

Priorities for Rail Improvements

Research Report

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Management Summary

- With billions of pounds being invested in rail, it is vital that the industry has confidence that expenditure is meeting passenger requirements. Research was commissioned to gauge passenger priorities for rail improvements.
- **7 workshops** (6-8 respondents each for 90 mins) were undertaken amongst rail passengers – commuters, leisure, business & disabled users. Research took place in late February and early March 2007.
- There was some feeling that rail travel is currently ‘on the up’ in terms of improved reliability, comfort, speed etc. This feeling was heightened by the current negative press for air and road travel. Despite such improvements, it is important that the rail system is sufficiently flexible to react to passenger demands to provide an environment in which all passengers feel secure when travelling by rail.
- Tackling train crowding was considered the key issue for the rail industry across all user groups. The current network was seen as unable to cope with demand for rail travel. [Crowding issues present an actual barrier to train travel for those with disabilities, if there are alternative modes of transport available they may reject rail travel altogether]. Personal security also emerged as an area that passengers felt needed improvement.
- In terms of **train design and the train environment**, passenger needs mainly relate to safety, comfort and information. Largely, these needs are being met for current users, but it may be that there are other less tolerant passengers outside of our research sample who are no longer using trains due to these needs not being met.
- With regards to passenger experiences of the train environment, seemingly minor positive experiences can have a great effect on overall perceptions of rail, for example providing headphone sockets and power points for laptops/mobiles. Despite the fairly large number of small ‘gripes’ from passengers about the train environment, there was nothing highlighted that was felt to be preventing current usage.
- Whilst passengers suggested a number of improvements for their comfort and convenience (e.g. more leg room, free wireless broadband etc.), these were all seen as ‘nice to haves’ rather than ‘essentials’, thereby confirming that basic passenger needs are currently being met.
- More space to move around carriages was felt to be key for mobility impaired passengers. Furthermore, those with visual impairment need Braille signage and easy to recognise door opening. All those with disabilities want more staff to help them and for staff to be better trained in understanding their needs and requirements.

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- Regarding **stations**, although passengers often have very basic needs (e.g. shelter, warmth, cleanliness etc.), some of these are quite hard to deliver effectively.
- The issue of personal security is most likely to impact negatively on future likelihood of travel. Differences in perceptions of personal security vary by size of station – often this is seen as a positive at larger stations, but a negative and sometimes a reason not to travel at smaller stations.
- As for areas in need of improvement at stations, addressing personal security issues and improving inter-modal connectivity were highlighted by current users and could be barriers to rail travel amongst those we did not see in this research.
- Passengers with disabilities who preferred to have help at the stations, felt that it was key to have access to trained staff. Others wanted improved physical access to the station and more done to increase their independence.
- With regards to **ticket purchasing**, passenger needs are continuing to be met, with increased purchase channels which are welcomed by passengers, ensuring the customer experience is as seamless functional as possible
- Nevertheless, the ticket purchase process can be a source of frustration for some passengers. Key to improving this will be raising awareness of alternative purchase channels encouraging more remote purchases where possible. There is a strong desire amongst frequent users for smart card and e-tickets to simplify purchase and speed up their journey.
- There are a number of different factors affecting modal choice for **long journeys** - it is not simply a case of which is the fastest/cheapest mode. These factors include cost, time of travel, length of journey, other modes available, who they are travelling with, comfort etc.
- Although the innovation and vision of a new high-speed rail network for the UK is broadly welcomed, most are sceptical of the cost implications for passengers, thus would prefer investment to be made in improving the existing network.
- Whilst it goes without saying that **safety** is the most important issue for all passengers, it is usually taken for granted. This was even the case within the context of a very recent major rail incident which occurred during the research.
- Rail travel is viewed as inherently safe. Consequently, statistics and information on fatalities are not felt to be interesting or meaningful to passengers.
- In conclusion, within the context of all modes available, rail often compares favourably and holds several key advantages over the alternatives. All passengers are capable of prioritising issues for improvement, but seemingly for our sample, no issue was strong

enough to be a barrier to continued usage. However, increasing the capacity to cope with demand and improving personal security were seen as the two key areas for improvement.

