

The passenger impact of engineering overruns at London King's Cross and London Paddington on 27 December 2014



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Passengers travelling to and from London King's Cross and London Paddington were badly let down on Saturday 27 December 2014 when engineering work was not completed on time. Passenger Focus has prepared this report into passengers' experiences as evidence for the Office of Rail Regulation's Investigation into what went wrong; it follows our [initial report](#)¹ published on 30 December 2014.

As well as reviewing previous work by Passenger Focus about service disruption, much of which focuses on the importance of providing timely and accurate passenger information, we have drawn on the findings of two exercises carried out specifically to inform this report:

- We invited passengers affected by the disruption at Paddington and King's Cross to complete a short feedback survey via the Passenger Focus website
- We analysed Twitter traffic to understand what passengers were saying and the sentiments they were expressing.

The events

Of the large number of engineering projects carried out by Network Rail over Christmas 2014 two went badly wrong. They were the work to renew points in the Holloway area between London King's Cross and Finsbury Park, and major track and signalling changes in the Old Oak Common area between London Paddington and Acton. Full details can be found in the [Network Rail report](#) ("the Paonessa report") published on 12 January 2015.

The passenger reaction

Passengers understand that things will go wrong from time to time, but what they find difficult to forgive is the rail industry's apparent failure to plan for that certainty – even where the consequences will be significant for a large number of people. Our research in 2010 "Delays and Disruption – Rail Passengers Have their Say"² identified five key themes for passengers who experience unplanned disruption and we have kept them in mind as we prepared this report. They are:

- 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
- act joined up.

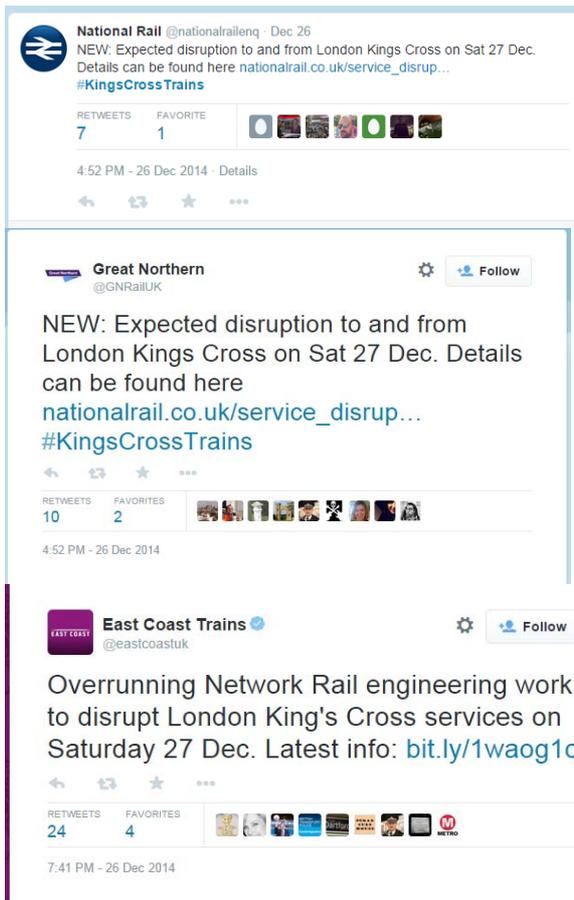
¹ [Initial observations: railway engineering overruns Christmas 2014](#)

² [Delays and Disruption – Rail Passengers Have their Say](#). Passenger Focus, 2010

Disruption to and from London King's Cross

Flow of information to passengers on Friday 26 December 2014

It is clear from the Network Rail report that by 11:00 on 26 December it was understood that reopening the line as planned the next morning was impossible, and that by 13:00 it was evident that there would be an overrun of 24 hours. The time that then elapsed before the first tweet by National Rail Enquiries (NRE) and Great Northern at 16:52 feels excessive. The first Tweet from East Coast was not until 19:41.



Our theme of “help me avoid the problem in the first place” is relevant. While at 13:00 it may not have been possible to say precisely what service would be provided the following day*, the industry appears to have lost almost four hours on the afternoon of Boxing Day that could have been used to warn intending passengers that the railway would not open as planned and to check back for further details.

* We comment later about the decision by East Coast not to prepare a formal contingency train plan for use in the event of an overrun.

