

Wales and Borders Rail Service and Metro scrutiny

1 Introduction

- 1.1 Transport Focus is the independent consumer watchdog promoting the interests of rail passengers throughout Great Britain; bus, coach and tram passengers across England, outside London; and users of the Strategic Road Network in England. We have a Board Member for Wales appointed by the Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Transport.
- 1.2 We welcome the opportunity to provide evidence from our passenger research, to aid the Committee's scrutiny.

2 What passengers want from the new rail service

- 2.1 During the specification and procurement programme, we have been able to work closely with Welsh Government, Transport for Wales and the bidders. We have provided input across a range of passenger insight, including specifically-commissioned research.
- 2.2 Our analysis draws from the National Rail Passenger Survey¹ (NRPS), drivers of passenger satisfaction and dissatisfaction and passenger priorities for improvement², alongside our report on what passengers want from the future Wales and Borders rail service³. Together these highlight a number of factors that should be top level priorities to be addressed. The primary requirements should be for an absolute focus on the fundamentals to deliver reliability on a daily basis.
- 2.3 Passengers tell us that their top priorities for the new Wales and Borders railway are getting a seat on reliable services that provide good value for money. Many passengers in Wales are currently travelling on trains well past their sell-by date. Older trains, carrying more passengers than the number of seats available, makes for an uncomfortable journey. Passengers deserve better from a modern rail service.
- 2.4 Persistent delays to services on parts of the previous Arriva Trains Wales (ATW) network battered the expectations and trust of passengers. It's important that Transport for Wales, KeolisAmey and Network Rail get the basics right, on a more consistent basis, to rebuild trust with passengers. Clearly passengers will look forward to seeing the promised benefit of new trains, additional services and increased capacity.
- 2.5 The problem of crowded services came up time and time again in our research. Rail passengers right across the Wales and Borders network feel that all too often there is simply not enough capacity on their particular route. This was apparent in different ways, from commuters suffering severe overcrowding on a daily journey to work, to sports fans heading to a big match struggling to get on a packed train, to families unable to sit together on a holiday to the seaside.
- 2.6 Many services run with insufficient seating and too little space for buggies, wheelchairs or luggage to meet the demand of today's travelling public. Passengers would like to see more seats and more space to alleviate these problems. It is also important that the new service provides trains of appropriate length during peak periods and supplies a service frequency that meets demand. All too often, the number of carriages falls woefully short in relation to the need.

¹ [National Rail Passenger Survey](#), Transport Focus, 2018

² [Rail passengers' priorities for improvement](#), Transport Focus, 2017

³ [The future of the Wales and Borders rail service: what passengers want](#), Transport Focus, 2017

- 2.7 Daily overcrowding is a serious problem for commuters in the urban centres of South Wales, North Wales and the Borders. The dated nature of the rolling stock, carrying far more passengers than the number of seats available is a recipe for discomfort and, at times, leaves passengers feeling unsafe. They also express frustration when they see off-peak services with more carriages than the busy service they use to get to and from work.
- 2.8 Arriva Trains Wales passengers felt that fares were reasonable in comparison to other travel options. This was especially true for local journeys, although less true for longer trip or group travel. However, passengers don't feel that the ticket prices offer good value for money, given factors such as old and crowded trains. For passengers to feel like they are getting decent value, they expect to get a seat, for the service to run on time and for the train to be clean. Their perception of value for money is eroded by the feeling that stations and trains are old-fashioned and run down. Improvements that address these concerns must be a top priority for Transport for Wales as it delivers the new service.
- 2.9 Punctuality, reliability and how disruption is dealt with are highly important for all passengers, but particularly key priorities for commuters who tend to see most often the best or worst a service can offer. Persistent delays to services on parts of the Arriva Trains Wales hit passengers' daily lives. This went beyond frustration; for some passengers the research reveals a feeling of despondency with issues that have persisted for years and services that don't seem to be improve.
- 2.10 Seamless ticketing is also called for, which allows passengers to select and easily obtain the best and most appropriate fare for their journey, delivered through the medium of their choice. The operator also needs to embed a genuinely customer-service focused culture at all levels and provide a personalised, rewarding passenger experience and building trust with clear and open communication.
- 2.11 For passengers with disabilities, the key issue is lack of staff to assist them with their journeys. Crowding presents unmanageable and dangerous conditions and anti-social behaviour is more threatening. Confusing ticketing can cause issues for those with anxiety and learning disabilities. Lack of provision in parts of Wales also presents difficulties of finding routes to more central stations.
- 2.12 Our work to explore passengers' relationship with the rail industry⁴ found that to improve trust, train companies not only need to get the basic service right day-to-day, they need to put effort into building long-term relationships with their passengers. For Wales and the Borders, it is important to get the basic service right ahead of everything else. Then, building on closer relationships with their passengers. One way is through high quality communication. Passengers should feel that train companies are 'on their side'.
- 3 Effectiveness of the contract**
- 3.1 The yardstick for passengers will be the extent to which the specification and service address current issues and offer what they want for the future. Understanding this was a fundamental element of the procurement process. The consultation and engagement during the process was welcomed, however views differ on how inclusive this was of passenger groups across Wales and the Borders.
- 3.2 Our research⁵ shows the previous ATW franchise has left passengers with feelings of dejection and despondency over the lack of investment. The NRPS results for ATW, tracking the top six passenger priority aspects over the 15 year franchise, are attached at

