



# Rail passengers' experiences during the snow

March 2011



# Introduction

This short report provides a passenger perspective on how train companies handled disruption during the extreme weather in late November/early December 2010. It builds upon the understanding of passengers' experiences during disruption gained during production of both our research report *Delays and disruption: rail passengers have their say*, published on 1 December (see Appendix – part A) and our submission to the *David Quarmby Winter Resilience Review* on 7 December (see Appendix – part B).



**M**any of the problems identified in “Delays and disruption: rail passengers have their say” were again apparent, but they were often magnified by the extreme conditions. The feedback again shows the importance of consistent, accurate and timely information during disruption. When it snows, passengers are aware of the potential for disruption and are actively seeking information. They expect an accurate answer to the question “can I get where I want to go?”; and they want it before they leave home.

**Passenger Focus will continue to press the rail industry to implement measures that will significantly improve passengers' experiences during future severe weather and other disruption.**

# Research findings

The *Delays and disruption: rail passengers have their say* report looked at comments from a 1000-strong passenger 'disruption panel'. This identified six main themes in terms of what passengers wanted the rail industry to do differently during delays and disruption. They were:



- Treat me with respect
- Recognise my plight
- Help me avoid the problem in the first place
- You got me into this, help get me out
- Act joined up
- I am 'always' delayed, do something about it.

The extreme weather occurred just as Passenger Focus was preparing to close the 'disruption panel', which had then been running for 12 months. As a final request to panel members, we asked for their views about how disruption was handled during the snow; we received around 30 reports. These reports were analysed in the context of understanding gained in reviewing panelists' experiences during disruption over that 12 months, and the six main themes emerging from them. The additional feedback showed many of the same issues, but four specific areas stood out and are discussed below.

## **“Can I get where I want to go?”**

During severe weather passengers are more likely than usual to actively check how trains are running before they set out. Unlike 'general' unplanned disruption, in severe weather passengers expect that there might be delays and are actively looking to check. If passengers arrive at a station and the service bears no resemblance to the information available before they left home it becomes doubly frustrating. Particularly so if it turns out that the journey cannot be made at all and you need not have battled your way to the station in the first place. What came across powerfully is that passengers need a fast, accurate answer to the question “can I get where I want to go?” – and that they want it before they leave home. Therefore any discrepancy between different sources of remote information, principally online journey planners, textual descriptions on websites, Live Departure Boards and the broadcast media undermines passengers' trust in any of the information and it creates anxiety and frustration.

***“The greatest frustration throughout the period, however, was not with the train services themselves – they cannot help the weather – but the woefully poor information***

*which was provided; not just on the railway stations, but also on the National Rail Enquiries live departure board.”*

*“I think my biggest complaint about the disruption was the fact that there was misleading information being provided on the websites and by station staff. For example on Wednesday morning, the 8th December, I looked at the [train company] website and it was saying that the 8.28 was on time... I got to the station with the notice boards still saying that the train was going to be on time and as I stood on the platform the time of arrival was changed to show the train was going to be delayed. The staff member then informed everyone that no trains would be coming as they couldn't get the trains out of wherever they had been for the night. I then had to walk home to get my car to make my alternative way to work... I made unnecessary trips to the station based upon the information provided on the website and this was totally unacceptable.”*

*“Southern's use of local media outlets is derisory and it would be interesting to find out the communication and media strategy in such circumstances. Surely the main emphasis would be giving customers total information regarding the situation even if this means that no trains are running.”*

*“On several occasions the live departure boards online indicated that there were trains running, so I went to the station only to find no trains at all. If the information online was correct I could have saved myself the trip to the station and made alternative arrangements.”*

*“I am on the message alert service and this was useless the same messages were sent during the fortnight saying trains may be cancelled, I would have thought they could have updated this on a more regular basis with relevant information.”*

The feedback revealed the problems of crowding during service disruption and/or a planned reduction in either frequency or capacity. As well as knowing if there are trains running, passengers need to know if they have a realistic prospect of getting on one, given the likely loadings by the time trains reach their station. Train companies are concerned about running trains, but passengers are concerned about travelling; for a passenger, a train that is too full to get on has the same value as a cancelled train – none. For some people, knowledge of likely crowding is fundamental to answering the question “can I get where I want to go?”.

