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31 July 2019

Dear all

High temperatures: the passenger experience

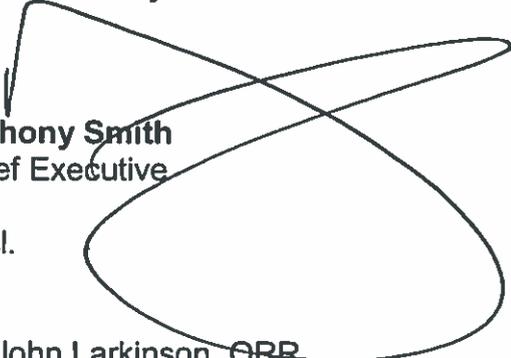
Please find enclosed a summary of the issues faced by passengers during the high temperatures experienced recently, particularly on Thursday 25 July.

These fall into two broad categories: issues specifically related to the heat (e.g. air-conditioning) and issues common to any significant disruption (e.g. information).

It is striking how many passenger frustrations are things Transport Focus has raised previously and the industry has not adequately addressed. Last week's experience must provide the catalyst to address long-standing deficiencies in the way disruption is managed.

The enclosed summary contains a number of recommendations. I look forward to your responses.

Yours sincerely


Anthony Smith
Chief Executive

Encl.

cc John Larkinson, ORR
Peter Wilkinson, DfT

High temperatures in July 2019: the passenger experience

Passengers and railway staff had a torrid time in the extreme heat on, particularly, Thursday 25 July 2019. Transport Focus asked members of its Transport User Panel for feedback and also analysed a selection of 'in the moment' social media posts. Around 1,500 members of the Panel responded.

Passengers' views can be summarised as follows:

- track and overhead power lines must stand up better to this sort of event
- air-conditioning must work properly on trains without opening windows
- information was patchy, contradictory, sometimes plain wrong
- staff did a great job working in the heat, but often didn't have much information

Infrastructure resilience

Many passengers feel that for the fares they pay the railway should be able to operate properly in the sort of heat experienced last week.

"Extreme heat is becoming a yearly occurrence - infrastructure needs to be updated. Hot countries seem to cope". Leeds to Normanton passenger

"Clearly the infrastructure is inadequate. Network Rail impose heat related speed restrictions EVERY year, not just this year". Bristol Temple Meads to Newport

"There is clearly something no longer compatible with current design standards for overhead lines and rails for the higher temperatures from global warming. Singapore routinely operates railways in equatorial conditions without shutdowns. We need to redesign this aspect of our infrastructure." London Euston to Glasgow passenger.

"I had bought tickets for the Mary Rose museum in Portsmouth but couldn't make the journey due to Southern's decision to cancel trains on Thursday because it was sunny." Intending passenger who could not travel.

It should be noted that some passengers were more accepting that things simply won't work in extreme situations.

"How could they do anything different? They don't control the weather." London Waterloo to Alton passenger

Where the infrastructure failed, particularly the overhead line, was it down to underlying design or poor maintenance? How significant is the risk of rails buckling? What could be done to mitigate the risks without introducing speed restrictions?

Transport Focus recommends:

- That Network Rail establishes the extent to which, despite the heat, improved maintenance would have prevented any of the individual infrastructure failures on 25 July
- That Network Rail reviews its design assumptions (for enhancements and renewals) to ensure that any new equipment will operate normally at the previously unusual temperatures Britain is predicated to experience in future.

- That the industry seeks to communicate to passenger why the weather, including high temperatures, will/could prevent the railway running normally; why the proposed mitigations will help; why “do not travel” advice has been issued; and what your journey will/could be like if you decide to travel. The objective should be to let passengers make informed decisions; to let reasonable people make reasonable judgements.