⁴ [Passengers' relationship with the rail industry](#). Transport Focus. 2014

⁵ [The future of the Wales and Borders rail service: what passengers want](#), Transport Focus, 2017

Appendix 1. These show the satisfaction trends are fairly flat; ending with comparatively similar scores to where they started. Passengers are looking to the new rail service with an expectation of greater improvement.

3.3 To highlight this, and to inform the procurement process, we provided insight into the passenger perspective. This was built up through consultation responses and evidence to the Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee's inquiries as well as through direct engagement with Welsh Government, Transport for Wales and bidders. We also provided expert reports on bidders' proposals on the passenger experience to assist in appraising each bid.

3.4 The substance emerging from the new service specification shows considerable ambition. Some key highlights include:

- NRPS targets and additional customer satisfaction surveys, alongside a service quality regime across stations and trains to improve standards
- Delay-repay introduced after 30 minutes from day one and after 15 minutes from the end of January 2019
- 'Think like a customer' training in first six months, disability awareness training; booking app for passengers needing assistance and 22 community ambassadors from 2020
- Pacer trains withdrawn by 2020 and refurbished trains added, with new stock starting to be introduced from 2021 and main influx from 2023 to 2025
- South Wales Metro service introduced, joining up heavy and light rail with buses, bus rapid transit, interchanges and active travel; new vehicles and level boarding across the Valleys lines from 2022, with easy to understand, integrated signage
- Earlier trains and more frequent services on Sundays from 2019 alongside more general service improvements and extra trains on routes 2019-2022
- Deep clean of all stations from end of 2018, with wider investment in stations to improve shelters, toilets, access, catering, wi-fi, information, parking and cycling. 100 per cent secure stations accreditation by 2025
- New stations built 2020-2023 and flagship schemes at key stations
- New app, ticket machines and smartcard from 2019; fare initiatives for children and young people and pay as you go from 2020/21
- Over 600 new jobs, plus 450 apprenticeships, new depot and maintenance facilities and train assembly plant
- Investment in track doubling and junction remodelling to provide capacity and rolling out digital rail traffic management.

3.5 There would appear to be a lot here on paper that reflects what passengers want. However, it is crucial to get the delivery and disruption managed effectively, to avoid passenger trust being eroded.

3.6 Primarily though, the recurrent theme of crowded services and insufficient seating would not seem to be addressed right away, despite this being a key theme for passengers.

4 Early implementation

4.1 Currently, the new service has been running for less than four weeks, so in that context it is too early to form a substantive view. However, setting the tone with good first impressions is a key part of building passenger trust, so these early steps are important.

- 4.2 The media in particular have been building a sense of expectation, which is important to manage in the context of future promises balanced with delivery of the rail service today. The acid test for passengers will be getting performance working and the reliability of their daily train service. Delivery of the core product carries most meaning for passengers, in terms of punctuality, reliability and how delays are handled. How effective the front-line customer service is in creating a positive passenger experience is also an essential ingredient. Infusing the new culture and refreshing staff attitudes through comprehensive training is key to good engagement and encouraging passengers to get on board with plans.
- 4.3 Future plans will also be hugely disruptive, particularly for track works, electrification and creation of the South Wales Metro. Our research into passengers' experience of engineering works⁶ shows it will be crucial to surround this with good, early communication and delivery plans for managing passengers' understanding of what is happening and why, alongside effective options for travel and a positive experience supported by frontline staff.
- 4.4 The introduction of a new rail service provides a great opportunity to get a better deal for passengers. However, the new rail service must show demonstrable progress. In doing so Transport for Wales, KeolisAmey and Network Rail must also convey a story that passengers understand, which is illustrated in the graphic in Appendix 2. In the short term, this starts to build trust by addressing what is wrong with the current service and delivers some "quick wins". The long-term plan for improving the service is then set in a narrative of investment, modernisation and progress, built through on-going passenger engagement.
- 4.5 How agile and flexible the new rail service plans are will be demonstrated in their ability to withstand difficulties and challenges. It is essential in laying preparations that lessons are learned from experiences with Northern and London North Eastern railways.
- 4.6 Passengers will also want to see how responsive commitments are to measures. It is important to set a useful array of targets and provide public access to these, alongside transparency of achievement and access to progress. Good communication channels are essential in supporting a relationship, including meaningful customer reports.
- 4.7 Transport Focus aims to ensure that passenger interests are placed at the heart of the new Wales and Borders rail service under Transport for Wales and KeolisAmey. We have had some encouraging early meetings and look forward to working closely with Transport for Wales, using the findings from our research into passengers' experiences; such as the above-mentioned research into passengers' experiences during engineering works and our work with a community of passengers on the design of new trains for Merseyrail⁷.

