

# Passenger Voice

Independent national rail passenger watchdog



## Survey shows most passengers satisfied with train travel

Our Spring 2008 National Passenger Survey (NPS) shows the majority of Great Britain's rail passengers (80%) are satisfied with their journey. However, it also reveals Great Britain's train companies haven't made any progress in changing how passengers feel about the price of their ticket with only 40% of customers satisfied.

The NPS is Great Britain's largest train passenger survey and includes the opinions of more than 50,000 rail users. The survey is used to set the agenda for delivering changes for passengers. Train operators use the NPS results to look at how they are delivering.

First ScotRail passengers reported significant improvements to its performance with an 88% overall satisfaction rating – up five points on Spring 2007. Passengers said

four key areas of the service had improved including ticket-buying facilities at the station, the upkeep and repair of the station buildings and platforms, the availability of staff and trains' punctuality and reliability.

Maintaining their high passengers' satisfaction scores were Gatwick Express (93%), Heathrow Express (92%), Chiltern Railways (89%) and Merseyrail (88%).

The survey also provided some insight into early passenger views on the new franchises which haven't been previously looked at in the NPS.

Following the substantial changes in November 2007 to the shape and ownership of many train companies, the results for London Overground and East Midlands Trains, among others, should be seen as an



initial, early snapshot of passenger opinion. A fuller analysis of passenger satisfaction will be possible from the Autumn 2008 NPS.

Nationally, train operators scored low on how well they dealt with delays (34%), toilet facilities (35%) and the availability of staff (56%).

Passengers noted improvements to ticket-buying facilities, up four points to 71%, and personal security at stations increasing from 57% to 61%.

## South Central franchise consultation launched

Passenger Focus's early involvement in the franchising process gave the Government a good idea about passenger priorities, helping to ensure the new franchise will meet passengers' needs

Passenger Focus was asked to advise the Department for Transport (DfT) on the future franchise, putting forward the views of passengers. We undertook research asking more than 6000 passengers their opinions on the rail service and

priorities for improvement.

Anthony Smith, Passenger Focus chief executive, commented: "The Government has clearly listened to a lot of what passengers have said are priorities for the South Central franchise. Passengers' main

priorities are more trains to relieve overcrowding, more evening and weekend services and more trains arriving on time. However, information, especially at times of disruption and a clear, transparent ticketing structure also figured.

"While the consultation covers many of the issues passengers raised, we will be looking for commitments to improve value for money, additional trains and effective consultation with

passengers about future changes to services. Passengers and user groups must speak up and ensure the DfT hears their views – this is a rare opportunity to influence fundamental services in South London, Sussex and Surrey."

The franchise will be shorter than usual, at five years, 10 months, because major changes are envisaged around 2015 when the Thameslink Programme is complete.

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# Passenger Focus to become bus and coach watchdog

Ruth Kelly, Transport Secretary, has announced Passenger Focus will become the official national bus and passenger champion, representing the millions of people who use buses in the towns, villages and cities across England, outside London. The decision followed extensive public consultation and will take forward the measures in the Local Transport Bill to give passengers an influential national voice for the first time.

We are delighted to be given this new opportunity. Extending Passenger Focus's role to become the independent consumer watchdog for England's bus

and coach passengers is a logical way of joining up passenger representation.

So far Passenger Focus has met with all the key industry, local authority, Passenger Transport Executive, user group and government stakeholders. These meetings have helped define priorities for Passenger Focus in this new role as well as helping to build understanding of the issues facing bus passengers and the industry.

Passenger Focus will find out what passengers think and want through comparative benchmarking research, coupled with seeking to



Colin Foxall

influence decision makers. David Sidebottom, a Passenger Focus manager, has been appointed to help build the new capacity and capability Passenger Focus needs to take on for this new role.

Passenger Focus hopes to:

- Start up in-depth comparative research on the experiences of bus passengers in six cities and regions around England. This will help build an understanding of where and why bus services are successful
- Start bespoke research on key consumer issues – the impact of the national



A voice for bus users

concessionary fares scheme, for example

- Build extensive networks of user groups and users to allow the national organisation to have an effective regional reach
- Carry on publishing the current Department for Transport national bus satisfaction survey

Passenger Focus will take on the issues faced by bus and coach passengers in England while London TravelWatch will continue its role of representing bus users in London.

