

Passenger Voice

A quarterly newsletter from the statutory rail passenger watchdog



Passenger satisfaction mixed picture nationally

The latest National Passenger Survey (NPS), published by Passenger Focus in January, demonstrated that the number of passengers satisfied with their journey has risen since autumn 2005. With just over four in five passengers very or fairly satisfied with their journey, this is the highest level recorded since the survey was launched in 1999...

The NPS assesses service aspects that are important to rail users during a 'real' journey and enables Passenger Focus to monitor trends in passenger satisfaction over time and across train operating companies. Each survey, published twice a year, comprises 25,000 questionnaires and the results are prepared for individual train operating companies and the rail sector as a whole.

The majority of service areas were perceived to have improved with the proportion of passengers satisfied with punctuality/ reliability three per cent higher than autumn 2005. However, nationally only 43% of passengers were satisfied with value for money for the price of their ticket. Three in five people were satisfied with sufficient room for all passengers to sit/stand.

Comparing overall satisfaction ratings for individual train operating companies with autumn 2005, the picture is a mixed one. At 68% Merseyrail was top when it came to value for money, with 'one' lagging behind with the worst rating of 31%.

Comparing like with like, GNER came out highest of the long distance train operating companies when it came to satisfaction for room to sit/stand, at 74%,

while Virgin Cross Country scored 60%.

Analysing the results, Passenger Focus chief executive Anthony Smith said:

"The main purpose of the National Passenger Survey is to help improve the railways. As passengers have recorded the highest level of satisfaction since the NPS was launched eight years ago, things are moving in the right direction.

"There are still big areas for improvement, however, not least value for money. It is just not acceptable that only 43% of passengers are satisfied with value for money for the price of their ticket at a national level. The disparity



Value for money scores poorly

between train companies is even more concerning with the lowest rated company more than 37% below the top rated company."

Highlighting the good and the bad is one thing but how is the survey used to improve the railways? Passenger research manager,

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Edinburgh CrossRail Services need improving not dividing

Passenger Focus is urging Network Rail to improve capacity at Edinburgh, Waverley station in order to avoid splitting Edinburgh CrossRail Services. This is one of a number of recommendations in response to Network Rail's draft Scotland

Route Utilisation Strategy. We support the proposal to provide faster services between Aberdeen and Edinburgh but are asking for a commitment to at least a 15 minute reduction in journey time.

Passenger Focus would also urge the railway industry to consider the concept of 'early bird' schemes to encourage passengers to travel outside the morning peak time between 8am and 9am.

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Is the cavalry coming?



Colin Foxall

The new results from the Passenger Focus National Passenger Survey are in. Overall passenger satisfaction is up, driven by on-going good performance – welcome news for a rail industry battered by the storm of protest about New Year fare rises. However, the overall satisfaction figures mask some major issues...

First Great Western performance, crowding on Cross Country and value for money, especially in London and the South East, are causing concern. The furore over fare and car park rises show that passengers are beginning to say enough is enough.

The Government's avowed intention to transfer more of the

cost of the railways to passengers is starting to bite just as more people are using the railways. As train companies put fares up, take out seats, toilets, tables, buffet cars, tinker with ticket restrictions and push advance purchase fares, the nature of the railway is changing. The easyJet style railway, with all its advantages and disadvantages may be coming to a station near you soon – we intend to spark debate about whether this is the direction we need to be going in.

A pertinent query is – will the forthcoming White Paper on the future of the railways save us? Reading between the Eddington lines indicates Government will buy longer trains and the platforms that need to go with them. That will buy some time and enable the industry to generate more revenue in more tolerable conditions. We intend to hold a conference to discuss the White Paper and what it means for passengers.

In the meantime, I hope you enjoy our first edition of *Passenger Voice*. Inside you will find details of the work we have been doing on ticket retailing, fares, getting a seat and passenger priorities on particular routes. Please tell me what you think:

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Colin Foxall
Chairman



Our latest National Passenger Survey

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Pete Thompson explains:

“When Passenger Focus took over the contract for NPS in 2005, we decided to conduct an external review of the survey to examine methodology and see how it is used. We found that NPS is seen as a key performance indicator by the industry and that train operating companies do take action when they score poorly in the survey.

“The Department for Transport’s Franchise Management team refer to NPS when reviewing areas of concern. Our own passenger link managers use it to inform their discussions with the train operating

companies and to bring about improvements.”
With value for money and overcrowding still scoring lowest in the latest NPS,

Passenger Focus is expecting the DfT and train operating companies to address these two major areas of concern and take action.

Mystery shoppers investigate ticket buying facilities

In the next couple of weeks we will be publishing the results of a mystery shopper exercise investigating the quality of ticket-buying facilities in Britain. The overall objective of the research is to measure the quality of facilities and services afforded to rail passengers when purchasing a rail ticket.

Shoppers have been asked to audit

ticket machines; ticket offices; on train ticket buying facilities; excess fare windows/offices; and train operating companies’ telesales and internet services.

As the quality of research is an important issue, mystery shoppers have been trained to a high level to allow them to make objective assessments.

Look out for the



results of the exercise on our website www.passengerfocus.org.uk

There will also be an update in the next issue of *Passenger Voice* in April.

Don't penalise passengers on Cross Country services

Following the Department for Transport (DfT) proposals to change the network of Cross Country services, Passenger Focus prepared a response expressing serious concerns about the changes; in particular the loss of many long distance direct services linking one end of the UK to the other...

The proposal to sever these links would result in many passengers having to change trains, primarily at Birmingham New Street, a station where interchange is already notoriously difficult.

Passenger Focus commented that the existing Cross Country franchise is an acknowledged success in terms of improved passenger satisfaction, improved reliability, and more passengers travelling by rail. We



Passengers at Birmingham New Street

made it very clear to the DfT that it would be a mistake to break up the network when it is popular with passengers.