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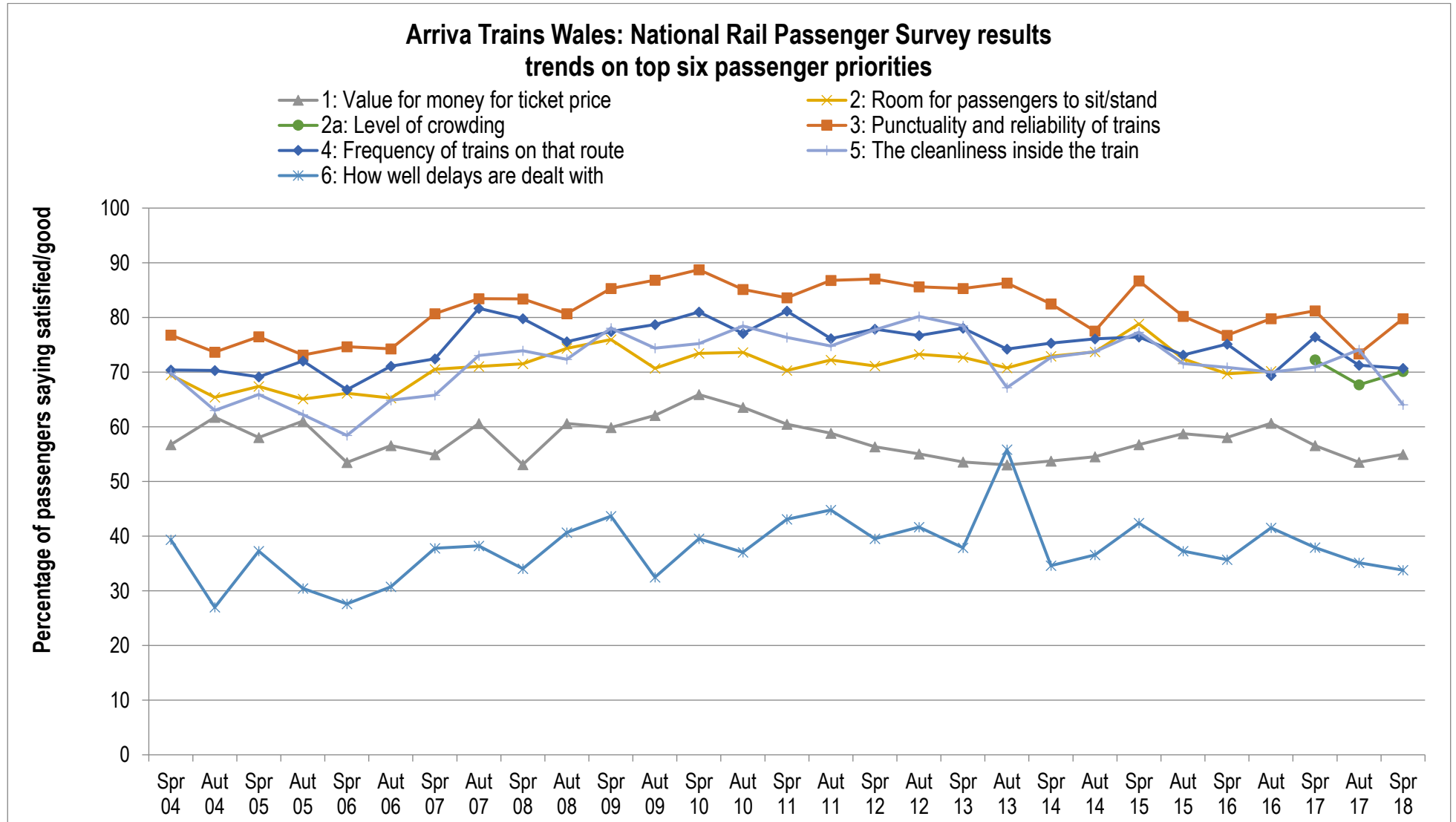
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⁶ [Rail passengers' experiences during engineering works](#), Transport Focus, 2017

⁷ [Future Merseyrail rolling stock – what passengers want](#), Transport Focus, 2014

Appendix 1: NRPS results for ATW over 15 years – trends on top six passenger priorities



Appendix 2: Setting plans in a narrative of investment, modernisation and progress

The new rail service must show demonstrable progress and convey that narrative to passengers