Despite the delay in alerting passengers to the existence of a problem, there was further delay in providing details about alternative routes, ticket acceptance and refund arrangements.

The following tweets illustrate the confusion and frustration experienced as passengers tried to find out whether they would be able to travel.

Note: some screenshots show the time in California, USA, because the computer we used was not logged into Twitter – the time in Great Britain is shown in a box.

mike @MikesAndRobots · 23 hrs
@eastcoastuk any information on what is happening to trains that will be running tomorrow? Ridiculous lack of comms #KingsCrossTrains

RETWEETS 3 FAVOURITES 2 I ❤️ PUTNEY

10:16 am - 26 Dec 2014 · Details **GB time: 18.16**

The Legal Lab @TheLegalLab · 23 hrs
@MikesAndRobots @eastcoastuk I know it's shocking. And I signed up for email alerts. Heard nothing

Steve Everett @Everett_SR · 23 hrs
Just on @BBCNews that Kings X will be closed all day tomorrow. @eastcoastuk blaming @networkrail change at Finsbury Pk #KingsCrossTrains

RETWEET 1

Bee Barker @hellobee · 21 hrs
So so confused @eastcoastuk - do we need to travel to Finsbury Park for our train to Leeds? It's SO unclear on the website #KingsCrossTrains

Sarah Read @SC_Read · 22 hrs
Lack of any info v frustrating @eastcoastuk Can advance tickets be deferred? Will services run north of Finsbury Park? #KingsCrossTrains

RETWEETS 2 FAVOURITES 3

11:39 am - 26 Dec 2014 · Details **GB time: 19.39**

Even then concrete details were promised “asap”

TWEETS 104K FOLLOWING 5,303 FOLLOWERS 80.1K FAVOURITES 4,352

11:52 am - 26 Dec 2014 **GB time: 19.52**

East Coast Trains @eastcoastuk · Dec 26
A revised Saturday 27 Dec timetable will be available ASAP: bit.ly/1waog1c. Network Rail and East Coast apologise for the disruption

East Coast Trains @eastcoastuk · Dec 26
Customers travelling to/from London King's Cross tomorrow (Sat) should consider deferring journeys to Sun/Mon. Apologies for the disruption

East Coast Trains @eastcoastuk · Dec 26
Overrunning Network Rail engineering work to disrupt London King's Cross services on Saturday 27 Dec. Latest info: bit.ly/1waog1c

The delay in providing details about the service to be operated the next day continued through Boxing Day evening, causing more frustration to passengers.



The events again highlighted passengers' frustration that train companies are not proactive in getting in touch with those who have bought seats on trains that cannot run.



Information to passengers on Saturday 27 December 2014

On 27 December itself, information that East Coast trains would start and terminate at Finsbury Park was available. At 04:06 the NRE website stated that East Coast trains would depart on the hour and half hour from Finsbury Park to Leeds, Newcastle and Scotland*, and that Grand Central trains would be starting and terminating at Peterborough. However, there was no mention of First Hull Trains or Great Northern, beyond the latter's Finsbury Park to Moorgate route being listed as an alternative given that trains could not run to King's Cross. The East Coast website showed which services would be running to and from Finsbury Park.

* In fact, there were no Finsbury Park to Leeds trains (Leeds trains were starting/terminating at Peterborough) and error which was perpetuated all day.

Websites carried banner headlines alerting passengers to the problem and containing details of how to claim compensation for delays or obtain refunds. Tweets also mentioned entitlement to compensation and the fact that passengers could defer travel until Sunday 28 or Monday 29 December.

However, passengers subscribing to East Coast email alerts received messages that individual trains "will not call at your destination due to over-running engineering works", but no information was provided explaining why – or what to do instead.

One passenger contacting Passenger Focus reminds us that not everybody has internet access: "I knew the engineering works were over-running but not that King's Cross was

closed, as neither Network Rail's automated phonenumber nor the BBC red button service gave this information - c. 9.30am on Sat. morning!! NB. not everyone has access to the internet, especially at holiday times."

The situation at Finsbury Park station on Saturday 27 December

By 10:30 on 27 December, as the Network Rail report puts it "passenger flows were extremely difficult, with crowded platforms meaning that passengers on incoming trains were even unable to alight".