- **Our recommendations for areas for rail improvement are as follows:**
- **Train overcrowding** – introduce longer trains, more standing room on shorter journeys and declassification of first class on some journeys, especially for disabled passengers.
- **Other on-train improvements** – cleaner toilets, more power sockets, wireless Internet access.
- **Station security** – staff unmanned stations, particularly in the evenings and keep stations clean to give an improved perception of comfort and safety.
- **Ticket purchasing** – introduce more multiple channels for purchasing, including remote purchase, smart card and e-ticketing.
- **Improving accessibility** – including staff training in recognising and being proactive with disabled passengers and involving users groups at the design stage.
- **Information** – service updates and electronic information at all stations.
- **Inter-modal connectivity** – improve regional rail and bus links and car parking.
- **It is not necessary to provide information on the relative safety of rail travel compared to other modes.**

1. Research Context & Objectives

With billions of pounds being invested in rail, it is vital that the industry has confidence that expenditure is meeting passenger requirements.

Passenger Focus, as one of the key links between the rail industry and its customers, is, alongside the DfT, seeking to gain insight into how passengers feel about the relative importance of various potential improvements that could be made.

Research was therefore commissioned to gauge passenger priorities for rail improvements.

We have outlined below in full the objectives of this research:

- To uncover spontaneous passenger perceptions of rail travel and areas for improvement.
- To explore passenger views on a number of areas of service provision within rail travel, as follows:
 - Ticket purchase, train design, station design, modal choice on long distance, role of journey time (for high speed links), crowded train issues, safety, environment.
- To identify how best to overcome any issues that arise within these areas of rail service provision.
- To understand the priority attached to making improvements in each of these areas of service delivery in the next 20 years.

2. Sample & Methodology

This project used a qualitative research methodology of 7 workshops amongst rail passengers (6-8 respondents each for 90 minutes). Details of the sample breakdown are given in the tables below:

6 workshops amongst rail passengers focusing on priorities for improvement (6-8 respondents each for 90 minutes), as follows:

Passenger Type	Commuters			
Length of journey	Long	Short	Short	Short
Age	20-40	40-55	20-40	40-55
SEG	ABC1	BC1C2	C1C2 (D)	C1C2
Location	Chippenham (to London)	E. Croydon	Manchester	Glasgow
Workshop	1	2	3	4

Passenger Type	Leisure	Business	Disabled
Length of journey	Long	Long	Short/Long
Age	50-65	40-55	Any
SEG	C1C2	ABC1	Any
Location	Manchester	London	London
Workshop	5	6	7

- Workshop 1 – long commute of 1 hour 15 mins or more. Included spread of 3, 4 and 5 day a week commuters.
- Workshop 2 – mixture of routes travelled where new and older trains are used (First Capital Connect and Southern).
- Workshops 3, 4, 5 & 6 – some had choice of mode.
- Workshop 7 – disabled included mobility, eyesight etc., using rail at least once every 2 months for any journey purpose.

Research was conducted during late February and early March 2007.

There are a number of factors that undoubtedly impact upon passenger prioritisation of rail improvements. When structuring the sample care was taken to ensure that these factors were taken account. We have detailed these factors in the list below:

- Type of journey
- Length of journey
- Financial status
- Lifestage
- Choice of modes available
- Location
- Distance from station
- Size of station
- Train Operating Company
- Frequency of rail travel

3. Main Findings

3.1 Overview of Prioritisation for Rail Improvements

Across the sample, there was a general consensus that rail is performing fairly well, certainly when compared to other modes of travel. Other modes have received bad press, most noticeably air travel with the new carbon taxes and cars. Whilst this has undoubtedly had a slight effect on how passengers view rail travel, it is also the case that improved reliability, faster journey times and improved comfort in new rolling stock have all fed into the overall perception that rail is 'on the up'.

“Actually if I’m honest, it’s a pretty good service we get – it’s relatively comfortable, the journey time is quick considering the distance and it is not that often that there are major problems with delays”.

[Long Commuter, Chippenham]

Nonetheless, rail passengers are still able to highlight plenty of areas in which they feel that rail travel can and should be improved. Key areas for prioritisation are felt to be the inability of the system to cope with current demand, as well as the need to improve perceptions of personal security particularly at (sub)urban stations. Other areas detailed for prioritisation that are discussed in this report are typically seen as enhancements rather than requirements.

The overall context to this report is that whilst there was some feeling amongst our sample of rail users that rail travel is currently 'on the up', it is important nonetheless that the rail system is sufficiently flexible to move with passenger demands and provide an environment in which all feel secure.

3.1.1 Overview for Those with Disabilities

Accessibility issues and requirements for improvements varied depending upon the type of impairment that the rail passenger had. For example, those with visual impairments clearly had very different needs to those with mobility impairments. As such, it was impossible to identify a common set of priorities for those with disabilities, and some of our respondents resented being asked to do so.