**Colin Foxall**

Passenger Focus chairman

## Passenger Focus Annual Conference 2008

Passenger Focus this year held its annual conference at the Wellcome Collection, London, on the theme 'Is the industry delivering?'

The conference allowed industry and stakeholders to debate key issues on the rail agenda and how passengers should be put at the heart of any developments and improvements to the network.

The keynote speech came from Transport Secretary Ruth Kelly MP, but she was supported by key industry representatives including Iain Coucher, Network Rail chief executive and the

Association of Train Operating Companies' commercial director David Mapp.

Kicking off the conference, Ruth Kelly reflected on the challenges government faced on the rail network including overcrowding, poor service, fares and giving passengers a stronger voice.

While offering her support to the introduction of fare name simplification, Ruth Kelly asked Passenger Focus to



Ruth Kelly



Iain Coucher



David Mapp

review the current system and compare rail fares in the UK with those in Europe.

Questions put to delegates during the day included whether fare rises should be tied to performance; should passengers pay the same price for a bus replacement

service; and whether the industry could deliver the Government's High Level Output Specification. Workshops included passenger priorities for stations, optimising the rail network, the fare system and managing disruption.

# Wasting time queuing

Passenger Focus's research shows that queues are longer off-peak and particularly busy at weekends.

Queuing times at 12 major stations were monitored by the watchdog. Only one in 20 passengers had to wait longer than three minutes at peak times but during off peak it was one in six. At weekends it rose to one passenger in five. The research found ticket offices had longer queuing times than ticket vending machines.

The Ticketing and Settlement Agreement states that no one should have to queue for more than five minutes during peak times and three minutes off-peak. Birmingham New Street emerged as

the best station for the shortest queues with no one queuing for as long as the Agreement's maximum at any time. King's Cross consumed the most passengers' time.

Passenger Focus chief executive Anthony Smith said: "Long queues are a problem for passengers when travelling on trains that have penalty fares operating. Train companies are now taking revenue protection more seriously, so it is crucial that passengers are given every opportunity to buy a ticket before boarding. Passengers may abandon a long queue to board without a ticket, and consequently suffer a fine."

## New rules on ticket use cause huge rises in travel costs

The broad welcome given to rebranding of tickets was marred by simultaneous tightening of rules on their use

Passenger Focus has vigorously opposed the changes which some train operating companies (TOCs) announced at the same time as the simplification of ticket types. The broadly favourable response to the rebranding was clouded by press reaction to price increases. Passenger Focus chief executive Anthony Smith has written to the three TOCs singled out for particular criticism, asking them to reconsider their decisions.

One of the fundamental changes is the time at which Cheap Day Return tickets can be used. For example, CrossCountry has banned their use under a blanket 'not before 09.30' and 'not between 15.30 and 18.15', whereas before they could be used earlier in the morning and without afternoon restriction. This means hefty increases in travel costs for passengers who have time-sensitive journeys, but it is likely to exacerbate overcrowding. It also

introduces confusion because it clashes with other TOCs' fare policies that use overlapping routes.

On Virgin Trains (VT), restrictions imposed on its Savers hit passengers from North Wales particularly hard, a journey from Llandudno Junction that would have cost £67 now costing £173. There is reason to feel a sense of injustice about this because VT's justification is that passengers boarding at stations in England, where more stringent restrictions apply, have been abusing the system by buying tickets from North Wales stations but boarding



Anthony Smith

### Recently completed research

- Stakeholder Survey 2007 – research tracked the changes of key stakeholders' perceptions and attitudes towards Passenger Focus
- Thameslink Rolling Stock – qualitative research to capture passengers' needs and ensure interests are reflected in the design of the new Thameslink rolling stock due in 2015

### Research underway

- Assisted Passenger Reservation Service (APRS) Mystery Shop – research investigating the quality of service provided to passengers with disabilities who book assistance using the APRS in the north of England, Wales and Scotland
- Employers' Requirements – research to inform Passenger Focus and the industry of employers' transport needs
- Ticket Vending Machines – research in partnership with South West Trains to survey passengers' attitudes and reasons for purchasing tickets at stations
- Thameslink Passenger Needs – qualitative research to determine what measures the rail industry can take to minimise the impact of the Thameslink Programme construction work, which will start early 2009

further down the line. However, since the watchdog made representation on behalf of passengers, Virgin has announced it is making available additional Advance Purchase tickets on this route. While this offers some benefit to passengers, others will miss the flexibility to turn up on the day and buy an affordable ticket.