This is what passengers said to us:

"At Finsbury Park station there was no information whatever. No posters or signs. The PA system outside the station was used for just one announcement while I was there, between c. 11.15am and 12.15pm, saying they hoped to open the station gates in about 15 minutes. This did not happen; the station was closed for all of that time and some people told me they had been waiting since about 10am. I saw no railway staff outside the station; no one from East Coast or the other TOCs. (But they had 15hrs notice to find people?)

"At Finsbury Park there seemed to be no organisation whatever. People were just massed outside the mainline station entrance and round the block to the Underground station (the direct access between them was closed.) There were no posts and straps/ropes, or barriers to manage the crowd. Passengers exiting the station (through a small gap in the closed gates) had to fight their way through the crowd; there was no one-way system with separate entrances and exits."

"I was struck by the fact that passengers exiting the gate had to do so in a slow single file due apparently to the need to push their way through the "scrum" outside the gate of which my wife and I were reluctant members. Had they been able to exit at a decent rate there might have been opportunities for the waiting throng to be allowed in. Frankly the most disorganised third-world airport would have done better on the crowd control front than the disorganised shambles we experienced."

"Safety at Finsbury Park seems not to have been considered at all. People were spilling off the pavement into the path of vehicles as there is a bus station and a taxi rank right outside. The passengers were not ordinary commuters but were mainly travelling to or from family and friends, so there was a high proportion of vulnerable people, for whom there was no provision (elderly/ disabled/ babies and children). No loos, no food or drink for anyone. Also seemingly no access for emergency services... Most people appeared to be making long-distance journeys and many had a lot of luggage, which impaired their mobility and created obstructions. How large was the crowd? I have seen estimates of 1,000 people and think I saw at least six or seven hundred. Who was responsible for their health and safety? I saw real suffering that day and I believe that a serious incident was avoided only by luck, not planning."

And this is what it looked like at Finsbury Park:



Sunday 28 December

East Coast's website opened with news that the disruption had been cleared and that services were running normally.

