

Calls for better planning of engineering works

Passenger Focus has voiced concerns about Network Rail shutting parts of the East and West Coast Main Lines at the same time for essential engineering works over recent weekends

The issue has also been raised with the rail company by Lord Andrew Adonis, Minister for Transport.

Julie Warburton, Passenger Focus manager commented: "Passengers will be mystified how the two main North to South rail routes can be cut at the same time. Passengers understand that engineering works have to be done but they must be planned by the whole industry to lessen

the effect on passengers. Passenger Focus is seeking a pledge from the train companies and Network Rail that they will always seek to ensure that during planned engineering work trains use alternative routes and bus replacement services are only used as a last resort. Just as importantly information should make it clear that passengers can use other routes and this should be at no extra cost."



Image: Keeping Track

Passenger Focus's research shows passengers would prefer to spend up to an hour longer on a train than change to a rail replacement service.

Network Rail has since given assurances that works would be planned to allow passengers to travel by alternative rail routes.

Exploratory bus research

As part of its work to help define its new role, Passenger Focus has met TravelWatch West Midlands to understand areas of joint interest and explore how the two organisations might work together.

Stakeholder interviews have been held with local operators in Herefordshire and with the County Council to look into complaint-handling arrangements. Research has also been carried out in Birmingham to look into the operation and impact of the concessionary fares scheme on passengers, local authorities and operators. The scheme allows those over 60 to travel free on buses outside peak hours.

Encouraging NPS results for Virgin

Virgin Trains scored well in Passenger Focus's Autumn 2008 National Passenger Survey: 84% of its passengers are satisfied overall with Virgin's rail services and 82% are satisfied with reliability and punctuality.

However, there is still room for improvement. Only half of Virgin's passengers think it deals well with delays and that toilet facilities on the trains are satisfactory.

Although only 43% of passengers are satisfied with car-parking facilities, this should improve in future surveys as improvement plans progress.

Free travel for passengers

Passengers are hoping that an action plan by London Midland (LM) will end a period of sustained poor performance caused through a combination of timetable changes, infrastructure problems and poor train availability. The impact of short-notice cancellations and platform changes was exacerbated by poor communication.

Passenger Focus's Paul Fullwood has raised these issues with LM, which is

producing an action plan to be presented to the Department for Transport (DfT). As a 'thank you' to passengers and in recognition of these issues, LM has given three days' free travel to season-ticket holders between Northampton and London Euston and on the Marston Vale and Watford Abbey branches.

The National Passenger Survey revealed an overall satisfaction figure of 80% for London Midland.

Reconnecting Moor Street

Chiltern Railways' plans to reconnect the terminal platforms at Birmingham Moor Street will contribute to Centro's long-term strategy to increase the capacity of city-centre stations and relieve pressure on New Street. Passenger Focus supports the reconnection but insists that changes to commuter service patterns must take into account passenger concerns.

Passengers put first

Board Member profile

Birmingham based, Philip – universally known as Phil – has strong public and voluntary sector experience.

The Passenger Focus Board member is a former trade union officer specialising in employment law and as an Employment Tribunals member, he still keeps a link to his 20 plus years on the industrial frontline. This is only one of a number of representative and advocacy roles Phil has undertaken.

“I was fortunate to twin-track my union job with work as a local councillor and transport and land-use planning was a particular interest.

“I became leader of one of the top performing councils in England and also led the West Midlands Regional Assembly. This gave me experience of how transport planning and the politics affecting it needs to be linked to give us a better rail and bus system. At the same

time I’m a regular rail and bus user so I see what the passenger sees.”

Phil is one of the Passenger Focus board members with a particular interest in the English regions. He sits on the West Midlands Regional Transport Partnership and tries to keep in touch with regional transport user groups. He

is delighted that Birmingham’s New Street Station is to get its long-awaited passenger facilities “make-over”, but sees this as only ‘phase one’, given the lack of room for extra trains at this key rail junction.

Nationally, Phil also has good informal links with transport providers, meeting with colleagues from both public and private sectors as a member of the Commission for Integrated Transport, a ministerial advisory body.



“As long as they get a decent service, passengers don’t much care who runs their bus or train - but representing transport users does require understanding of what shapes the passenger experience,” says Passenger Focus board member Philip Davis.

“Passenger Focus is well-placed to turn individual passenger concerns into policy proposals for better service. We’ve listened to by government, so the operators pay attention.”

Gates at five Midlands stations

Automatic ticket barriers are about to be installed at five stations in Birmingham as part of a £2.7 million franchise commitment by rail operator London Midland: New Street, Moor Street, Snow Hill, Five Ways and University

While installation of gates has aroused controversy in some stations, Passenger Focus supports their objectives – protecting revenue and improving security – but that each case has to be assessed on its merits. Passenger Focus acknowledges that in an ideal world, gates would be unnecessary.

London Midland managing

director Steve Banaghan said the barriers would improve flow through the stations and reduce journey times for rail users. He has advised Passenger Focus that there will be a period where passengers will need to get used to this new technology and staff will be on hand to help.

Training is being provided for London Midland staff,

especially when dealing with the numbers of passengers using Birmingham New Street, but the barriers are compatible with the majority of tickets. Despite the introduction of the automatic ticket gates, staff levels will remain the same.

The gates’ software system can provide intelligence, which will help forecast future



growth and allow London Midland to gauge passenger levels on individual routes.

West Coast Main Line tribulations

The first few weeks of 2009 saw the West Coast Main Line dogged by unrelated problems.

However, the full Virgin High Frequency timetable has been introduced and things seem to

be settling down with the majority of customers enjoying more frequent intercity services. Many passengers along the Trent Valley route continue to feel aggrieved that Virgin has

reduced the number of stops at their stations in order to speed up the long-distance services. Passenger Focus will be undertaking passenger research later this year to gather passenger views about how they think the new timetable is working for them. The data will

be used to support its response to the West Coast Route Utilisation Strategy consultation. Passenger Focus will also be holding Rail User Group and Community Rail Partnership meetings at various points along the West Coast Main Line in early summer.