



Brighton Main Line Improvement Project

– the passenger perspective
September 2019

Introduction and background

Transport Focus, the independent watchdog for transport users, carries out a wealth of research into passengers' expectations and experiences of planned engineering works. Its report, *Rail passengers' experiences and priorities during engineering works*¹, looked at passengers' expectations in general terms. This has been complemented by specific research assessing passengers' awareness and experiences of planned engineering works at Reading and Bath Spa², London Waterloo³, on Merseyrail's Wirral loop line⁴ and at Derby⁵.

With all these projects local context has to be taken into account in planning for the work and the inevitable disruption to passengers' journeys. This includes passenger flows and numbers, journey purpose, alternative routes and modes available, local events and more.

With this in mind Network Rail, working with Govia Thameslink Railway, approached Transport Focus for independent advice in planning for the Brighton Main Line Improvement Project⁶. This work on the Brighton main line is a key part of a £300 million government-funded programme to tackle delay hotspots and boost the reliability of the railway in south east England, including the expanded Thameslink network. Without the work, it has been said that reliability on the Brighton main line would continue to deteriorate in the years ahead, leading to more delays for passengers.

The original plan was for two nine-day closures over the October 2018 and February 2019 school half-term holidays. In the wake of the May 2018 'timetable crisis', when the introduction of a new Thameslink timetable resulted in extensive disruption, the decision was taken to replace the October closure with further weekend closures rather than add to the hardship commuters had suffered. This meant that the railway was closed over 15 weekends in total.

Transport Focus worked with Populus, an independent research agency, to design a programme of research to measure passengers' awareness of the works and their experiences during the line closures. We wanted to monitor the effectiveness of communications activity and operational arrangements for train diversions and replacement bus services. The research consisted of

six waves of research starting in April 2018 and finishing during the half-term blockade in February 2019. The research used two ways of obtaining passenger feedback:

- handing out self-completion paper questionnaires at stations, on trains and at rail replacement bus stops with passengers posting them back
- online interviews with passengers responding to an email from Network Rail or the train companies or to an invitation from these organisations' social media channels.

This report summarises the research findings and offers observations from Transport Focus on the success of the improvement project. More detailed information can be found on the Transport Focus website.



¹ <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/rail-passengers-experiences-and-priorities-during-engineering-works/>

² <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/planned-rail-engineering-work-passenger-perspective/>

³ <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/railway-engineering-work-putting-passengers-heart-london-waterloo-upgrade/>

⁴ <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/merseyrail-wirral-loop-line-survey/>

⁵ <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/derby-resignalling-works/>

⁶ <https://www.networkrail.co.uk/running-the-railway/our-routes/south-east/brighton-main-line-improvement-project/>

Key findings

Awareness of the project and planned line closures

From a baseline of 45 per cent back in May 2018 after the first significant burst of communications activity, awareness reached 88 per cent in November and 90 per cent by the time of the blockade in February 2019. Transport Focus noted throughout that those completing the survey online were a more 'engaged' and more knowledgeable audience. In the final wave awareness among these passengers reached 99 per cent compared with 86 per cent for those completing the paper questionnaire.

Commuters were the most aware (at 94 per cent) followed by business (86 per cent) and leisure (75 per cent) travellers.

Passengers' level of knowledge increased steadily over time; in May 2018 one third said they knew either 'a great deal' (five per cent) or 'a fair amount' (29 per cent) about the project. By February it was over half – 15 per cent 'a great deal' and 37 per cent 'a fair amount'.

Understanding of the implications of the works

In the final wave in February 2019, three quarters of passengers were aware, when asked, of the planned weekday line closures and their dates, and that there would be no trains between Three Bridges and Brighton/Eastbourne. Two thirds were aware of the subsequent weekend line closures and almost six in 10 understood

that there would be no trains at intermediate stations. One in five were aware of car parking being offered to season ticket holders at Gatwick Airport. The relatively low awareness levels for this and other geographically specific implications reflects the fact that they apply to only a small proportion of the passenger base.