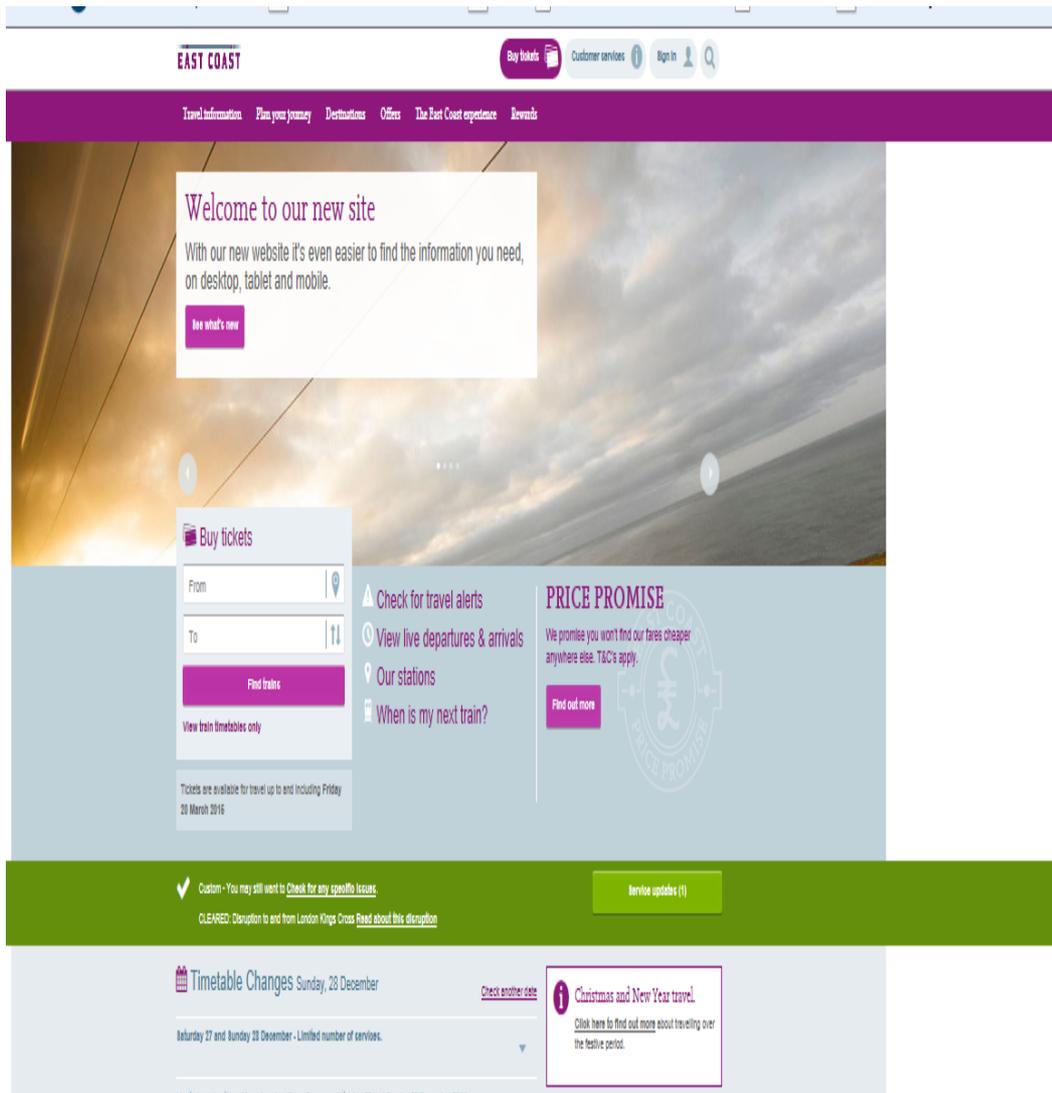
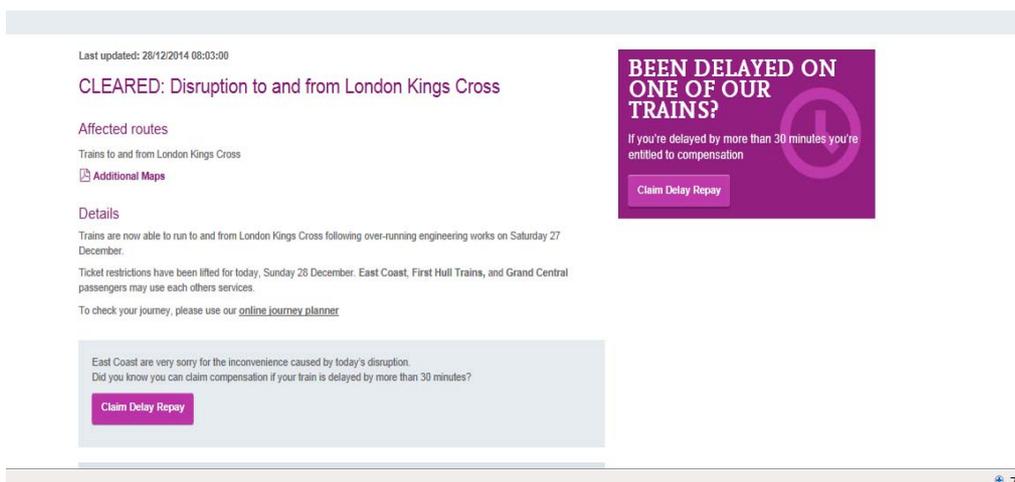


Image as of 8.40am on 28 December 2014

It was interesting to see that, despite the scale of the previous day's disruption, there was no overt mention (or apology) on the front page other than as part of the green 'disruption cleared' message. It was only when clicking on this that there was mention of compensation.



This report deals primarily with the impact on passengers of what went wrong. However, we cannot avoid commenting that the catalogue of issues highlighted in the Paonessa report is very concerning, not least the use of new equipment untested in the rugged environment in which it was to be used and failure to understand the consequences of project slippage on the number of engineering train drivers required. It is vital that Network Rail learns the lessons from this event; it should not have happened in the first place and must not happen again.

The West Coast Main Line was planned to be closed

There is one point that has not been made explicit in relation to the planning and subsequent delivery of this work. The West Coast Main Line (WCML) was planned to be closed at Watford on 27 December, with passengers directed to the Midland Main Line and the East Coast Main Line instead. Therefore it was all the more critical that King's Cross was open; yet the heightened consequences of failure at Holloway did not seem to have been appreciated.

Recommendation 1

Notwithstanding that project risks must be better-understood and better-mitigated generally, Passenger Focus recommends that in future Network Rail provides a higher level of mitigation where the consequences of failure will be all the more significant because of engineering work elsewhere.

