

# Passenger Voice

A quarterly newsletter from the national rail passenger watchdog



## Protest launched against unfair price hike by SWT

South West Trains' announcement in March that it intended to impose substantial increases on some off-peak fares for passengers travelling towards London resulted in overwhelmingly negative media coverage in the national, regional and trade press...

Passenger Focus chief executive Anthony Smith was widely quoted in the media saying he was unsatisfied with the lack of explanation about what he deemed to be an "unjustified, unexplained and unfair price hike". He criticised South West Trains for the large increases which he said will

extend the peak throughout the whole of the morning.

The fact South West Trains made such an announcement without consultation added to the blow to passengers who value an affordable walk-on fare.

Passenger Focus held a meeting with South West Trains to express concern

about the steep proposal. Disappointingly South West Trains refused to reconsider their decision.

Passenger Focus has written to MPs whose constituencies are affected by the increases, protesting against what it considers to be exploitation of a monopoly market. In the run up to 20 May, when the new fares will be introduced, Passenger Focus will launch a media campaign objecting to the off-peak hike. As well as ensuring that passengers are aware of the change, the organisation's website will provide practical



South West Trains

advice and a chance for passengers to voice their opinions on the fares hike – [www.passengerfocus.org.uk/swt](http://www.passengerfocus.org.uk/swt)

## Passengers in Wales travel for free despite trying to pay

Passenger Focus' recent mystery shopping research has found that many passengers in Wales face a challenge when trying to buy tickets for their rail journeys. The publication showed that nearly a quarter (23%) of mystery shoppers are unable to buy a ticket due to overcrowding and a lack of guards on the trains. As a result many passengers board a train without a ticket and travel free despite trying to pay.

As part of Passenger Focus' research into rail ticket retailing, a team of specially

trained mystery shoppers carried out 56 on-board train checks on six different routes on the Cardiff Valley lines in South Wales, where passengers often have to buy their rail ticket on the train as ticket buying facilities are not available at most stations on these routes.

The research, published by Passenger Focus in March, found that the problem of uncollected revenue was particularly apparent at the weekends, when 58% of mystery shoppers were not able to

pay for their ticket.

Commenting on the results Passenger Focus board member for Wales, Stella Mair Thomas, said; "Paying on the train seems to equate to free travel in some parts of Wales. It is unacceptable to penalise those passengers honest enough to pay. The uncollected revenue resulting from ticketless travel also limits the potential for future investment in passenger services. Before increasing ticket prices, train operating companies must collect what is due to them."

### 2 Access to the railways

Quality of services for disabled passengers explored...

### 3 Best place to buy

At the station, on the phone or via websites?...

### 4 Parking at stations

People struggle to find a car parking space at their station...

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- 2 Franchising process must end
- 3 Getting a seat 'top priority'
- 4 Edinburgh CrossRail services to continue

# The first shoots of spring?



Anthony Smith

Two significant announcements herald positive changes for some of Britain's rail passengers although, as ever, change seems a long way off...

Firstly, the Government's announcement of a 1000 new carriages – not an order but an indication of the scale of the Government's ambition for this summer's rail spending review and the long term rail strategy to follow. Yes, this could have been done sooner and 1000 carriages will probably only match predicted growth but it is a big step in the right direction. Secondly, Network Rail's business plan for 2007/8 is looking at expanding the network. Hopefully, the Government's announcements on rail funding will match the 1000 carriages and we may see long-term capacity improvements. Could we be in a situation where the Thameslink, Reading and New Street projects, among others, could all be funded?

So, long term good news. In the meantime, while shareholders and Government reap the rewards of spiralling revenues, passengers face fare hikes and crowded trains. The passenger voice is simply not being heard clearly enough. First Great Western and

South West Trains passengers are in the front line of this. The affordable walk up railway is being chipped away at and passengers are increasingly crammed into already packed trains.

Does a change to the process of franchising need to take place so that the most important group on the railway, and now its main funder, the passengers, can have more faith and see their needs being prioritised? If the industry is not up front about franchises from the outset then public confidence will be eroded which is simply not acceptable. Much, much more transparency is needed about what is being purchased from the rail industry on behalf of passengers. The Government makes much of putting the user at the heart of public services. It is about time this theory was really imported to the railways.

A. J. C. Smith

Anthony Smith  
Chief executive

## Exploring the needs of passengers with reduced mobility

Passenger Focus has a long-established role in influencing industry decisions about making the railway more accessible and is involved in a wide range of activities including making recommendations for requirements to Disabled People's Protection Policies (DPPPs). The organisation is also involved in the 'Railways for All' project which funds

enhanced access at stations. Following a successful mystery shopping survey into rail ticket retailing in March, Passenger Focus has undertaken a pilot mystery shopping survey to measure the effectiveness and quality of facilities and services provided to a sample of disabled passengers who booked assistance via the Assisted Passenger

Reservation Service (APRS).

This latest project, being conducted in the South East, will enable Passenger Focus to understand the changing needs and experiences of passengers with reduced mobility. Specially trained shoppers audited a number of areas including ease of booking assistance through APRS and the effectiveness of the service once booked. The accuracy of information



given by National Rail Enquiries, including reference to APRS, was also monitored.

Look out for the results of this survey on our website [www.passengerfocus.org.uk](http://www.passengerfocus.org.uk) in August.

# Where's the best place to buy rail tickets?

With almost one in five passengers (19%), according to the National Passenger Survey, dissatisfied with ticket buying facilities at stations, Passenger Focus commissioned a mystery shop survey to better understand the level of service that is being experienced by passengers purchasing rail tickets in Great Britain...