The other key issue that affected our findings was the personal attitude of our respondents towards their disability. For example, there were some who were very keen to be as independent as possible when using the railway, whilst others wanted assistance. There were also some passengers who resented being 'labelled' or recognised as having a disability whilst others were less fazed by this.

Thus, overall prioritisation was impossible amongst this group, however it was clear that rail issues did impact upon perceptions and usage of the railways, both currently and in the future. However, for some the lack of choice of modes available meant that they sometimes had no choice but to travel by rail despite their issues.

3.2 Train Environment & Design

3.2.1 Perceptions of Train Crowding

Perceptually, tackling train crowding was seen as the key issue for the rail industry to address across all user groups, with the current network perceived as being unable to cope with demand for rail travel.

Currently, commuters are often unable to select their journey time to help avoid crowding (and ensure they get a seat), as much as they claim they would like to. Whilst some of the longer distance commuters are able to alter their journeys for this purpose within a small time window each morning (10-20 minutes). For shorter distance commuters the best they can achieve is to stand at specific spots on the platform to increase their chances of getting a seat each morning and evening. As we have previously found in research for Passenger Focus, commuters altering their journeys to travel in the shoulder peak is seen as a nice idea (to reap the benefits of cheaper tickets) but is often impractical due to the perceived inflexibility of their employers.

For some commuters, there is a growing fear over the safety issues associated with overcrowded trains, particularly on longer distance commutes such as Chippenham to London. This relates to passengers that have to stand for this length of journey. Several of our respondents claimed that they had complained to First Great Western about this and had been informed that standing does not constitute as operating outside of agreed safety parameters. Thus, the key issue

here appears to be a difference between the commuter and train operating companies (TOC) definition of what is safe.

“When everyone piles on at Swindon and there’s people standing all the way to London, it does make you think how can this possibly be safe”.

[Long Commuter, Chippenham]

“When I wrote to First Great Western recently about how unsafe it is having to stand, they simply wrote back saying that this is not the case”.

[Long Commuter, Chippenham]

Leisure users generally do not have as much experience of train crowding as commuters, unless they happen to be travelling in the shoulderpeak, for example on the first train of the day on which reduced-rate tickets are valid. However, when occasionally they do encounter overcrowding, it can have a significant negative impact upon their perceptions of rail travel.

For those passengers with disabilities, crowding issues can present an actual barrier to train travel, if there are alternative modes of transport available to them they may reject rail travel altogether.

3.2.2 Train Design – Passenger Needs

For current rail users, their needs with regards to train design relate to the following broad areas:

Safety

- The provision of sufficient seating or safe means of standing (i.e. more grab rails and space to stand inside carriages rather than between carriages).
- Prominent information about what to do in the event of an emergency.

“I wouldn’t mind standing so much if I could pay less to go in a standing carriage that was equipped with proper grab rails”

[Short Commuters, Croydon]

Comfort

- The provision of relative levels of comfort relating to temperature, lighting, seating/safe standing and toilets – this can all vary by length of journey, with for example those making longer journeys more likely to feel they need seats, tables and access to refreshments.
- Sufficient personal space for passengers.
- Overall standard of cleanliness.

“The interior design of trains needs a drastic overhaul. It’s always yucky and the toilets are always disgusting”
[Long Business, London]

“If they want to encourage more people onto the railways they should make it a more luxurious journey”
[Long Business, London]

Information

- The provision of information relating to the journey, including regular updates if problems.

“Sometimes, I’m travelling on an unfamiliar route and I’m always on edge, wondering when my stop will be coming up”.
[Short Leisure, Glasgow]

Hygienic conditions are a basic yet essential customer requirement. Providing hygiene conditions will never ‘wow’ passengers, but without them perceptions of rail will undoubtedly be much more negative. Generally, customers are satisfied with hygiene conditions as their current needs are being met. However, it should be pointed out that there may well be other less tolerant passengers outside of our research sample who are no longer using trains due a bad experience.

3.2.3 Train Environment – Passenger Experiences

Rail passengers in our sample relayed a number of positive rail experiences to us. It became clear that fairly small positive experiences can have a great effect on overall perceptions of rail.

Experiences recounted during the research included the recent provision of headphone sockets on Virgin Pendolino trains and the provision of power sockets for laptops and mobiles on a number of train services. These moves in particular were felt to enhance the passenger journey experience from both an enjoyment and practical perspective. Other positive experiences included the frequent rubbish collection services on longer journeys, and the occasional downgrading of first class carriages to standard class when there is exceptional overcrowding.