Implications of the works	Percentage aware
Sample size: 667	
The Brighton Main Line Improvement Project will affect weekday train services with planned line closures over nine days between the 16th and 24th February 2019	77
During the line closures, there will be no direct trains between Three Bridges and Brighton or Three Bridges and Lewes	75
The Brighton Main Line Improvement Project will affect train services with planned line closures on several weekends up to May 2019	67
During the line closures, there will be no trains at all at intermediate stations between Three Bridges and Brighton or Three Bridges and Lewes	58
[...] passengers from Brighton, Hove and stations to Angmering will need to travel on diverted trains via Littlehampton taking longer than usual	34
[...] there will be no trains between Preston Park and intermediate stations to Three Bridges; replacement buses will serve the intermediate stations between Preston Park and Three Bridges	32
[...] passengers on trains that usually travel via Lewes to London/East Croydon will need to travel on an express bus from Lewes to East Grinstead and take a train from there; passengers for other stations will need to travel on a replacement bus to Three Bridges	21
[...] additional temporary car parking will be available at Gatwick Airport for invited season ticket holders who may wish to drive there to catch a train to London	20
[...] passengers for London from stations between Eastbourne and Bexhill will need to travel to St. Leonards and change there for a Southeastern service; passengers for other stations who would normally travel via Lewes will need to use replacement buses from Lewes	11

Behaviour change

To provide an indication of passengers' travel plans for the February half-term week, Transport Focus asked what actions they planned to take and, during the line closure, what they had actually done. In interpreting passengers' responses during the line closure in February, it must be noted that for obvious reasons it was possible to approach only those who actually travelled that week. Allowing for this, passengers' prediction of their likely behaviour turned out to be closely aligned with what they actually did. Network Rail has reported that demand was reduced by

40 per cent as against its target of 25 per cent.

In January, over a third (35 per cent) said they planned to work from home (or another location); during the line closure this was just under a quarter (23 per cent). In January, a quarter (27 per cent) said they would avoid travelling; in fact, in February the figure was just under a fifth (18 per cent). Similarly, in January just under a quarter (23 per cent) had said they might take annual leave, whereas in February 13 per cent reported actually taking leave.

Behaviour change	January %	February %
Sample size – January: 735; February: 733		
Working from home/another office on some days	35	23
Avoiding travelling by train over the half term week	27	18
Taking annual leave for some of the time	23	13
Using a rail replacement bus/coach	17	23
Driving	16	13
Travelling via an alternative route	9	26
Travelling at a quieter time	4	14
Travelling from a different station	7	9
Other answers	<3	<4

Communications channels and satisfaction with information

As with other studies, the findings from the Brighton main line project show that passengers expect to, and do, find out about the works and disruption through a wide range of channels. It is clearly important to continue to use all available means for getting the message out. Posters around stations is the most solid channel, with around half of all passengers reporting having seen these right from the early days of the campaign, with leaflets handed out at stations close behind. Announcements (at stations and on the train) grew in importance across the survey waves as the date of the blockade got closer. Social media was significant in contributing to early awareness before the campaign started, but was then replaced by more traditional channels with a slight increase again in the final

wave during the disruption.

By the time of the blockade, 49 per cent reported being very or fairly satisfied with the information being provided to them. This is slightly below the level seen for other recent projects (Bath Spa – 62 per cent; London Waterloo – 76 per cent; Derby – 56 per cent). When asked what information they were still looking for, the main themes were:

- more information as to the benefits of the work and what improvements passengers can expect
- confirmation of the timeline for the works and when the project will be finished (including any further weekend closures)
- why no compensation was being offered.

Awareness of the benefits of the works

Throughout the research around six out of 10 passengers were aware of at least one benefit of the works. Five out of 10 passengers pointed to improved reliability and punctuality, and around four out of 10 said that without the work, performance would continue to deteriorate. Slightly

fewer were aware that the blockade would reduce the need for weekend closures in future years, while around a quarter acknowledged that the work was to improve drainage in the three tunnels on the route.

Support for the works

When asked whether or not they supported the works, across all waves of the research around half of passengers were in favour. This is broadly comparable with Bath Spa and Derby, while at London Waterloo it was over three quarters – however the work at Waterloo was more visible to passengers and the benefits (improved capacity on longer trains and at the station) potentially more tangible.

Many passengers recognise the need to maintain the railway infrastructure if it is to continue to deliver, with some suggesting that this has been neglected and has led to poor performance in recent years. Those not supporting the works tend to think the disruption is not justified; are sceptical that the work will make any difference; or are upset at the lack of compensation.

Satisfaction with rail replacement services

Satisfaction with various aspects of the rail replacement services is between 47 and 63 per cent. This is lower than for Derby where extensive rail replacement services also had to be provided. For Brighton, satisfaction scores were higher where passengers experienced a coach rather than a bus; the higher proportion of passengers experiencing coaches at Derby may partly explain the difference in

satisfaction levels. While the logistics of the operation meant it would not have been possible to use significantly more coaches for Brighton, the research findings are further confirmation that most passengers prefer coaches when rail replacement is unavoidable. That said adequate provision must of course be made for disabled passengers who are unable to board a coach.

Transport Focus observations

Transport Focus's report, *Rail passengers' experiences and priorities during engineering works*¹ made a number of recommendations to the industry for ensuring passengers' needs are taken into account when planning major engineering projects. The following section looks at how Network Rail and Govia Thameslink Railway have responded to those recommendations on the Brighton Main Line Improvement Project.