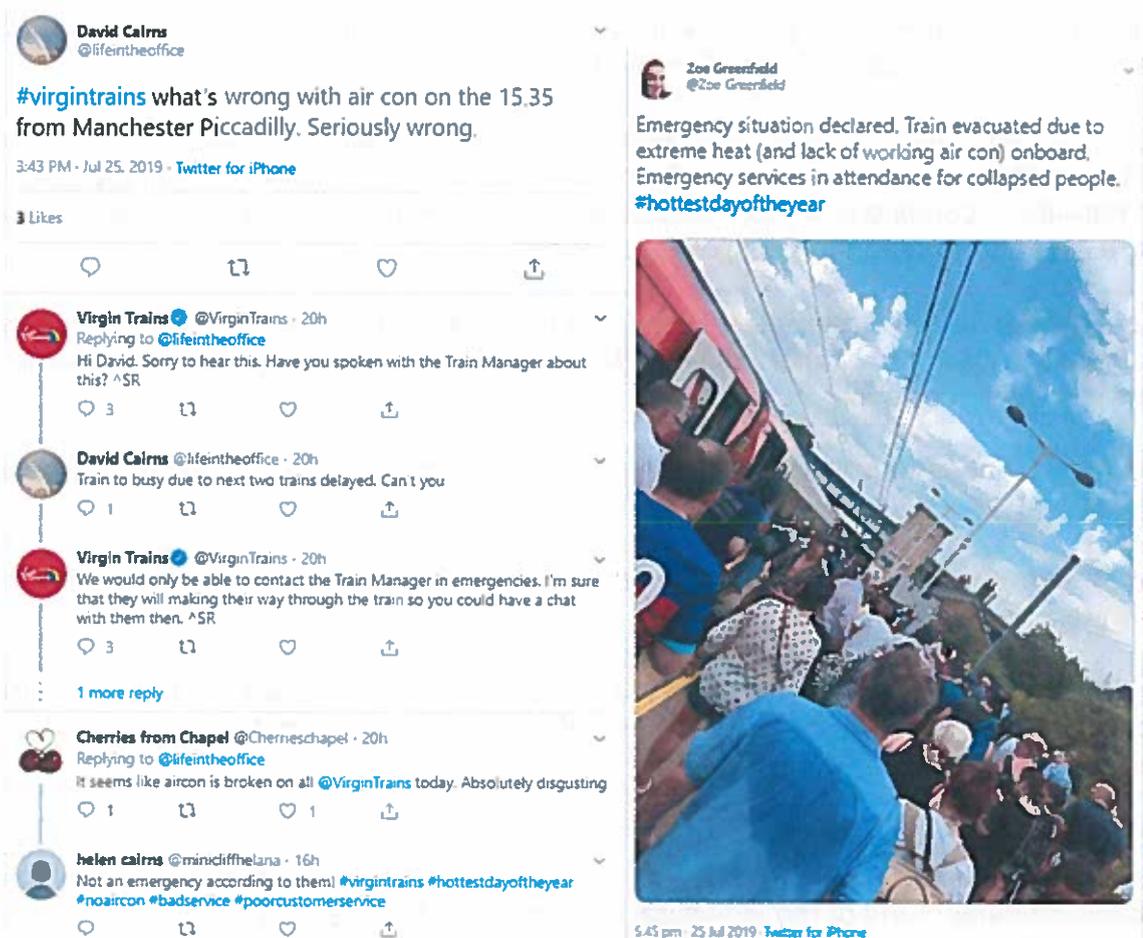
Air-conditioning

Many passengers reported uncomfortable, and sometimes dangerous, conditions onboard trains. This was a result either of air-conditioning not working properly or because it stopped working when power to the train was cut. The fact trains were disrupted and running at lower speeds also reduced the effectiveness of ventilation on older trains with opening windows.

The comments of many passengers are summed up here:

“If we build (and run) trains with sealed windows... the air-con HAS to work!”. London Euston to Stafford passenger.

Many passengers commented favourably about efforts to distribute water and the industry deserves credit for being proactive in this area. Nevertheless it would appear that the situation on some trains was grim, with reports of passengers fainting.



