



Disruption and delays - what do passengers want?

At the time of writing, many parts of Great Britain are being battered by unprecedented strong winds, heavy rain and flooding which is disrupting some rail services in a major way.

No one predicted this level of disruption and the way it is handled by the rail industry will be a key factor in determining passenger satisfaction during this period.

Our latest National Rail Passenger Survey (NRPS) (see page 53) found that only 40 per cent of passengers were happy with the way their train company deals with delays.

The research, carried out between September and November 2013, showed that there was also a great deal of variation between the train companies that got the highest and lowest scores for dealing with delays. The top company, East Coast, scored 65 per cent, while the bottom, London Overground, scored 30. First Great Western, the train company currently bearing the brunt of February's extreme weather, scored 40 per cent.

How are the train companies and the rest of the rail industry dealing with this major disruption in early 2014? Well, we're pleased to see train companies accepting each other's tickets and lifting time restrictions on tickets where there is major disruption. Bus companies have also been helping out and extra long-distance coaches have been laid on where rail services are affected. These alternatives have been a great help to passengers planning journeys.



Rail continuing to struggle with information

Passenger Focus is closely monitoring the quality of online information provided by the rail industry to passengers and there is a lot of good practice. But the rail industry continues to struggle with information. For instance, journey planners on 10 February were still showing some trains running via Dawlish – six days after the sea wall was destroyed. The immediate focus is rightly on restoring services as quickly as is safe to do so.

But important questions do need to be asked about passenger information accuracy and whether the level of investment in weatherproofing the railway should go beyond what has already been announced for the 2014 to 2019 Control Period.

So, what do passengers want? Our research, *Delays and disruption - rail passengers have their say*, identified that during disruption passengers want train companies to:

- **treat me with respect**
passengers referred to messages being insincere and dismissive; of formulaic platitudes and simplistic explanations; and about just being left in the dark
- **recognise my plight**
passengers felt that train companies treat disruption as matter-of-fact, a purely logistical challenge to be overcome before normal running resumes
- **help me avoid the problem in the first place**
passengers want to be given information that enables them to avoid the disruption in the first place, whether by staying at home, delaying their trip, changing modes of transport, taking a different route, etc. If passengers can take an informed decision they feel much better about it.
- **you got me into this, help get me out**
once passengers are caught up in disruption, whether at a station or on a train they need to know how long they will be delayed. When they're not given an estimate, about arrival times or resumption of service, passengers cannot take informed decisions about what they do. While the extent of the disruption may not initially be known, the industry must give robust estimates about the delay more quickly
- **act joined up**
passengers felt that there is no coordinated approach within or between train companies and that front-line staff often do not know what is going on during disruption. Passengers reported getting different answers depending on who they asked. The effect is that passengers lose confidence in the information provided by any source.

The rail industry responded positively to this research. But as our recent NRPS suggests there remains a considerable way for train companies to go in handling disruption in a way that meets passengers' expectations.

It is worth remembering that simple things can often make a big difference. Providing an honest explanation of what is going on as quickly as possible – even if that means saying 'we're not quite sure at the moment' – can be enough to lessen passenger dissatisfaction, or even generate satisfaction with the way things are handled.

David Sidebottom is the acting chief executive of Passenger Focus. (Anthony Smith is taking a career break and will return in April 2014)