The recommendations made by Passenger Focus were based on extensive research including surveys with over 3300 passengers on all Cross Country routes. Passengers told us that one of their top priorities was the ability to complete a journey without having to change trains.

In our response to the formal consultation, Passenger Focus stated disappointment at the lack of evidence provided by the DfT to justify the franchise proposals relating to the management of connecting services to reduce the need to change at Birmingham and to improve journey times. Despite meetings with representatives from the DfT we remained unconvinced that the proposed loss of existing Cross Country links was justified.

In order to gain a clearer picture about the number of passengers actually

Passenger Focus Wins

- Some train operating companies put their New Year fares up before January. Passenger Focus publicly criticised the move and referred the matter to the DfT. The Association of Train Operating Companies and the train operators subsequently decided to draw up a common policy and to refund any passengers who had been overcharged.

- One of our passenger link managers spotted inaccurate information on the BBC website about wheelchair accessibility at some of Arriva Trains Wales (ATW) stations in West Wales. He raised the issue with the ATW accessibility officer who discovered that station information was not being automatically updated when improvement works were undertaken. Details about accessibility were subsequently updated.

changing trains at Birmingham New Street Station we have commissioned an independent market research company to carry out research to find out how many people would be affected.

Overcrowding on First Great Western unacceptable

Following the introduction of First Great Western's (FGW) new timetable, passenger link manager Mike Greedy raised a number of concerns with the Department for Transport (DfT) and FGW.

Mike carried out observations at stations

where overcrowding had become an issue and liaised with FGW regional managers to update them on what he witnessed. He identified key trains in need of immediate strengthening in the Bath-Bristol area and highlighted the need to urgently review the

Thames Valley services as a priority.

Mike also made sure that the DfT's franchise manager was kept abreast of his findings and kept the media informed about the shortage of rolling stock and resulting problems.

Are environmental issues top of passenger priorities?

Passenger Focus will be undertaking a survey of national priorities for improvement to rail.

The aim is to produce reliable data looking at ten regions overall. We have also been asked to conduct two pieces of qualitative research. The first is intended to gain insights into the role

that environmental concerns have in influencing rail travel behaviour and attitudes towards rail.

The second piece of research will aim to understand passenger concerns and attitudes towards issues to be addressed by the Government's White Paper. Passenger Focus is working with the DfT

and Transport Scotland has agreed to additional funding to ensure Scottish passengers are represented in this research.

Updates about all of these will appear in future editions of *Passenger Voice*.



'Early bird' schemes required to address congestion

Since the publication of the Passenger Focus report – Encouraging edge of morning peak travel – last autumn, the issue of overcrowding in busy commuter periods has continued to hit the headlines and our research has been widely quoted...

The Passenger Focus report found that there is passenger support for the concept of 'early or late bird' incentive schemes as a short-term way of reducing congestion and crowding.

Roughly half a million people commute

by rail into London every day – around 70,000 of these passengers have to stand on their trains during the morning peak, with 50,000 of those having to stand between 8am and 9am. Such congestion is a clear demonstration of the need to provide

passengers with an incentive to travel outside this peak hour.

Our report suggests that nearly one in five commuters would be very or fairly able to travel later or earlier to avoid busy periods. Passengers also told us they want to be rewarded for those days when they travel outside the peak, rather than being penalised when they travel within the peak.

Some commuters said they don't want to be tied down to travelling at set times each day which means smart cards are crucial. Passenger Focus is pressing train companies to explore the potential for such schemes, in preference to punitive measures to restrict demand.

News roundup

- **Passenger Focus chief executive Anthony Smith** spoke at the 'Customer Service Excellence in Public Transport Conference' at the Thistle Charing Cross Hotel earlier this month.

He said that "Performance remains by far, despite recent improvements, a key passenger priority. Other key drivers of passenger satisfaction are length of journey, value for money, frequency and staff attitudes."

- **The next issue of Passenger Voice** reveals the findings of a report which explores whether access to railway stations is meeting passenger demand.

- **Let us know what you think**
If you have any comments about anything you have read in this issue of Passenger Voice or anything you would like to see in the next issue, contact Sarah Egan at Passenger Focus, Whittles House, 14 Pentonville Road, London N1 9HF
sarah.egan@passengerfocus.org.uk

Better access to Cardiff's stadium needed

Passenger Focus has initiated a project to bring together the key industry partners in Wales to take a strategic look at how to improve the provision of rail services and

customer information for major events at the Millennium Stadium in Cardiff.

Further information will appear in the next issue of *Passenger Voice*.

National Rail Awards 2007

Passenger Focus is judging one of this year's National Rail Awards and will sponsor another...

Passenger Focus is solely responsible for short listing nominations for *The Station of the Year Award*. Stations will be judged by Passenger Focus and the NRA judges against set criteria that take into account station operations, infrastructure and maintenance. Particular emphasis will be placed on initiative and innovation in all aspects of station presentation, management and activity aimed at making stations as inviting, efficient and customer-friendly as possible.

Putting Passengers First is a new award, sponsored by Passenger Focus, aimed at recognising excellence, best practice and innovation in customer service in the rail

industry. This award is about promoting the achievement of outstanding service and recognising an organisation, team or individual that has demonstrated they have gone over and above the call of duty.

The winning entry could be a member of staff who showed great initiative when helping one of their passengers. Alternatively it might acknowledge a particular creative solution, developed by an organisation or team, which has vastly improved the passenger experience. Examples could be a new and innovative ticketing system, or a brand new initiative that has improved the journey experience for a particular passenger group, such as disabled travellers.

Ideally, the winner of the award will lead the way for the industry to follow. *Putting Passengers First* is open to nominations from any source.