

Passenger Voice

Yorkshire and The Humber

Independent national passenger watchdog



Tram-train plans move forward

Passenger Focus has welcomed plans to trial new tram-trains in South Yorkshire and will be monitoring their reception by passengers

The Department for Transport has announced that tram-trains are greener than conventional trains because they use less fuel and have faster acceleration and deceleration rates, which offer passengers better journey times. They are also lighter which may reduce wear and tear on tracks, thereby reducing maintenance and disruption to services.

Plans are being developed to run tram-trains between Sheffield and Rotherham on the current freight route from Rotherham and then join the Sheffield Supertram network at the Meadowhall Interchange.

The trial will assess the environmental benefits, operating costs and technical suitability of the tram-trains as well as testing how popular the vehicles are with passengers. Passenger Focus will be involved in consultation and will seek passenger feedback.

David Sidebottom, Passenger Focus bus passenger project manager, and Kerry Williamson, Passenger Focus manager, have

been involved in consultation on the project to date. David commented: "What we will want to see from this trial is ongoing liaison with passengers and community groups to ensure this service meets passenger needs. Passengers tell us that value for money,

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trains running on time, getting a seat, and sufficient services are their top priorities for railway improvements. If the tram-train can deliver on these priorities, it will be a win for passengers. We also look forward

to seeing if this scheme can deliver its promise for quicker journeys for passengers and fewer disruptions on the network."

New timetable on East Coast

When National Express won the East Coast franchise in 2007 it proposed an enhanced timetable (in terms of service frequency and new destinations) to start in December 2010. Guy Dangerfield said, "Passenger Focus will work with the Government to ensure passengers have the chance to comment on what is proposed in the future".

Shaping a new franchise

Passengers want punctual and reliable trains, value for money and to be able to get a seat on services run under the new East Coast franchise.

As National Express handed back the franchise to the Government, Passenger Focus completed research asking what passengers want delivered by the future operator.

Guy Dangerfield, Passenger Focus manager, said the return of the franchise to the Government brought an end to the period of uncertainty. He

commented: "Passengers were relieved that the transfer was smooth and will welcome assurances that the level and quality of service will not suffer.

"Looking forward, it is most important that passenger needs and priorities are at the heart of any future franchise. In the last two months we have surveyed over 6000 passengers on this route and have fed their views to the Government – we hope passengers' concerns and aspirations are central to the next franchise."



Passengers surveyed

Passenger Focus is also working with the Department for Transport to understand passengers' views about various service quality issues to be addressed during the period when the Government has direct responsibility for the East Coast franchise.

Campaign to improve complaint handling

Hull Trains has made important changes to the way it handles passengers' complaints as Passenger Focus works on a national programme to help get passengers a better deal

The independent watchdog's suggestions follow a review of the train operator's procedures. It builds on existing good practices, including offering passengers refunds by credit card or cash rather than travel vouchers. While new credit and debit card rules are likely to preclude continuation of this practice, Hull Trains has set up a BACS direct credit arrangement for passengers who provide their bank details.

Passenger Focus also highlighted the need to incorporate a response time in Hull Trains' Passengers' Charter and Customer Complaints Handling Procedure; it currently aims to respond in a 'reasonable' timescale. While Hull Trains is considering this point, it doesn't want to promise a response time that it cannot consistently meet, nor does it want to advertise a period of time that is much longer than normally required to resolve an issue.

Hull Trains has also accepted the need to improve the wording of its responses to passengers, and staff will now be offered

refresher training on letter-writing skills to improve the quality and content of correspondence.

In addition, Hull Trains has recognised the need to review the consistency of its compensation policy and to improve the way it processes complaints, including after major disruption.

Sue Tibbett, Passenger Focus manager said: "These reviews, which are part of a national programme Passenger Focus is undertaking with all train operators, allow a fresh look at the customer service approach to complaint-handling within the company along with the supporting processes, policies and

corporate objectives that are in place. Passengers will benefit from the improvements that have been identified and causes of complaint should be reduced for the operator."

TransPennine also addresses complaints

- Passengers should have started to notice an improvement in TransPennine Express's complaints-handling process, including a more consistent and better quality of response. This follows recommendations made by Passenger Focus last year. The watchdog has been asked to carry out periodic reviews to ensure standards are maintained and further improved.

Passenger Focus Board in the North East

September saw the Passenger Focus Board travel to Newcastle for its meeting in public. The independent passenger watchdog also held a stakeholder reception at St James' Park where Bernard Garner, chief executive of Nexus, outlined his vision for Newcastle transport and Metro improvements to be undertaken in the future. Passenger Focus chairman, Colin Foxall, also spoke about passenger issues in the region and the work the watchdog undertakes with train companies and passenger groups.

The board meeting was held at the Life Bioscience Centre and included representatives from Grand Central (Tom Clift, managing director), National Express East Coast (Mike Hogg, operations director) and CrossCountry Trains (Sarah Kendall, production director). All guests commended Passenger Focus on the work it does and expressed their desire to continue to work closely with the watchdog in the future.

Board in Focus David Burton



David Burton brings over 30 years' experience as a railwayman to his work as a board member at Passenger Focus. Apart from the rather poisoned chalice of being given the task of selling Red Star parcels, most of his time was spent on the passenger side.

He was deputy general manager of the Southern Region under British Rail, helped prepare many of the train operating companies around London and the south east for privatisation, and was managing director of West Anglia Great Northern in shadow and privatised forms.

Asked whether he feels there is an element of gamekeeper turned poacher in his work for Passenger Focus, he rejects the idea; the same business principles apply whatever the form of ownership or management, the most important being the necessity of looking after customers. His understanding of railways from a passenger perspective is perhaps his greatest contribution to the board, and his main areas of involvement with the team are timetables, franchise renewal and Route Utilisation Strategies.

David Burton sees ticketing and fares as a major unresolved challenge. Despite the Association of Train Operating Companies' (ATOC) recent simplification of fare names, he feels there is still far too much complexity

and a lack of clarity for passengers. There remain too many subdivisions within each ticket type, and the times at which they can be used vary from one TOC to another. Nor is there consistency over the times that Advance tickets become available to book. Equally he thinks a major marketing exercise is needed to let those who seldom use trains realise what good value fares can be obtained through advance booking.

He is looking forward to the challenge of championing bus, coach and tram passengers. Although research to find out what passengers want is at an early stage, he believes it may offer the opportunity of improving integration between modes. While there are good examples of bus/rail integration, they are the exception rather than the rule. David Burton sees the new role as a natural extension of Passenger Focus's current remit. He has been impressed by the dedication of the team, and he stresses how much he enjoys working for what he sees as a successful and well-run organisation.