East Coast had no contingency train plan

When the East Coast Main Line was closed at Peterborough on Friday 27 December 2013, East Coast had prepared a full contingency train plan in the event that work overran into the Saturday. Thankfully it was not required. 12 months on, and with the additional factor of the WCML being closed at Watford, we understand that no contingency train plan was prepared. This appears, and not only with hindsight, to have been an extraordinarily high-risk strategy which passengers will find very difficult to comprehend. All the more so, since it is clear from the Network Rail report that the project's "point of no return", with no subsequent opportunity to scale back the work to complete on time if there were problems, was as early as 09:00 on Christmas Day. The absence of a proper contingency train plan appears to have led to, or is likely to have contributed to, many of the problems passengers experienced on Saturday 27 December, including:

- The length of time it took for full details to be provided about the revised service on 27 December. If there had been a plan it could have been published – certainly in PDF form – shortly after 13:00 on Boxing Day.
- The problems passengers experienced with inaccurate information via websites and apps. If there had been a plan, and the 'Day A for Day B' procedure been used to upload it, accurate revised times would have been available via electronic journey planners during Boxing Day evening.
- The dreadful scenes at Finsbury Park, stemming partly from the attempt to use platform 4 for long-distance arrivals and departures. Had 'Day A for Day B' been employed to upload a pre-agreed contingency train plan, it seems less likely that the local decision about long-distance trains arriving and departing from platform 4 would have been made

and likely that there would have been fewer delays caused by ‘on-the-fly’ attempts to dovetail long-distance trains between Great Northern services.

- Delays and alterations to southbound trains. Closely allied to the previous point, had there been a formal contingency timetable that minimised congestion at Finsbury Park station it is reasonable to assume that there would have been fewer reports of trains delayed by up to two hours on their final approach to Finsbury Park.
- Lack of staff presence and facilities for passenger welfare at Finsbury Park. We discuss this further below, but if there had been a proper contingency train plan it seems likely that there would also have been a proper plan to mobilise sufficient staff and facilities such as temporary fencing, temporary toilets, additional catering, etc, to operate Finsbury Park station to minimise passenger discomfort.



Recommendation 2

Passenger Focus recommends that for any major possession where the consequences of an overrun would be significant, a full contingency train plan should be developed and pre-agreed with Network Rail for implementation through the ‘Day A for Day B’ process if necessary.

Looking after passengers at Finsbury Park station

Passenger Focus is not in a position to judge whether Finsbury Park station is inherently unsuitable as a temporary terminus for long-distance trains. What we can say is that arrangements to look after passengers at Finsbury Park appear to have been wholly inadequate. Passenger information was poor; there were extremely limited toilet facilities and food/drink options for those waiting; and many people were in the open on a winter’s day. The industry is probably extremely fortunate that temperatures were not sub-zero on 27 December – as they clearly could have been – with resulting risk to those already in poor health. We feel that the decision to start and terminate long-distance trains at Finsbury Park all day on 27 (in addition to the Great Northern trains already scheduled to do so) should have been made only in conjunction with the deployment of significant numbers of staff, equipment and facilities to ensure that passengers could be properly looked after and properly informed about what was going on. It is far from improbable that, even without the attempt to use platform 4 for both arriving and departing long-distance trains, operational problems would have emerged that required these arrangements.

Recommendation 3

Passenger Focus recommends that a decision to start/terminate long-distance trains at an alternative location, whether planned in advance, as a result of a formal contingency timetable or through control decisions on the day, should be accompanied by a plan to provide the level of staff and other resources necessary to meet passengers’ reasonable needs.

Alternative routes and ticket acceptance

Websites stated explicitly that “East Coast passengers are **not** able to use East Midlands Trains services between Sheffield and London St. Pancras”. This message was given because St Pancras was expected to be very busy anyway (because the WCML was

closed at Watford) and we accept that this was a difficult judgement. However, we make four points:

- We strongly encourage a 'give passengers the facts, let them decide' approach. It could have been made clear that while Finsbury Park is regarded as the best option for East Coast passengers, travel from St Pancras is possible, but to expect trains to be very busy with a risk of standing room only.
- East Midlands Trains (EMT) had planned and rehearsed queuing arrangements at St Pancras given the expected numbers of passengers, yet Finsbury Park with no such arrangements was deemed preferable.
- Many tickets sold for East Coast journeys allow passengers to use EMT services in any case, so the message was factually inaccurate for some.
- Passengers who did travel that way tell us that there was not excessive crowding on trains from St Pancras and passengers displaced from East Coast could have been easily accommodated.
- It was an own goal not to explain why East Coast passengers were not being permitted to travel via St Pancras – at best, the industry did not look joined up.



