

Independent national passenger watchdog

Passenger Voice Rail



Autumn/Winter 2010

North West

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High-speed a step closer

The Government has announced that it will consult early next year on building a 'Y'-shaped high-speed rail network with separate legs from London to the West Midlands then to each of Manchester and Leeds. A 'Y'-shaped route would allow the East Midlands and South Yorkshire to be served by the high-speed rail network, as well as Leeds, Manchester and the North West.

Ashwin Kumar, Passenger Focus rail director, said: "Passengers who have campaigned for a high-speed connection to east-coast destinations will welcome this latest development.

"All forecasts show that Britain's railways are only going to get busier. Government and industry must continue progress on this important project as new high-speed lines are critical to relieving overcrowding in the future. Putting longer-distance journeys onto these new lines will allow more trains to serve commuters and middle-distance passengers on the current network.

"Wherever this new line is built, there will be winners and losers. It is important that the Government and industry discuss the implications of this decision with affected communities and addresses concerns."

Avoiding website errors

When Virgin redesigned its website in 2009, it did not clearly show restrictions on tickets. Because peak and off-peak services start and end at different times across Virgin services, it was all too easy for passengers to make a mistake when booking a ticket.

Passenger Focus reviewed the website with Virgin and asked them to make such restrictions clear when the mouse cursor hovers over a ticket option. By installing these warnings, Virgin has minimised the risk of passengers finding they have bought the wrong ticket for their journey. Passenger Focus continues to work with the train company on addressing other concerns.



London to Liverpool disruption

Passengers travelling from London to Liverpool were subjected to severe disruption during the August Bank Holiday weekend when Network Rail cancelled planned engineering work between Crewe and Liverpool too late to reinstate a full services.

Services were already badly affected by engineering work between Rugby and Euston.

A last-minute decision to cancel engineering work meant Virgin Trains was unable to reinstate any of its services between Crewe and Liverpool. London Midland did manage to reinstate

its Liverpool to Crewe service. However, passengers travelling from Liverpool to London were still faced with very long journey times with changes at both Crewe and Nuneaton, even though there was no engineering work taking place between Crewe and Liverpool.

Mark Leving, Passenger Focus manager, said: "With more advanced notice and co-operation between train operating companies, it should have been possible for the same train to be deployed all the way between Crewe and Nuneaton, for the benefit of passengers."

Cycling to the station

Passenger Focus is pleased to see continued progress by the industry on improving cycle facilities at Britain's stations.

Passenger Focus is part of the Cycle and Rail Task Force, which was set up to improve bike and rail integration. It includes representatives from the Association of Train Operating Companies, Cycling England, government and Network Rail and the group is responsible for helping the delivery of a £14 million improvement package of cycle facilities at stations.

Currently, Merseyrail, Northern, South West Trains and Virgin are working on improving their cycle facilities as part of a flagship 'Bike 'n' Ride' scheme. Southern has also outlined its plans to upgrade cycling facilities as part of its station travel plans.

Passenger Focus feels that cycling to the station helps reduce road congestion, improves health and is a totally self-reliant form of transport. However, to convince people to cycle, sufficient and secure storage facilities must be provided at the station. This is especially important while trains are overcrowded and passengers cannot take their bike on the train.



Improving customer care at Merseyrail

Passenger Focus has welcomed Merseyrail's improved scores from passengers on staff availability and helpfulness.

Passenger Focus has worked with Merseyrail to improve passengers' view of the train company's staff following the Spring 2009 National Passenger Survey (NPS). Passenger Focus's survey found that only 33% of passengers were satisfied with the availability of staff on the train and 67% at stations. The helpfulness and attitude of train staff scored 49% satisfaction, station staff 76%.

After discussions with Passenger Focus, Merseyrail devised the 'Fast Lane' project as a model for improved customer care on trains and at stations. The project has lifted Merseyrail's NPS scores significantly. The Spring 2010 NPS showed that passenger satisfaction with staff availability of trains had risen from 33% to 48%, at stations from 67% to 78%. Satisfaction with the helpfulness and attitude of station staff rose from 76% to 82%. On trains the rise was even more impressive, from 49% to 67%.



Passengers share their views on franchises

Passenger Focus co-chairs Virgin Trains' quarterly Passenger Panel meetings, which are a chance for rail users to tell the train operator what they think about its services, stations and trains. At the most recent session, held in October, passengers discussed what they wanted from future franchises. The feedback will be included in Passenger Focus's response to the Department for Transport's consultation on reforming rail franchising.

Disruption handling

Passenger Focus is working with Virgin Trains to improve communications at stations, including participating in staff training days to highlight the importance of making accurate and timely information available to passengers.

At its regular meetings with Virgin Trains, Passenger Focus also reports back on the real-life experiences of its disruption panel, which comprises of about 1000 passengers nationwide. Passenger Focus uses the comments it receives to campaign at national and local level for improvements in the way train operating companies handle disruption.

Northern and First TransPennine Express have welcomed the feedback from Passenger Focus's disruption panel and while Passenger Focus notes improvements in the way the companies communicate to passengers during disruptions, the watchdog continues to emphasise the vital role played by rail staff in making consistent and timely information available to passengers. On CrossCountry, recent comments from Passenger Focus's disruption panel suggest passengers are generally satisfied with the way CrossCountry is handling delays and cancellations.



Photo courtesy of CrossCountry

Train operator of the year 2010

Passenger Focus has congratulated First TransPennine Express (FTPE) on taking the Passenger Operator of the Year title in the 2010 National Rail Awards. The accolade was given in recognition of the improvements made in every aspect of its business, including improving standards and security at stations.

In the most recent (Spring 2010) Passengers Focus's National

Passenger Survey (NPS), overall passenger satisfaction with FTPE was 87%. Although this score remained unchanged compared to the previous year, the score was a 10 point improvement on the 77% achieved in the franchise's first year of operation in 2004. Good news is the recent improvement to the operator's value for money score, up nine points on Spring 2009 to 60%.

Liverpool station is a passenger favourite

Liverpool Lime Street has taken the National Rail Awards Station of the Year title at this year's National Rail Awards.

Meanwhile, in the Small Station class, both First TransPennine Express's Barrow-in-Furness and MerseyRail's Ormskirk were highly commended by judges.

Passenger Focus is involved in

the nominating and judging of the stations. Judges consider a range of categories when making their assessment, including ticket buying facilities, facilities and services, information and staff.

Southern's Eastbourne Station was given the Medium Station award and the company's Bexhill took the small station category.



Northern Stars recognised

Passenger Focus has congratulated both Northern Rail and the staff successful in the train company's Northern Stars customer service awards. Passenger Focus joined the judging panel in an effort to recognise those staff delivering excellent service. Ashwin Kumar, Passenger Focus rail

director, said: "Stations and station staff are a crucial part of the passengers' rail journey. Passengers tell us that staff are needed for journey advice, ticket sales and for personal security. We are pleased to be part of the process which recognises excellent service."