Use replacement buses only as a last resort

Passengers wanting to stay on a train throughout were provided with diverted trains for the journey from London/Three Bridges to Brighton. However, the additional journey time (in excess of an hour) resulting from the diversion was such that regular passengers to or from Brighton did not find the diverted train acceptable. Coupled with this is the fact that direct 'express' buses between Three Bridges and Brighton had been provided during previous weekend line closures and many passengers had become used to, and accepting of, such a provision. Operational constraints meant that the rail replacement services during the blockade were not planned to include a direct 'express' service between Brighton and Three Bridges. In the event, passenger demand and the availability of vehicles meant

that on occasions some buses were able to operate direct to Brighton at particularly busy times such as for football matches.

Every project will be different and the local context will determine what is feasible. Although the trains diverted via Littlehampton and Horsham were not particularly well-used for travel between Brighton and Three Bridges/London, Transport Focus maintains that for long-distance journeys an extended journey of up to forty minutes on a diverted train is likely to be the preference of most passengers.

Help passengers make an informed choice when a bus or diverted train is involved

Govia Thameslink Railway published its timetables in good time, meeting the T-12 (12 weeks in advance) deadline. From eight weeks in advance buses were clearly marked as such in journey planners, although there were anomalies with journey planners suggesting unlikely routes (for instance, from Brighton via Havant into London Waterloo). It is unfortunate that agreement was not reached sooner on the provision of parking for season ticket holders at Gatwick Airport as this could have been communicated to them sooner.

Deliver better customer service when passengers change from train to bus and vice versa

The ‘bus hub’ at Three Bridges station with a covered waiting area, toilets and refreshments was impressive and there were plenty of staff on hand to guide passengers. However, it is unfortunate that the safest pedestrian route from the platforms to the bus hub required a temporary overbridge and stairs to segregate passengers from vehicles entering or leaving the bus hub. While an alternative route was available for those not able/wanting to use the stairs and marshals were instructed to watch out for passengers who might appreciate assistance, there should have been clearer signposting of the availability of assistance for passengers with no visible disability and better signposting for those arriving at the station on foot rather than by train.

With any disruptive arrangements, however well planned, it is important to monitor how they perform in practice, to listen to passengers, and to make adjustments where these are seen to be necessary.

Use coaches (rather than buses) wherever possible and refer to them as such

Transport Focus recognises that the capacity of the bus hub and the availability of vehicles meant it was not feasible to use only coaches on the Brighton project. However, our research confirms the desirability of doing so where circumstances allow, making sure adequate provision is made for disabled passengers.

The industry might do more to promote the benefits of any work and to say ‘thank you’ once it is completed

Passenger awareness of the benefits of the project was good – although there was a degree of scepticism as to whether these would materialise. Transport Focus notes that it can be difficult to ‘sell’ more intangible benefits such as performance improvements and better punctuality, and that more ‘concrete’ benefits such as the platform lengthening at London Waterloo (visible to all) and the promise of longer trains with greater capacity will naturally be more appealing. That said, it was a positive move by the programme team to schedule more visible maintenance activities at selected stations during the blockade so that passengers returned to a smarter, repainted station immediately afterwards.

This research was undertaken during the blockade and before any significant ‘thank you’ activity had taken place (although a quarter were aware of offers such as free coffee vouchers). Transport Focus notes that since the blockade finished, there has been further communications activity to explain what was done and to thank passengers for their forbearance.



Poster showing achievements of the project, displayed at Three Bridges station.

Overall success of the project

Transport Focus acknowledges Network Rail and Govia Thameslink Railway's efforts to put the needs of passengers travelling on the Brighton main line at the heart of their planning, as well as acting on the findings of previous research and learning from the outputs of each wave of this research. Transport Focus is pleased to have worked with them and to demonstrate once again the value of passenger research for large infrastructure projects.

The industry reports that there were few complaints from passengers and some positive social media comments. Transport Focus notes the frustration of passengers – particularly season ticket holders – who

received no compensation for an inferior journey experience during the blockade. The importance passengers attach to compensation when offered on projects such as at London Waterloo and Derby has been noted previously.

Transport Focus believes that the research findings and experience of the February half-term blockade suggest that half-terms, and specifically the February one, may be worth considering as potentially 'less bad' times to undertake major projects than other options such as Christmas/ New Year, Easter and bank holiday weekends. That said, every case should be looked at on its merit: just because February half-term worked on the Brighton Main Line does not mean it would necessarily be appropriate elsewhere.



The 'Bus hub' for rail replacement services at Three Bridges.

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Transport Focus is the operating
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