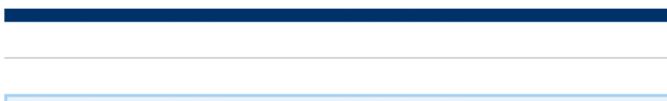
Passengers may use:

- London Underground (Victoria / Piccadilly lines) and London Buses (bus 259 to / from York Way East Side of London Kings Cross) between London Kings Cross and Finsbury Park (Seven Sisters Road)
- Great Northern services between Finsbury Park and Moorgate, to complete the journey.
- **East Coast, Grand Central and Thameslink** have mutual ticket acceptance between Luton and London St Pancras International also with Abellio Greater Anglia between Ely / Cambridge to London Liverpool Street.
- There will be a connecting service on the hour between Peterborough and Leeds
- East Coast passengers are **not** able to use East Midlands Trains services between Sheffield and London St Pancras.

Grand Central passengers with a ticket for travel on Saturday 27 December may use their ticket on Sunday 28 or Monday 29 December.

You can follow this incident using the hashtag [#KingsCrossTrains](#)

To check your journey, please use the National Rail Enquiries real-time [Journey Planner](#)



The fact it was Boxing Day

A number of factors, including the time at which Twitter activity started on 26 December and the time train planning resources became available, lead us to question if the fact it was Boxing Day – when few train company staff would have been at work because trains were not running – contributed to the industry's failure the following day. Would East Coast and Great Northern have made a better job of deploying sufficient human and other resources to Finsbury Park on the 27 December if staff had been available to organise it the previous day?

Recommendation 4

Passenger Focus recommends that train companies ensure their processes to communicate with passengers (including but not limited to Twitter), manage data in industry information systems and to mobilise resources for the following day are adequate on Boxing Day, other bank holidays and Sundays.

Disruption to and from London Paddington

For the second year running the railway from London Paddington did not reopen on time after Christmas engineering works. Many of the recurring issues with the handling of disruption, and particularly weaknesses in passenger information, applied to what happened this year.

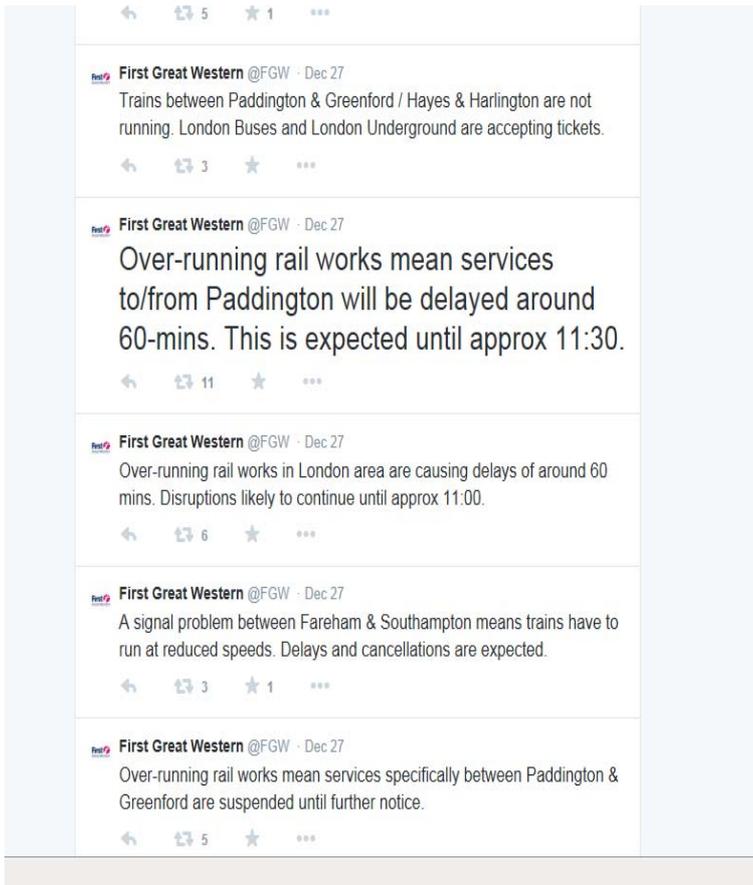
Ever-shifting estimates for completion of the work

What stands out at Paddington is the ever-shifting estimate for when services would start. As the [Network Rail report](#) makes clear this was wholly related to lack of clarity about when signal testing and associated work would be complete.