*“After I had waited on a freezing platform for just over an hour a train turned up. It was shortformed and no-one*



*at Eltham could board it. People who had been there longer than me had waited around 1 hour 20 minutes by then. For some people it was their second visit to the station that morning to get into work.”*

*“The 8.01 or 8.10 was advertised as running, but I waited until 8.30 for one train to come, which was so crowded that most people at Streatham Common were unable to board. I then gave up and got the bus.”*

*“I was unable to commence my journey from East Croydon to London Bridge... it was simply not possible for me to undertake this journey. There was either no trains running or when they were they were packed.”*

*“The 7.38 and 8.09 trains were cancelled which meant there was just one four carriage train – the 7.52 in to London in the space of an hour.”*

### **Passengers really suffered, the conditions were extreme**

In “Delays and disruption: rail passengers have their say” we reported that passengers think train companies treat disruption as a purely logistical challenge to be overcome before normal running resumes – that is, divorced from what passengers are thinking and experiencing in the meantime. Passengers reported being left on stations without knowing when or whether the train would come; train companies not actively providing advice about alternative travel options; and being abandoned for long periods at stations with which they are unfamiliar. During the snow this problem was accentuated, bringing home just how grim it can be standing on platforms waiting for trains in sub-zero conditions.

*"Waited over an hour for trains from Scotland, delays later and later on information screen, in overcrowded and COLD waiting room on Newcastle station, finally gave up and returned on Metro home – FROZEN STIFF."*

*"The first 3 trains departing from Marsden towards Huddersfield were cancelled. Marsden is an unmanned station and has no heated waiting areas. The temperature on that morning was between -10 and -12 deg C. I with around 50 other passengers waited on the platform for 1 hour 40 minutes for a train to arrive. During this period no announcements were made over the station tannoy, however we were kept amused by the completely erroneous and irrelevant updates provided by Traintracker. In all seriousness this level of passenger neglect is not acceptable."*

*"Poor decision making seemed to make matters worse e.g. why was a perfectly good service terminated early in Aberdeen and two carriages worth of passengers forced to endure almost an hour long wait in sub-zero conditions? Surely the sensible course of action here was to take local passengers to Dyce which would have minimised the number of people inconvenienced."*

*"The train is frequently sat at the platform from about 17:00, engine running with driver and conductor on board. Yet despite this the doors are closed and passengers not allowed to board until about 17:20. This means we have passengers stood in the cold who could be seated in the warm."*

#### **It felt chaotic**

During the snow, passengers often felt that nobody was in overall control of events. This included staff at stations not having the whole picture; receiving different information from different sources; and a generally laissez-faire approach to the impact on passengers. Bad as it can be during 'general' disruption, in the snow passengers found things bordered on the chaotic.

The result was passengers being shunted around, made to switch platforms, board trains woefully short of carriages and staff sometimes unwilling, but more often not in a position to help. Despite understanding that the challenges facing train companies were immense, passengers want a calmer, holistic, more unified management of the situation.



*"I understand that there will be occasions that there will be no trains, but in the 21st century I do expect up to date information and all staff to be informed. If you could look at one aspect please look at the repeated communications breakdown when anything out of the ordinary happens on the West Coast Mainline."*

*"...coming home (from Leeds Station) was a different story, every Manchester Airport, Manchester Piccadilly and Liverpool train was delayed, then they would change platforms at the last minute, but not actually make any announcement – just someone shouting out, then there would be a mad dash, it is a wonder people weren't injured."*

*"The Trans Pennine Express is one of the busiest lines that run through Leeds, so Platform 16 where they normally run from every 15 mins is always packed in the rush hour, so you can imagine the amount of people when there had not been a train for 45 mins, which was happening, it really was quite scary at some times."*

*"The next London Kings Cross train finally showed up about 13 minutes late and was rammed. I went in to ask at the ticket office. The staff member told me she had just been told the 6:36 was cancelled and had no idea the 6:27 Moorgate train hadn't showed up. This is a shocking state of affairs. I'm not asking for information*



***that will require extra effort. I hope FCC know where their trains are at any given time. I just ask that info be available to the paying public (both at stations and on line)."***

What also showed in the reports was an appreciation by passengers of the extraordinary position of staff in these circumstances. There were cases of staff being less than helpful, as reported previously by panel members. However these latest reports give a sense that passengers empathise with passenger-facing staff apparently let down by their employer.