Views on the buffet car were mixed. Whilst some passengers (often those making longer journeys) claimed they liked having the option of refreshments on board, others would be happy for the buffet car to be replaced by more seating.

“I always like to buy my coffee before I get to the station so really it would make no difference to me if there was no buffet car. In fact, if it increases my chance of getting a seat, then great”.

[Long Commuter, Chippenham]

“I prefer to get a coffee on the train sometimes – it’s quite nice having somewhere to go during the journey, providing it’s not too overcrowded”.

[Long Commuter, Chippenham]

“You can’t have a train going from Manchester to London without refreshments”.

[Long Leisure, Manchester]

Throughout the duration of the research, respondents also made a number of observations based upon what they have seen and experienced on trains abroad. This included features such as more grab rails, wider carriages, double-decker trains, separate entrance and exit doors and no gaps between the train and the platform.

Despite reporting positive experiences of the train environment, passengers still had a number of ‘gripes’. These tended to be fairly minor issues which would not prevent passengers from using rail. These gripes included the following:

- Too much space allocated to bicycles
- Airline seats mean less legroom

- Table legs interfering with legroom
- Uncomfortable for those standing due to noise and lack of dedicated standing space
- Luggage racks too small on Virgin Pendolinos
- Insufficient luggage space on trains travelling to airports
- Dirty toilets (across all trains and TOCs)
- Too many first class carriages
- Insufficient information on what to do in an emergency
- Aisles too narrow
- (Perceived) lack of staff on late night trains
- No facility to upgrade to first class if travelling off-peak with a season ticket

“Sometimes you wonder if there are ever any guards on duty after a certain time in the evening. You certainly never see them”.

[Short Commuter, Manchester]

“The toilets on trains are frankly unacceptable. You often find yourself holding on and being uncomfortable rather than using them”.

[Long Commuter, Chippenham]

3.2.4 Train Environment – Priorities for Improvement

Passengers suggested a number of improvements to the train environment centred on two main areas of provision, as follows:

Safety

It was felt that having more flexibility about downgrading first class to standard class during times of overcrowding would have positive safety implications and would serve to lessen the fears of those who expressed concern about standing on longer distance journeys. Some passengers also suggested that providing more grab rails would enhance their perceptions of safety on board trains.

Comfort/Convenience

Whilst passengers suggested a number of improvements for their comfort and convenience, these were all seen as ‘nice to haves’ rather than ‘essentials’, thereby confirming that basic passenger needs are being met. Improvements suggested included more standing space for shorter distance commuting journeys, increased leg room, more control over the temperature, free wireless broadband, tinted glass and quiet carriages for shorter commutes.

"I would like personal climate control like in cars to adjust the temperature in my personal space to make it warmer or colder"
[Long Business, London]

"I wouldn't mind standing on my short journey if there was something to hold on to".
[Short Commute, Croydon]

3.2.5 Train Environment – Passengers with Disabilities

Train crowding issues were most acute for those with mobility impairments, thus they tend to avoid travelling at peak hours.

"I tend to travel between 10am and 2pm both to avoid the crowds".
[Disabled Passengers Group]

"Avoiding peak times is not always easy to do. I have a problem with balance – I need something to hold onto and I cannot stand for long".
[Disabled Passengers Group]

Some of the issues that those with mobility impairments encounter include narrow seats, difficulty accessing toilets and a lack of policing of disabled seats. What this means is that for longer distance journeys, those with mobility impairments have to plan ahead to ensure they get a seat reservation. This can cause issues if the train is cancelled and the seat reservation is lost.

"There needs to be some kind of monitoring system so that people with disabilities can get a seat; I have travelled from Euston to Manchester standing for part of the way because of a cancelled train the reservation was not valid".
[Disabled Passengers Group]

Train design was a key issue for all passengers with disabilities and needs identified were multiple. The key issue to emerge was the necessity for more space to move around carriages.

"Wider aisles – the train to Gatwick is particularly bad".
[Disabled Passengers Group]

Other suggested improvements included more handrails, ensuring drop down steps are level with platforms and the facility to raise armrests and tables.

“We need more handrails everywhere inside the train really and near toilets”... Also like with buses these, the step between the train and the platform should be much lower – level would be best.”
[Disabled Passengers Group]

Those with visual impairment also expressed a need for Braille signage and easy to recognise door opening, and all visually impaired respondents wanted more staff to help them. The issue with staff was often that those with disabilities did not feel staff were sufficiently trained in recognising their needs/issues and knowing how to deal with them appropriately.