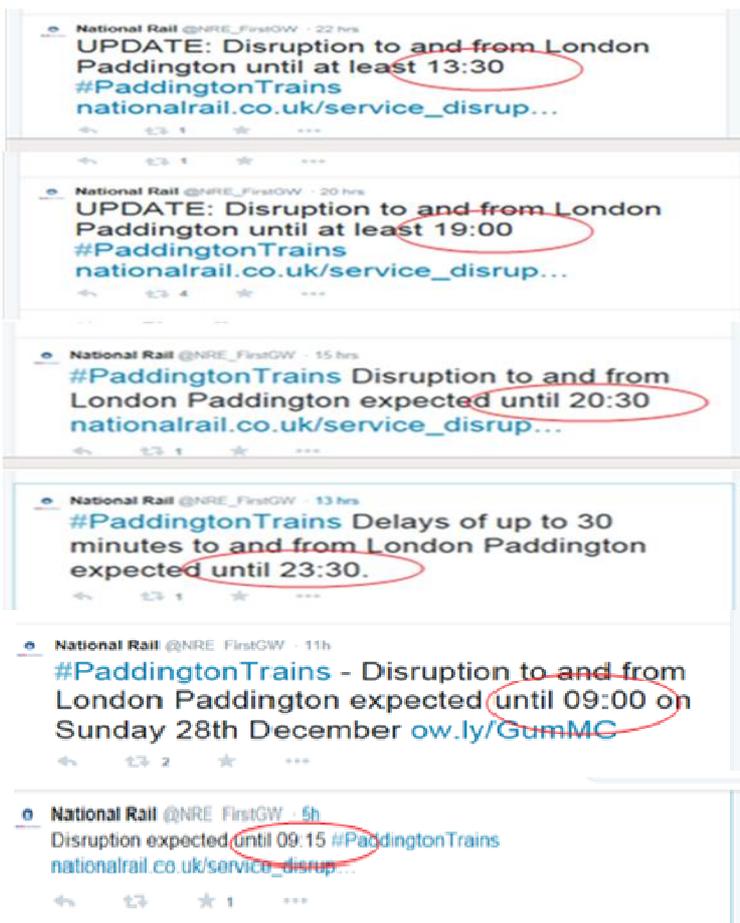
Initially, First Great Western (FGW) were expecting only the first trains from Paddington to be affected plus the Greenford services

The image shows a screenshot of a Twitter thread from the account 'First Great Western @FGW'. The thread consists of four tweets. The top tweet, dated Dec 27, states: 'Over-running rail works mean services specifically between Paddington & Greenford are suspended until further notice.' Below this tweet is a timestamp '11:59 pm - 26 Dec 2014' and a box containing the text 'GB time: 7.59am 27 December'. The second tweet, dated Dec 26, says: 'As a result of over-running rail works, the first services out of London Paddington will be subject to disruption.' The third tweet, also dated Dec 26, mentions: 'As a result of signalling issues, there are disruptions to/from services via Southampton Central - with delays & short notice cancellations.' The bottom tweet, dated Dec 25, is a holiday message: 'Wherever you are spending your Christmas, we hope you have a wonderful day! Happy Christmas everyone.' Below the text is a small image of a Christmas tree.

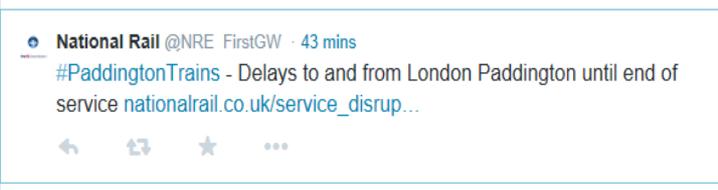
Subsequent tweets on 27 December extended the estimate until 11:00 and then 11:30.



The following succession of tweets shows this continued throughout the day and how the information passengers had to plan their journeys kept on changing.



Eventually, it seems the industry accepted that disruption would continue all day on the Sunday.