***"I felt sorry for the staff on the platforms because they knew no more than we did and were getting visibly stressed by being asked for information by the passengers but not getting any answers from above."***

***"As ever, a considerable number of train and station staff did their best in difficult circumstances to assist and inform. They have been let down by those above them in the chain of command."***

#### **It hasn't snowed for days – why are you still disrupted?**

Passengers showed some forgiveness when the weather was visibly bad, but the reports show that passengers think the rail industry should be able to recover more quickly when there is no fresh snow-fall. There are two elements to this: first, whether the industry should indeed be able

"In the  
**21<sup>st</sup>**

century I do expect up to date information and all staff to be informed"

to recover more quickly and, second, that train companies need to get better at explaining why routes are still closed or temporary timetables still in operation.

***"Quite apart from the provision of false information, it was also difficult to understand why an emergency timetable was needed from Leeds as it was three days since any fresh snow had fallen, and lying snow was neither deep nor mobile, with no snow south of Grantham. Other operators appeared to be running their full timetables over the same route!"***

***"On Friday the Manchester via Brighouse route was cancelled for the rest of the day, despite there being no snowfall whatsoever on Thursday – therefore giving Northern Rail a whole day to clear the tracks."***

***"The service seemed to get worse rather than better as time wore on, despite there being no further instances of poor weather in the north east of Scotland after 2/12/10."***

***"I appreciate that the weather can cause services to not function in the way they have been planned to, but the weather cannot be used as a blanket reason for any issue. The nation has been given fair warning of any weather hazards so I believe the TOCs could have done a little more in preparing for the weather."***

# Appendix



**Part A The conclusions of *Delays and disruption: rail passengers have their say*, published 1 December 2010 were:**

- Many passengers who experience disruption feel that the rail industry shows too little respect for them, both as customers and as human beings. The impression is given that train companies treat disruption as a purely logistical challenge to be overcome before normal running resumes – that is, divorced from what passengers are thinking and experiencing in the meantime.
- Too many passengers experience patchy, inaccurate or conflicting information – and some get none at all. It shines through that having accurate, consistent information is vital, irrespective of the information channel used, whom you ask or where you ask. It seems extraordinary to passengers that in our modern communications age this is apparently so difficult to achieve.
- That the rail industry is poor at helping people through incidents once they have become caught up in them. Indeed, passengers cite actions that made things worse and lack of action that would have made the disruption more bearable. This manifests itself in two main ways: failure to provide accurate estimates of delay or incident duration; and failure to proactively help passengers understand what they should now do, whether it be specific advice or a range of options.
- That there is considerable scope to help passengers avoid disruptions in the first place, prevention being better than cure. Many passengers have the option to take a different route, travel from a station on a different line, or delay their journey to avoid getting caught up in disruption. Yet the majority (87%) of passengers arrive at the station not knowing that there is a problem.
- That when train companies behave 'considerately', in particular when accurate, honest information is shared in a proactive, timely way, passengers are often quite forgiving, even when the delay is lengthy.

**Part B** **Headline findings from our submission on 7 December 2010 to David Quarmby's Winter Resilience Review:**

- The National Rail Enquiries (NRE) website appears to have coped well with very high volumes
- The online real time journey planner on the NRE website did not show correct information for some train operating companies (TOCs)
- The online journey planners on TOC and third-party websites did not generally reflect the contingency timetables in operation
- Tickets continued to be available for sale online for many trains that would not run
- Station displays appear to have reflected formal contingency timetables, except for Southeastern
- Station displays and online Live Departure Boards did not always keep pace with events
- The NRE call centres appear to have provided good information, but queuing times of 11 or 12 minutes were common.