3.3 Stations

3.3.1 Stations – Passenger Needs

Passenger needs regarding stations are fairly basic and focus on three main areas as follows:

Security

In local provincial stations in particular, many passengers claimed that they often feel threatened and fearful of attack when travelling during the hours of darkness. This was typically the case at unstaffed stations in the outer reaches of major cities such as Glasgow and Manchester. Thus, the passenger need in these instances is for more of a feeling of personal security.

“Even local stations that have CCTV don’t feel safe because they’re usually unmanned”.
[Short Leisure, Glasgow]

“Some local stations can feel risky at night, even when they have CCTV because you feel so isolated”
[Short Commuters, Croydon]

Comfort

Passenger needs in terms of comfort at stations are fairly basic – shelter, warmth, seating and cleanliness.

“Some stations are really grotty looking and the toilets are always horrible”

[Short Commuters, Croydon]

Convenience

With regards to convenience, passengers express the following key needs:

- Facility to purchase any ticket at any time
- Journey information and updates
- Inter-modal connectivity
- Sufficient parking
- Clear sign-posting

“East Croydon has been modernised and it has shops and excellent information and it feels much safer”

[Short Commuters, Croydon]

“My nearest station is a twenty-five minute walk, so I really need a bus to get there”.

[Short Leisure, Glasgow]

Thus, once again these needs are fairly basic, although some are seemingly much harder to deliver, not least improving the inter-modal connectivity.

Of all the passenger needs expressed regarding stations, the issue of personal security was felt most likely to impact on future rail travel.

3.3.2 Stations – Passenger Experiences

Passenger experiences at stations vary considerably depending upon the size of station, most notably with regards to perceptions of personal security. Whilst at smaller stations some passengers mentioned the staff (if there were any present) as being more personable, the stations themselves were often felt to be unclean and poorly maintained which can lead to passengers feeling insecure. In addition some mentioned the lack of visible security and police in these smaller stations.

“It’s the smaller stations that make you feel more vulnerable”

[Long Leisure, Manchester]

*“There’s never anyone else at my station.
I sometimes feel quite unsafe”.*
[Short Leisure, Glasgow]

*“If you’ve ever stood on Crewe station, you want to cut your throat, it’s
that bad, it’s the pits, it’s appalling”*
[Long Business, London]

Other issues with small stations included choke points at stairwells and barriers and queues at ticket offices. This was particularly an issue for commuters for whom a few minutes in a queue can be extremely frustrating and can sometimes mean missing a train if they have turned up with not much time to spare. A lack of passenger information updates and sufficient seating were also raised as issues at smaller stations.

*“They do need to sort out the stairs at Chippenham as there is an
almighty crush there every day when we get off the train. How hard can
it be to widen them a bit?”*
[Long Commuter, Chippenham]

At larger stations, whilst some passengers commented on similar issues such as choke points and ticket office queues, one of the key positives was felt to be the number of visible Police Community Support Officers present. This meant that passengers did not experience the same feelings of insecurity at mainline stations, particularly those in London such as Paddington.

Other positives at larger stations included higher standards of cleanliness (due to full time cleaners) and a wide choice of shops. On the negative side, some of the shops are felt to be quite expensive, also passengers find it frustrating when they cannot locate a bin and some expressed concern at a lack of emergency information (e.g. muster points, exits, who to contact etc.).

“Victoria station is amazing, it’s like a shopping mall on the first floor”.
[Long Business, London]

*“If people have to wait for a train, you might as well make the waiting
experience pleasant, and in places like Euston it is fine to be honest”.*
[Long Business, London]

3.3.3 Stations – Priorities for Improvements

Passenger suggestions as to improvements that could be made to stations focused primarily on improving perceptions of security at smaller stations through the implementation of CCTV, better lighting, staff after dark, also better inter-modal connectivity. This inter-modal connectivity could be achieved through more car parking, improved bus links, better regional rail links etc. It could be that both of these potential improvements which were highlighted by current users could be barriers to rail travel amongst those were not part of this research.

“I sometimes have to park a long way away from the station which doesn’t make me feel all that safe walking back to my car at night”.
[Short Leisure, Glasgow]

Other potential areas for improvement that were seen as important but not as high in priority as security and inter-modal connectivity were better passenger information and updates, addressing obvious choke points and more emergency sign-posting and information.

