

Satisfaction not guaranteed

Passenger Focus's recent national survey shows a wide variation in satisfaction, and finds that younger passengers in particular aren't as happy as others

How happy are rail passengers with their train service? Well, 83 per cent of the 29,000 passengers we recently spoke to said that they were satisfied overall with their journey. Only six per cent rated their experience as fairly or very poor.

This is from our latest National Rail Passenger Survey (NRPS) which we published in late January. The NRPS is one of the largest published passenger satisfaction surveys of rail passengers in the world and is released as an official statistic. Twice a year we speak to around 29,000 passengers and produce satisfaction ratings for around 30 factors including punctuality, helpfulness of staff and cleanliness of stations and trains.

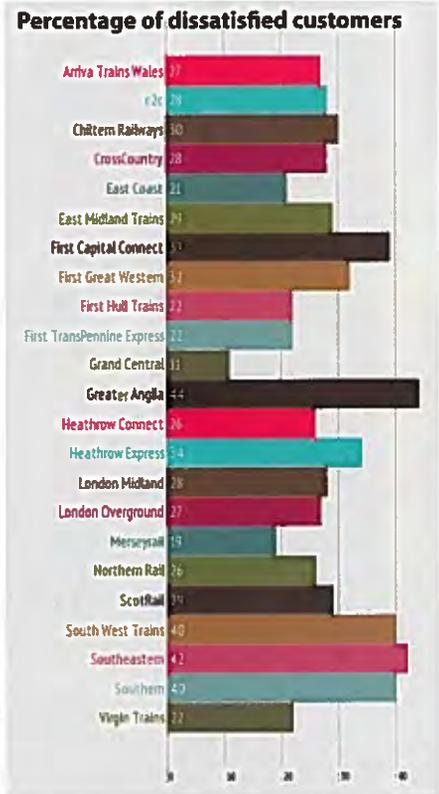
At face value this appears to be a very good score. Most businesses and organisations would probably be happy with this level of customer satisfaction. However, when you delve deeper you see that this relatively high level of overall satisfaction masks a wide variation among Great Britain's train companies and routes. It also masks lower levels of satisfaction with factors such as punctuality and value for money.

Satisfaction with value for money scored 45 per cent – down from 47 per cent in autumn 2012. The survey was carried out between September and November 2013, before announcements on rail fare increases, which would be expected to have some impact on the next round of NRPS this coming spring.

In fact 15 of the 19 franchised train companies had at least one route where less than half of their passengers were happy with value for money. For instance, 76 per cent of ScotRail passengers travelling on rural rail lines thought their ticket was good value for money. This contrasts starkly with 28 and 29 per cent respectively of Greater Anglia passengers on Stansted Express and Mainline routes.

Value for money scores descend further when looked at by journey purpose. Less than a third (32 per cent) of rail commuters were satisfied with value for money. This compares to 46 per cent for business and 61 for leisure passengers. We spoke to 12,000 commuters, so 8,000 of them didn't think that their ticket was good value.

The chart on the right shows the percentage of passengers by train company who are dissatisfied with value



for money.

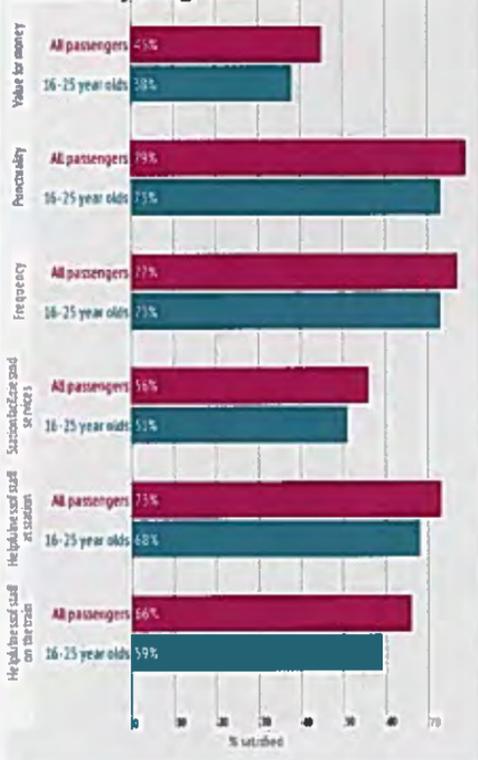
This is hardly surprising as fares continue to rise, albeit it, at a slower rate this year, and punctuality performance was down over the period. When you buy a ticket to travel by train, you are in essence buying the timetable and paying your train company to get you from A to B at a particular time. When the train is late it means they are not providing what you have paid for.

The satisfaction rating with punctuality has dropped since last autumn's survey – from 83 to 79 per cent. However, passenger satisfaction with punctuality has barely changed in the last five years (in 2008 it was 81 per cent).

How train operators handled delays dropped from last year's 44 to 40 per cent satisfaction – and varied between 23 and 69 per cent across the country. Although this is a slight improvement on →

the situation in 2008 (when this factor scored 37 per cent), it is disappointing considering the amount of work that has gone into helping operators better manage and communicate during delays.

Views of youngsters



Younger passengers short-changed by rail travel

This year we took a special look at how passengers of different ages rate their train journey. We found that Britain's younger passengers aren't as happy as others with value for money, punctuality and frequency. They were also less satisfied with station facilities and services, helpfulness of staff at stations and on trains. The chart, left, shows how much lower younger passengers scored these aspects of their train journey.

The rail industry should look closely at these results to ensure that young passengers are not priced or put off the railway. They are, after all, the passengers of tomorrow's railway!

Satisfaction with stations

In this round of the NRPS we also looked carefully at how satisfied passengers were with their station. The top were Liverpool Central, London St Pancras, Bath Spa, Birmingham Moor Street, and Hull. Crewe, Peterborough, London Bridge, Birmingham New Street, and Nottingham, were in the bottom five. Some of these stations are at the centre of massive redevelopment projects, so their inclusion is not surprising. It will be interesting to see how these scores change once the improvement works are finished.

Opening up our data

We recently launched an open data tool which allows anyone who has web access to find out satisfaction ratings for train services going back over a period of time. It will also allow you to explore the complaint appeals we have received for each train company.

The last three years' core NRPS results are available through our more technical research analysis tool, 'Reportal'.

What next?

Passenger Focus has already started speaking to passengers for the next round of the NRPS due to be published in June 2014. Now the real work begins as we use these results to identify problem areas with train companies and Network Rail and see that they are addressed.

We are also pushing to have the results of the NRPS used more in the service-quality targets within new franchises. This already happens to a certain extent, but we want greater accountability based on what passengers think. The best judges of quality are the people who have used the services in question, so it is essential that the experiences of passengers, through the results of the NRPS, are at the heart of all new franchises.

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