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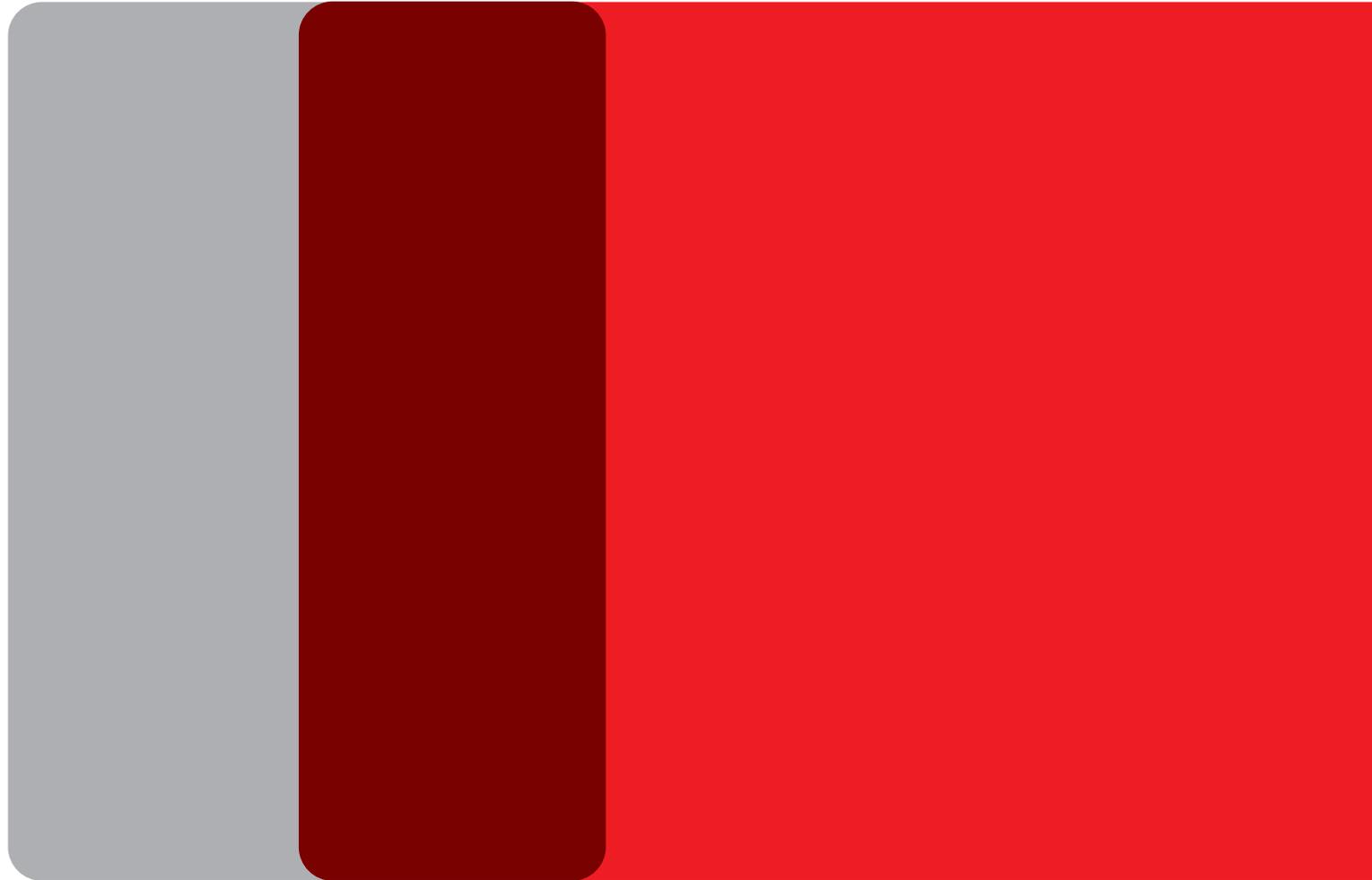
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