Passengers additionally suggested increasing the amount of seating from a comfort perspective. Also, introducing ticket-only access to platforms to improve perceptions of personal security. Ticket-only platform access was felt to be a means of preventing undesirables from gaining access to platforms and bothering passengers.

Furthermore, whilst all liked the concept of cleaner stations, none were able to fully understand how a standard re-design of stations for the purposes of cleanliness may look.

“It’s people that make it dirty, not the design of the station”
[Short Commute, Manchester]

3.3.4 Stations – Passengers with Disabilities

For those with disabilities, perceptions of stations vary greatly by size of station.

“Liverpool Street is the best station, first class service. They provide a buggy, put my luggage away, they have a special toilet which they open for us”.
[Disabled Passengers Group]

“There should not be stations with stairs any more and that is still the case at smaller commuter stations”.

[Disabled Passengers Group]

However, a number of key requirements emerge, as can be seen in the following list. The main requirement was easy access to trained staff for those who prefer to be helped, whilst for others the improvement of physical access and helping them to be independent was key:

- Lifts as well as stairs
- Yellow lines on stairs and platforms
- Plentiful and clear announcements
- Improved lighting at small stations
- Seats near indicator boards (e.g. not at Euston)
- Trained staff to help out
- More disabled toilets open (i.e. not dependent upon staff finding the key)
- Longer opening of ticket offices at smaller stations since some unable to operate machines
- Mobility shop at station most welcome (e.g. Welwyn Garden City in shopping centre)
- Improved waiting rooms – seats, maintenance, safety

“More lighting at smaller stations and on commuter trains they don’t always announce the station coming up which is a problem for me. On longer journeys, I always book a seat, online, but then on the train I can’t the seat numbers”.

[Disabled Passengers Group]

“Staff should be trained to help people with disabilities and we should have better information on how to get a member of staff if we need help”.

[Disabled Passengers Group]

“Waiting rooms are cold and dirty. Water should be available. You also need enough seats for people to wait.”

[Disabled Passengers Group]

“At Euston, there is nowhere to sit near the electronic board and when they announce the platform, there is a huge rush of people – maybe they should board disabled people first”.

[Disabled Passengers Group]

“Depending on the station there is not always disabled toilets, if there are disabled toilets they’re not always open. Then you need to find someone to open the door for you and that’s not always easy”.

[Disabled Passengers Group]

3.4 Ticket Purchase

3.4.1 Ticket Purchase – Passenger Needs

With regards to ticket purchasing, the key needs here are focused around continuing to increase purchase channels so all passengers feel they have a choice of purchase method, responding in a flexible manner to passenger requirements and making the customer experience as seamless and easy to use as possible.

There are two facets to these improvements:

- Ease of Use
- Ease of Purchase

In terms of ease of use, passengers called for systems such as smart cards, e-ticketing and cross-TOC ticketing to be adopted. In terms of ease of purchase, there are widespread wishes for multiple ticketing channels to be extended, such as increasing the numbers of tellers, automatic machines, online and phone options and swipe card-type systems.

“Airline-style e-tickets would work better than Oyster due to the different franchises”.
[Long Business, London]

“This is the 21st century. Even buses do smart ticketing, so there’s no reason why the trains can’t”.
[Long Business, London]

“It would be fantastic if you could book online and print an e-ticket, but then it wouldn’t go through the barrier”.
[Short Commuters, Croydon]

3.4.2 Ticket Purchase – Passenger Experiences

Currently the ticket purchase process can be a source of frustration for passengers and the key to improving this will be encouraging more remote purchase where possible.

Availability of online ticket purchasing, in particular, is welcomed and there is some perception that this aspect of ticketing is more developed in the UK than in other European countries. However, there is some feeling among passengers that they are unlikely to wish to purchase a high-value season ticket online in case of any issues with postage, lost orders etc.

“There is no way I would want to part with £7,000 without getting the ticket in my hand immediately”.
[Long Commuter, Chippenham]

There are a number of other complaints based around ticket purchasing, including having to buy tickets the evening prior to travel in order to avoid long queues in the mornings, ticket offices closing too early in the evenings, only one ticket window being open (often resulting in missed trains) and the inability nowadays to be able to purchase tickets on board trains. In addition, there are difficulties and confusion regarding ticket validity when two TOCs are operating on the same route e.g. Silverlink and Virgin Trains from Euston to Milton Keynes.