The industry Guidance Note “Meeting the needs of passengers when trains are stranded”¹ is an important document and contains the following paragraph which is worth reproducing in full:

Internal conditions – though there will be exceptions, conditions on board the train should generally be the single most important factor influencing the decision on how best to respond. There are two particularly critical elements. The first of these is the temperature/quality/humidity of air on the train. The speed at which in the event of inoperative air conditioning the on-board environment can deteriorate during hot or even warm weather – especially on a heavily-loaded train – from one which is simply unpleasant to one which poses significant risks to health (and hence escalates the incident into a full-scale emergency) should not be under-estimated. Conversely, the ventilation effect of opening external doors and normally sealed windows should not be over-estimated. It is therefore recommended that in all such cases preparations for evacuation should begin immediately the situation becomes apparent. The second concerns the availability of toilet facilities. For many people, including young children and those with certain medical conditions, even 2 hours without access to a working toilet may be very problematic, hence it is recommended that the objective should be to ensure that no passenger is stranded on a train without functioning toilet facilities for more than 60 minutes.

Transport Focus recommends:

- That in each case where a train was stranded, Network Rail and the relevant train company specifically review the extent to which advice in the Guidance Note was followed and if weaknesses are identified, put in place robust measures to address them
- That the Rail Delivery Group and Network Rail review the Guidance Note “Meeting the needs of passengers when trains are stranded” to ensure that it remains fit for purpose given predictions that Britain will experience more extreme weather events, and more often, than in the past.

Passenger information

Comments from many passengers highlight the rail industry’s ongoing weakness in communicating effectively during service disruption. This shows consistently in the National Rail Passenger Survey. Passengers have provided numerous examples where there was no information, it was wrong or it conflicted with other information. In many cases apps and websites could not be relied on. Many passengers reported that nobody seemed to know what was going on, beyond the high-level message that high temperatures were causing disruption. All in all, there is a strong sense that information on 25 July was poor, and yet it is one of the few things that would genuinely have helped passengers cope better with the problems.

Despite the focus on improving information during disruption since Transport Focus published “Delays and disruption: rail passengers have their say” in 2010² and “Passenger information when trains are disrupted” in 2014³, passengers continue to experience many of the same old problems. The rail industry must redouble its efforts to improve passenger information during disruption: poor information is the rail industry’s Achilles heel. Sometimes ‘policy’ gets in the

¹ <https://catalogues.rspb.co.uk/rqs/oodocs/ATOCNR%20GN%20SP01%20Iss%203.pdf>

² <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/delays-and-disruption-rail-passengers-have-their-say/>

³ <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/passenger-information-when-trains-are-disrupted/>

way of communicating a coherent, passenger-friendly message: where that is the case, the policy should be challenged.

The following feedback from Panel members sums up passenger frustrations.

"Got to Birmingham New Street and vast majority of services cancelled or delayed - electronic signs weren't being updated. The signs were showing trains as delayed, and then the next minute departed - there was no logic or sense to what was happening". London Euston to Sandwell and Dudley passenger

"The rail app suggested taking the Manchester-York train to Manchester Victoria and there boarding the Scarborough to Liverpool service which was running almost on time. We chose to walk 20 minutes to Victoria instead and were able to get the train - however in the intervening time the York train was cancelled so anyone who had followed the advice on the app would still have not been able to get to Liverpool". Manchester to Liverpool passenger

"Websites were inaccurate. Particular issues: suggesting alternative routes that were also cancelled. Trains leaving while website claimed nothing was running". London St Pancras to Bedford passenger

"Information sadly lacking. Even if the railway does not know what is happening/when things might be at least part resolved, they should say so. Instead, hiding behind bland statements or saying nothing seems to be the default position. And auto announcements at times like this are annoying to say the least". London Euston to Rugby passenger

