RPI + 1%.
**if the train company puts up a particular fare by up to 5% it must balance this by reductions on others.

Rural buses and spending cuts

One in five people in England lives in rural areas and public transport is important to their quality of life. Many rural bus services are local authority-supported and as a consequence of financial pressure, seen as increasingly expendable. Passenger Focus has researched two such services to explore the role they play in the local community. It showed:

- around half wouldn't have been able to make that journey if those services were unavailable;
- the option to drive/get a lift was impossible/very inconvenient for around a third; and
- a minority believed those councils would not listen much if they wanted changes to services.

Passenger Focus will use the findings to ensure these voices are heard as decisions on cuts continue to made.

- passengers rely on these services to get about;



Coming soon: Bus Passenger Survey – Autumn 2011

Passenger Focus will be conducting the next survey across 23 English transport authority areas, whose bus journeys represent almost 70% of those made in England (outside London). The survey measures passenger opinion on the bus journey just made, together with attitudes towards bus use in general. Research is underway and the results will be released Spring 2012.



Euston station

Passenger Focus has worked in partnership with London Midland, London Overground, Network Rail and Virgin Trains to understand passenger satisfaction and priorities for improvement at London Euston station. 726 users of train services at Euston station responded. Overall, three quarters (75%) of passengers were very or fairly satisfied with the services and facilities at Euston station.

The top three priorities for improvement were:

- information about train times/platforms during disruption
- real-time information about train times/platforms
- toilet facilities.



Passengers want 'delay-repay' style compensation



Passenger Focus recently joined forces with FirstGroup and London TravelWatch to research passengers' attitudes when it comes to compensation when something goes wrong on their journey.

Among the key findings from this qualitative research was a strong preference from passengers for 'delay-repay' style compensation regimes over the traditional Passenger's Charter arrangements. Delay repay was felt to be fairer and more transparent.

The research also found that passengers' understanding of compensation entitlement is limited; that passengers believe more should be done by train companies to highlight entitlements to money back when there are delays; that the claims process needs to be as quick and easy as possible; and that passengers dislike paper vouchers, preferring either a straight rebate or an electronic credit to be used online against future purchases.

The full research report is available at www.passengerfocus.org.uk.

High Speed 2 – freeing up capacity

The opening of the HS2 line from London to the West Midlands will free up capacity on the existing West Coast Main Line (WCML). Some existing passengers between London and the major destinations in the Midlands and North West will transfer to the new line, freeing up passenger capacity on the existing WCML.

Passenger Focus in partnership with Network

Rail is undertaking research to understand what current train users want from the released capacity. This could mean increased frequency of trains, faster journey times, less crowding and/or better connectivity between key stations. The outputs of this research will enable Network Rail to develop feasible planning scenarios that meet passenger priorities. Research is underway and results will be available early in 2012.



Bus Punctuality Group

Passenger Focus is an active member of the Bus Punctuality Working Group (a stakeholder group set up by the Bus Partnership Forum chaired by Norman Baker). The group has produced guidance for local authorities and operators on better joint working between bus operators and transport authorities.

The guidance is available on the Passenger Focus website.



Information during disruption – a battle yet to be won

Improving passenger information during disruption is a key Passenger Focus priority. Building on our December 2010 report into passengers' experiences, Passenger Focus has recently worked with train company Southern to dig deeper into the issues and understand what practical steps could be taken to improve things.

The findings are consistent with earlier research and show, the importance of accurate and timely information in allowing passengers to make informed decisions; that during delays the attitude and empathy of railway staff towards passengers is key; that passengers want train companies to actively tell them if there are problems, particularly if a temporary timetable is being introduced or there are cancellations; and that, once caught up in a problem, knowing how long you'll be delayed becomes key.

The research also found that some passengers distrust the information they are given during disruption, particularly the reasons given.



Bus services after the Spending Review – what next?

Passenger Focus gave written and oral evidence to the Transport Select Committee as part of their inquiry into 'Bus services after the Spending Review'. The evidence focused largely on the impact of cuts to local authority-supported bus services and the general lack of adequate consultation with bus passengers and local residents.

The Committee's report was published in August and recommended that Passenger Focus work with the Local Government Association to produce and disseminate a best practice consultation 'toolkit' to all transport authorities to help them more effectively engage with local communities where changes to services are planned.

David Sidebottom, Passenger Focus director, has held an initial discussion with the Department for Transport and is in the process of beginning the necessary planning.



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How Britain's rail services compare to our European neighbours – The Eurobarometer reveals!

In June 2011 the EU published research on passenger satisfaction with rail services in 25 member states. The research was inspired by the National Passenger Survey (NPS) published by Passenger Focus, both in terms of content, and also of recognising the power of a consistent methodology to provide comparative benchmarking. Passenger Focus was pleased to be asked to advise the Directorate-General for Mobility and Transport as it devised the survey.

The GB rail network comes across in the research as a relatively quick, frequent, well connected service, with reasonable punctuality, but the lack of capacity is apparent from the fact that the UK comes 23rd on this issue. The Eurobarometer does not record satisfaction with value for money. However, we know from the NPS that less than half of rail passengers in this country are satisfied with value for money.