National Express East Anglia (NEXA) has hiked its most expensive fares, Standard Open Return tickets, while at the same time barring the use of One Day Travelcards on its trains leaving London Liverpool Street between 16.29 and 18.34.

Anthony Smith continued: "These changes represent another nail in the coffin for the turn-up-and-go railway with passengers having to pay more if they can't book ahead or Advanced Purchase tickets are sold out. Passengers tell us in the National Passenger Survey that train tickets represent poor value for money, and this is another example of train companies introducing back-door price rises."



# Focus on information systems

Passenger Focus and National Rail Enquiries have commissioned research into passengers' views and opinions about information in the rail industry.

The research looked at problems passengers encounter, both when train services are running normally and when there is disruption; what passengers regard as 'good practice'; and what passengers thought were on industry plans to improve information.

Passengers said they needed certain information to help them plan and undertake their journey. This information included: train times, fares, platform information for arriving/departing trains, updates on delays/cancellations, return journey times, and advice on local transport connections for the ongoing journey.

Overall the research found that the information provided by the rail industry is considered good, accurate and reliable. However, many passengers had occasional experiences of problems, especially during times of disruption. During such instances they expect to be provided with timely



information that identifies the extent of the interruption and clear, relevant and trustworthy information on alternative travel options.

A key finding of the research was that staff presence at stations and on trains is considered extremely important.

Passenger Focus will work with the industry to communicate the findings of the research with the aim of improving passenger information across the network.

## Call for passenger opinion

Passenger Focus is calling for passenger opinion on South West Train's plans to change ticket office opening hours. South West Trains has announced it is reviewing the opening hours of ticket offices at over 100 locations and has advertised plans at the affected stations. Passengers will have up until 5 August to comment on the

proposal. Passengers who wish to comment on the South West Trains proposal should get in contact with Passenger Focus at [www.passengerfocus.org.uk](http://www.passengerfocus.org.uk), call our passenger advice team on 08453 022 022 or write to **Freeport RRRE-ETTC-LEET, PO Box 4257, Manchester, M60 3AR.**

## News roundup

### • West Coast Main Line work

The national rail watchdog has backed moves to allow Network Rail to plan additional engineering works in 2008 along the West Coast Main Line. The Office of Rail Regulation has announced Network Rail could have extra possessions on the route to make certain it completes required work before the December deadline.

While Passenger Focus welcomed the decision, it is pushing train operators to compensate passengers who have to travel by replacement bus services during disruptions.

### • What we're doing for passengers

Passenger Focus is determined to get a better deal for train passengers. Here are a few examples of how our Passenger Advice Team helped:

- Negotiated £50 compensation from Arriva Trains Wales to cover a taxi fare when a bus replacement service did not stop at the passenger's normal train station
- A passenger's Senior Railcard expired before travel and on their journey they were asked to pay £80 for new ticket. Virgin agreed to a refund on our appeal
- When a passenger was sold an Advance ticket without being told the terms and conditions, she was charged for a full fare ticket on the train. South West Trains agreed to our appeal for a full refund in travel vouchers
- Secured a part refund for a Chiltern passenger who purchased a First Class ticket for a service where no First Class accommodation was offered

## Watchdog puts fares under spotlight

Passenger Focus is looking at fares, ticketing and value for money in a study requested by the Secretary of State for Transport, Ruth Kelly MP, who is concerned about low passenger satisfaction with value for money.

The Spring 2008 National Passenger Survey showed just 40% satisfaction with value for money. We are reviewing existing evidence, including research Passenger Focus has undertaken in recent years,

to produce a synopsis of the issues and understand where there are knowledge gaps.

Much is known about passenger satisfaction with value for money, but the understanding of why passengers rate value for money so poorly on the railways is largely assumption and instinct. It is a widely-held view that the fare structure is complex, with many passengers unsure if they have paid

more than they needed to. We will be examining this and looking at whether recent industry initiatives like Fares Simplification are sufficient to tackle the problem.

We will also be comparing fares in Britain with those in continental Europe: is the perception that fares here are sky-high actually reality?

We will be presenting findings in two stages. An interim report at the end of July, followed later in the year by conclusions in the light of any new research we undertake.