"I planned to get 1539 Victoria to Reigate train. I checked my app before leaving work and all seemed well with the trains. Arrived at Victoria 10 minutes later to see that my train was cancelled." London Victoria to Redhill passenger

"We left the Brasserie at St Pancras at 15.45. We went to Platform B to take the train to Bedford. After waiting for more than half an hour, with several conflicting 'stories' from staff, we were told that no more trains would leave that platform. So we went to Kings Cross and at Platform 7, boarded a train to Peterborough. After several delay messages from the driver, we were told that the train had been cancelled. We went back to Platform B at St Pancras and were told that trains to Cambridge were running and that they were stopping at Hitchin from where we could take a bus to Luton and thence to Bedford. The train was (very) delayed and even stopped for some 25 minutes at Finsbury Park. We arrived at Hitchin, but within 15 minutes, we were on a coach bound for Harlington, Flitwick and Bedford. We arrived at Bedford at 20 minutes to 9pm, nearly 5 hours since we had tried to take a train at St Pancras. Staff at St Pancras: they need information and not rumours. Staff at Kings Cross: unaware. Staff at Hitchin: high praise and we felt that – at last – we were somewhere where the staff understood the problems." London St Pancras to Bedford passenger

"Lack of announcements explaining what was happening when I was on the train. Wasn't sure if the train was going to stop and we'd have to get off, or how long it was likely to be delayed for. Frequent updates makes people a lot happier." Birmingham to Northfield passenger

Priorities to address include:

1. Aligning compensation regimes with "do not travel" advice. Compensation regimes currently undermine "do not travel" advice by providing nothing for those who stay at home, while compensating those who travel and are delayed. Transport Focus has written to all train companies requesting that this is urgently addressed.
2. Publishing revised timetables to passenger-facing systems in a timely way. If the railway is going to run an amended timetable, for whatever reason, it must have a robust process to replace the normal timetable with the revised one – and so make sure what passengers see on Apps and websites is correct.
3. Ensuring that the Darwin real time running database is accurate at all times. Too often passengers left home or their office for a train that was seemingly running and on time, only to find it was cancelled when they arrived at the station. Too often passengers saw delay to a particular train creeping up minute by minute, then going to "delayed" and then eventually "cancelled".
4. Giving passengers an overview of what is going on. As well as timely, accurate train-specific information, passengers need an accurate overview of what's happening. This will help them see the wood for the trees in making an informed decision about what to do. Too often there were general announcements about high temperatures disrupting services, but no explanation of what was going on at that moment. While no doubt accurate, is "services will be delayed by up to 120 minutes, cancelled or revised" of any help in judging whether you can or cannot get home? A screenful of "delayed" trains on your phone may nor may not mean the service is suspended – that is not fair on passengers.
5. In disruption, make live announcements. Endless automated announcements that services are disrupted due to today's weather do not help passengers understand if they can or cannot get home. Use a human to explain things.
6. Explain what is happening if there are delays on route. Passengers on many trains reported being kept well informed, but on others slow running and extended station stops went without sufficient explanation to prevent passengers wondering what was going on. This resulted in unnecessary stress and alarm about being stranded, and in passengers unnecessarily jumping into taxis or summoning family members to pick them up by car. All because a simple explanation of what was going on wasn't provided.
7. Better maintenance of ontrain public address systems. Given their importance in customer- and safety-related communications, a surprising number of passengers talked about not being able to hear announcements because PA systems weren't working properly.

Transport Focus recommends:

- That the rail industry considers this "priorities to address" list and formulates an action plan.
- That the rail industry conducts a root and branch review of its ability to process train-specific alterations, cancellations and amendments in Darwin at the speed needed for Apps, websites and station information systems to display timely, accurate and therefore useful information to passengers.
- That the rail industry reviews its response to Transport Focus recommendations from 2010 and 2014, specifically those set out in the appendix to this summary.