As part of its detailed research into rail ticket retailing, Passenger Focus' team of specially trained mystery shoppers carried out 421 visits to stations; 56 on-board train checks; 250 calls to train



Buying tickets at Birmingham New Street

operators' telesales operations; and 150 website checks.

Passenger Focus' research manager Pete Thompson explains how the results of the survey will help passengers when buying their rail tickets in the future; "We found that using the internet to get information or to book tickets is a generally positive experience. However, our research suggests that, in most cases, passengers can be sure of getting the best deal and can avoid add-on charges, such as the £2 fee thetrainline.co.uk charges for using a credit card, by ordering tickets directly from the train companies' websites.

"Some train operators also offer a further discount on some of their advance

## Passenger Focus Advice

Getting the best deal when buying rail tickets...

- Check train operating companies' own websites when trying to book long-distance advance purchase fares
- Double-check if you are unwittingly paying for any unwanted add-on charges, e.g. insurance or credit card charges
- If you are making a number of long-distance journeys, ask if a Rover ticket is available
- If you want to travel first class at the weekend, ask for a weekend upgrade
- Do not hesitate to ask questions in order to get the ticket that is most suitable for your journey

fares when bought online.

"Where possible, passengers should try to book in advance for long-distance travel. However we found that cheap tickets were sometimes still available the day before departure."

# New Cross Country passengers speak out about their needs

Passenger Focus has published a major report looking into how passengers will be affected by Department for Transport (DfT) proposals to cut the number of through services on the New Cross Country franchise. The report, which includes an extensive survey of almost 10,000 passengers' journeys, gives Passenger Focus' final recommendations to the DfT on the New Cross Country franchise.

Passengers have clearly stated that getting a seat is their top priority. If the DfT is determined to go ahead with the cuts in direct services, then it is

absolutely essential that the possibility of a 30% increase in longer and more trains becomes a reality so that passengers are able to get a seat on the more crowded central areas of the Cross Country network.

However, with funding for improvements to Birmingham New Street station uncertain, Passenger Focus remains concerned at the numbers of passengers that will change at the station under the DfT proposals for the franchise.

Susan Tibbett, Passenger Focus passenger link manager said; "Our research shows that there are some realistic

alternative stations for some passengers to change at, however an industry-wide approach will be necessary to make sure that these stations provide high quality interchanges for passengers. While we don't like having to make trade-offs between groups of passengers, if the proposals for the new franchise do go ahead, it is vital that the DfT has properly thought through the effects of the changes on passengers."

Passenger Focus has presented its report and research to the DfT, and will continue to push for the recommendations to be taken onboard by the



successful franchise bidder to ensure that sales systems and staff are informed of the options in order to provide useful journey information to passengers.

# Limited car parking capacity has negative impact on railway travel

A piece of groundbreaking research, commissioned by Passenger Focus, has highlighted the fact that people are struggling to find a car parking space at their train station...

## News roundup

- **Board meeting in Leeds**  
Passenger Focus is holding a board meeting in Leeds on 15 May.
- **Minister travels on new train**  
Passenger Focus recently commissioned a survey of passengers travelling on the new Pennine Class 185 trains asking them about their on-board experience. People were asked about a range of areas including access, comfort and information. The overall results are very positive and will be launched on 16 May in Leeds.  
To mark the launch passenger link manager Sue Tibbett will travel on one of the new trains, from Leeds to Huddersfield, with Tom Harris MP, Minister of State for Transport.
- **Passenger satisfaction survey**  
The next National Passenger Survey (NPS), which assesses service aspects important to rail users, will be published on 5 June.
- **The next issue of *Passenger Voice***  
explores how re-signalling affects rail-users and reveals the latest results of the National Passenger Survey.

• **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: **Jane Cobell at Passenger Focus, Whittles House, 14 Pentonville Road, London N1 9HF**  
[contact@passengerfocus.org.uk](mailto:contact@passengerfocus.org.uk)

**G**etting to the station, which focused on four stations in the East of England, concluded that many people will turn their backs on the railway and drive unless action is taken to make it easy for people to park near the railway.

While Passenger Focus supports measures to encourage passengers to travel to stations by alternative methods, including walking and cycling, for those people living in rural areas the car will remain the most practical way of getting there. *Getting to the station* shows that most people who live within walking distance of a station will generally walk to it, while passengers in rural, semi-rural and edge of town locations tend to drive and park at the station. For instance, when asked what they would do if it became difficult to park at the station they currently use, 38% of passengers at Royston – located in rural Cambridgeshire – said they would drive to another station.

The detailed research was conducted at four stations but passenger link manager Guy Dangerfield believes it has wider implications:

“The findings of our research are likely to apply throughout the South East and particularly outside the M25 where many station car parks are already full after the morning peak. People already have to hunt for car parking spaces and, worryingly, potential train passengers are probably opting to drive rather than use the train at all.”

Economic demand forecasts suggest significant growth in the use of the railway over the next ten years which will, undoubtedly, exacerbate the problem.



The car park at Royston station

## Edinburgh CrossRail Services to continue

In November 2006, Passenger Focus conducted extensive research to understand passengers' priorities for the Scotland Route Utilisation Strategy (RUS).

Network Rail's initial RUS proposed that the Edinburgh CrossRail terminated at Edinburgh Waverley. Passenger Focus submitted its response to the consultation stating that the research demonstrated that

most passengers wanted a through service without having to change trains at Edinburgh Waverley.

If there was no direct service half (50%) of passengers said they would be less likely to travel by train.

Following the three month consultation, Network Rail announced on the 1 March 2007 that the services will now continue so that passengers will not have to change trains.