“It would be great to be able to buy tickets online, but I don’t know if that facility exists”.
[Short Commute, Croydon]

“There’s often someone at the window asking loads of questions and there’s only one window when I’m queuing for ages. I’ve missed my train before. They need a machine.”
[Short Leisure, Glasgow]

3.4.3 Ticket Purchase – Reactions to Alternatives

There is a strong desire amongst frequent users for smart card and e-tickets to simplify purchase and speed up their journey.

Smart cards and pre-pay systems are also more front-of-mind these days and such a system was spontaneously suggested in the groups, particularly commuters and frequent business travellers. The feeling is that adopting such a system would have the dual benefit of helping to address the issue of long queues and reducing the number of staff at ticket barriers. However, there are questions over the cost of implementing such a system, with the expectation that this would be passed on to passengers.

Flexible pricing is seen as increasingly important and liked in theory. However, it may take some time for mindsets to shift significantly enough to persuade employers to allow staff to choose more flexible working hours. A knock-on effect of this is that an off-peak season ticket would need to be offered in order to make it worthwhile for passengers since on many journeys their existing season ticket would be cheaper than travelling on standard off-peak fares.

3.5 Long Distance Journeys

3.5.1 Long Journeys – Modal Choice

There are a number of different factors affecting modal choice for long journeys, and it is not simply a case of which is the fastest/cheapest mode for the passenger.

These factors include the following:

- Travelling with families can be expensive and difficult, especially when connecting across London.
- Trade-off between price, time and comfort.
- Time of day – many try to avoid peak hour travel for reasons of comfort and cost.
- Distance travelled – some impose limits on how far they will drive and some journeys are deemed to long for particular modes, such as coach.
- Other modes may or may not be available in certain locations and / or for certain journeys. For example, in rural or remote locations, there may be limited access to anything other than cars.
- Connections – for reasons of convenience, the location of termini play a significant role in choosing mode, as does the perceived ease of being able to connect with other modes, either prior to or after the rail journey.
- Comfort – driving can be stressful and one may wish to work while travelling.

3.5.2 Reactions to High-Speed Lines

Although the innovation and vision of a new high-speed rail network is broadly welcomed, most are sceptical of the cost implications for passengers, thus would prefer investment to be made in improving existing network.

Those who are the warmest towards the high-speed link tend to be those with long and / or difficult journeys.

“We go from Manchester to Cornwall by train each year on holiday and it takes us 9 hours which is pretty horrendous. So if this high speed line could speed our journey up that would be wonderful”.

[Long Leisure, Manchester]

However, in order to justify the cost of travel on this service, the general feeling is that it would need to cut the journey time by at least one hour.

In addition, many business and leisure passengers alike express the view that they do not always mind slightly longer journeys, as it represents a welcome chance to either work or relax. Moreover, with the exception of Scotland, it is felt that journey times are already fairly acceptable and there is widespread recognition that journey times have been shortened over recent years (particularly through the introduction of the Virgin Pendolino tilting trains).

Overall, the consensus is that the investment may be better spent in improving the existing network, rather than spending heavily on a new infrastructure. Most expected that the TOCs servicing the new routes would charge much higher prices for tickets and there were even some safety concerns from leisure users, based on the potential consequences of such high-speed travel.

“I wouldn’t get on a train in the UK that would get me to Scotland in three hours. I’d be scared it would fall off the rails.”.

[Long Business, Croydon]

“I should think it would be quite unsafe to travel at such speeds”.

[Short Leisure, Glasgow]

3.6 Perceptions of Safety

3.6.1 Reactions to Statistics on Safety

Whilst it goes without saying that safety is the most important issue for all passengers, it is usually far from top of mind, and this was even the case within context of a very recent major rail incident occurring during the research.

The Grayrigg train derailment, in fact, appears to have reinforced opinions that rail travel is inherently safer than other modes, owing to the low number of fatalities and the apparent strength of the carriages. Furthermore, there is a perception that there has been much ongoing investment in rail safety in recent times.

“I don’t think of safety on long journeys because there aren’t enough accidents for it to be a worry”.
[Long Business, London]

“Percentage wise, I feel that rail travel is very safe and problems get blown out of proportion by the media”.
[Short Commuters, Croydon]

Rather than rail travel itself, many think that fatalities are more a result of trespassing than rail and train malfunction and there is little feeling that this can be improved, as determined trespassers will not be easily dissuaded.

However, there are some specific safety concerns based around overcrowding in carriages as already detailed in this report.