National Rail @NRE FirstGW · 43 mins
#PaddingtonTrains - Delays to and from London Paddington until end of service nationalrail.co.uk/service_disrup...

Weaknesses in passenger information

The constantly changing estimate for when the railway would reopen clearly hampered FGW's ability to provide meaningful information to passengers virtually impossible. However, from what passengers have said to us information appears to have been poorer than it should have been even taking that into account. We also note that FGW's first tweet was at 07:59, an hour after the railway should have opened.

A passenger travelling from London Paddington to Great Malvern said:

"The staff at the station [Paddington] had no clue and simply were advising passengers heading west to get to Reading and continue journeys from there. So I paid for a £65 cab to get to Reading, thinking that trains would be running from there, cutting out the stretch of rail where these engineering works were overrunning. However, this was not the case. I got to Reading and the staff there had no clue, and had no idea why I'd been sent to Reading, because there were still no trains running on that line. More frustratingly, they could not offer an alternative route as they had no idea. I was told I would just have to wait and see if my specific trains going to Malvern (every hour) would show up. There was a train at approx 11:50 that remained on the board without any sign of delay until it was supposed to arrive, then it didn't arrive, and then it was finally confirmed as cancelled 45 mins later. One train arrived and was turned around to go to Penzance. No one knew this was happening 'til it actually arrived. I went back to the information point a few times and they still knew nothing."

A passenger travelling from Stroud to Paddington said: *"Had we been told the reading to waterloo train was a slow train with frequent stops we would have abandoned travel plans and had we been properly advised at Stroud or Swindon we would have made alternative travel arrangements to get to London. Arrived too late for the show we had tickets. Eventually returned to Stroud station at 20:00 after 8+ hours on trains."*

An issue mentioned by a number of passengers was that it was not been made clear to them how long it takes to get from Reading to London Waterloo. In essence, they were not given enough information to make an informed choice about what they did.

Conclusions and recommendations – Paddington

Although this report deals primarily with the impact on passengers, as at King's Cross we cannot avoid commenting that the issues in the Paonessa report are very concerning, in particular the failure to communicate with train companies and inability to estimate accurately how much time was required to complete testing. As at King's Cross, it should not have happened in the first place and must not happen again.

The fact that alternative routes exist to Heathrow Airport (the Piccadilly Line) and Reading (from London Waterloo) probably prevented the passenger impact being even worse than it was. It is clear, however, that passengers were still hugely inconvenienced, with substantially extended journey times, additional changes of train and missed events. We make two recommendations:

Recommendation 5

Network Rail must go further in instilling a culture of honest communication from works sites via Controls to train companies so the latter can respond more effectively. Half an hour's notice is self-evidently inadequate.

Recommendation 6

Train companies must go further in laying out the facts about alternatives on offer (whether online, through social media and in communications at stations) so passengers can decide what is best for them. If the alternative route will not get people to the theatre in time they need to know!

Restatement of previous recommendations

The events of 27 December 2014 illustrate, among other things, the importance of the 40-point Passenger Information During Disruption (PIDD) action plan and that its delivery as quickly and completely as possible is a high priority. In addition to the recommendations made above, we reiterate three existing Passenger Focus recommendations³ that are directly relevant:

- The King's Cross overrun underlines the need for the industry to "Develop the capability to implement a revised timetable, and revert to the normal schedule, significantly more quickly than current processes allow. Day A for Day B is clearly an improvement on the underlying Day A for Day C arrangements, but its limitations are significant". The 40-point PIDD action plan does not address this.
- The number of questions asked, and fears expressed, about non-refundable tickets leads us to reiterate the need to "Change aspects of the national ticketing rules to give passengers greater protection during disruption" – the issues are explained in detail in our research report⁴. We hope these points will be addressed in ATOC's forthcoming review of the National Rail Conditions of Carriage.
- Train companies must urgently address passengers' reasonable frustration that, having bought a ticket through a train company website, for a specific train operated by that train company, nobody gets in touch to say it cannot run and what to do instead – despite having an email address to do so. Progress here must be made sooner than envisaged by the PIDD 40-point plan.

Passenger Focus January 2015

³ recommendations in "[Passenger information when trains are disrupted](#)", Passenger Focus, May 2014

⁴ Page 19 of "[Passenger information when trains are disrupted](#)", Passenger Focus, May 2014