“The only time I ever think about safety is on commuter journeys when the train is really overcrowded”
[Long Business, London]

Additionally, some passengers would like more information to make them aware of on-board emergency procedures. Whilst they acknowledge this is much better than it used to be, some feel that one cannot have enough of this information. Some passengers also feel quite strongly that there should no longer be level crossings without barriers in operation in this country and this can become a source of anger for them when accidents happen at these locations.

In the groups, respondents were made aware of the fact that there has been a consistent reduction of fatalities since the 1950s and that rail travel is safer than many forms of road travel. However, this was generally as expected and did not surprise.

There is also a feeling that 'improving safety by 10%' is a meaningless statistic that implies that rail travel is inherently unsafe. Passengers prefer to see figures of 100% or 'zero tolerance' when regarding safety. Therefore, the idea of the government setting targets in this respect is seen as similarly meaningless in this context.

"If it was implied that rail could be safer than it currently is, there would be an almighty stink".
[Long Business, London]

"Government targets would be meaningless because it can never be 100% safe"
[Short Commuters, Croydon]

Thus, statistics and information on fatalities are not felt to be interesting or meaningful in this context of rail travel being viewed as inherently safe.

3.7 Other Areas for Improvement Identified

In addition to the areas already highlighted in this report, respondents also raised a number of other potential improvements for the rail industry, mostly based around passenger information and fares structure.

In terms of **information**, there is a feeling that passengers are not kept informed enough in stations, on platforms or on board trains. In particular, rural and remote station users feel that they are neglected in this regard, with few or no monitors and no announcements made regarding delays and / or cancellations.

Regarding **fare structure**, many find this over-complicated and difficult to understand. There is a perceived lack of standardisation across TOCs and many claim to be frequently unsure of whether they receive the best value from their ticket on any given journey. In addition, it is difficult to know when the cheaper tickets are available.

“Business passengers get fleeced at the moment. There should be more flexibility across the train companies”.

[Long Business, Croydon]

4. Conclusions & Recommendations

In conclusion, within the context of all modes available, rail often compares favourably and holds several key advantages over the alternatives. All passengers are capable of prioritising issues for improvement, but seemingly for our sample no issue was strong enough to be a barrier to continued usage.

Across the sample, there is a general consensus that rail travel is performing fairly well compared to other modes of transport. Passengers are often making a positive choice to travel by train, as it has the perceived benefits of speed, comfort, convenience, best use of time and reliability.

By contrast, most other modes have experienced some negative attention over recent years, whilst perceptions of rail travel have improved. Passengers readily recognise the investment in new rolling stock, faster journey times and increased reliability.

Where issues are spontaneously raised, these are usually specific to stations or lines. However, across our sample, there were more positive than negative opinions relating to rail travel.

The key areas for prioritisation are believed to be the inability of the system to cope with current demand (e.g. passengers numbers, ticket purchase efficiency etc.) and improving perceptions of personal security at urban and suburban stations. Whilst perceptions of fares was not something we were tasked with exploring in this research, it is perhaps unsurprising that cheaper fares also emerged spontaneously as a key rail improvement.

Other areas identified as enhancements, rather than absolute requirements, are cleaner toilets and improved communication with passengers.

On the basis of this research we would make the following recommendations as areas for rail improvement:

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Passenger Focus
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- **Train overcrowding** – introduce longer trains, more standing room on shorter journeys and declassification of first class on some journeys, especially for disabled passengers.
- **Other on-train improvements** – cleaner toilets, more power sockets, wireless Internet access.
- **Station security** – staff unmanned stations, particularly in the evenings and keep stations clean to give an improved perception of comfort and safety.
- **Ticket purchasing** – introduce more multiple channels for ticket purchasing, including remote purchase, smart card and e-ticketing.
- **Improving accessibility** – including staff training in recognising and being proactive with disabled passengers and involving users groups at the design stage.
- **Information** – service updates and electronic information at all stations.
- **Inter-modal connectivity** – improve regional rail and bus links and car parking.
- **It is not necessary to provide information on the relative safety of rail travel compared to other modes.**

5. Appendix

Below is the stimulus material utilised in this research (all from Department for Transport):

The railway industry monitors the number and type of train accidents (major and minor). Overall the number and frequency of these accidents has fallen consistently since the 1950s.

The railway industry also monitors the number and cause of fatalities and injuries on the railway and produces complex modeling to forecast levels of risk to passengers, workforce and the public.

Comparison of Fatalities Across Transport Modes