Staff

Many passengers recognised that it was equally hot for railway staff as for passengers, and praised the efforts made to distribute water, arrange complimentary ice cream etc. Alongside the “they did the best they could in the circumstances” sentiments, passengers perceived that many staff were in the difficult position of knowing less about what was going on than passengers.

West Midlands Railway Retweeted



Katey
@katey_as5

@WestMidRailway amazing customer care on 10.24 from Worcester foregate street to bhm New Street.. offering bottles of cold water out both in platform and train
#noaircon #customerservice #thankyou

11:13 am · 26 Jul 2019 · Twitter for iPhone

2 Retweets 7 Likes



“A nightmare. We got as far as Newark Northgate and the 14:46 was announced as the next train to arrive on platform one etc. It didn’t arrive as it pulled the wires down. The staff at the station were brilliant, supplying water and updates. Got a coach to Doncaster for the train to Northallerton. It was heaving, hot and no air con. We finally stepped off the train at 19:30!”
Skegness to Northallerton passenger

Transport Focus recommends:

- That each train company and each part of Network Rail captures and shares the best practice implemented on 25 July, in particular measures to safeguard the welfare (e.g. water distribution) and small gestures to improve customer experience (e.g. ice cream vans).

Transport Focus
31 July 2019

APPENDIX

Transport Focus recommends that the rail industry reviews its response to the following recommendations from 2010 and 2014.

- **That train companies embrace the “we will help you re-plan your journey to keep the inconvenience to a minimum” approach and make commitments to provide – in extremis – alternative transport and overnight accommodation, as is explicit in some train company Passenger’s Charters.** Making such commitments and implementing processes to make them a reality will help drive cultural change. It will signal to staff and passengers alike that a train company *will* help; it will not leave you to fend for yourself when things go wrong.
- **That during all CSL2 disruption train companies monitor in real time what their website(s), the National Rail Enquiries disruption pages, live departure boards, email and text alerts etc. are saying to ensure that information is “useful”.** This is probably best done by somebody not embroiled in the disruption, probably in a marketing, communications or customer service role. That is, somebody who can sit to one side and think “is this useful to our customers?” – and intervene if necessary.
- **In seeking to improve the quality of messages during disruption, consider how to more effectively ‘tell a story’, or ‘paint a picture’, of unfolding events.** The objective should be to give passengers a continually-evolving sense of the activity going on to restore the service. Understanding what is being done helps passengers practically and emotionally. If told that the rescue locomotive has set off but is 45 minutes away, or the website shows a photograph of a tree across the railway, passengers can relate to why they are stuck.
- **Ensure critical passenger messages, such as that there is a significantly reduced service operating tomorrow, are highly prominent on websites.** Too many train companies present such information in their ‘house style’, resulting in vital information blending in with the rest of the webpage or feeling like a “will you accept our cookies?” message.
- **Significantly improve capability to estimate the delay.** This would include the delay a passenger will encounter if they set off now; how long passengers on particular trains will be stuck; how long it will take to fix the problem; and how long it will be until the train service is fully recovered. Messages like “delays of up to 60 minutes” are backwards-looking, reporting what has happened (i.e. that some trains are running up to 60 minutes late), not forward-looking giving an estimate of what to expect if you set off now.
- **Deliver the capability, and then use it, for train company ‘control’ staff to speak directly to passengers in any train via the GSM-R system.** We believe this change will substantially improve the quality of information provided to passengers during disruption, particularly on driver only trains.

- **Develop the capability to implement a revised timetable, and revert to the normal schedule, significantly more quickly than current processes allow.** Day A for Day B is clearly an improvement on the underlying Day A for Day C arrangements, but its limitations are significant:
 - Train companies currently have to decide by 1100 on Day A if a revised timetable is required on Day B. If it becomes clear at lunchtime that horrendous weather will affect the railway tomorrow it is already too late
 - If a train company has decided to run a reduced timetable, but the severe weather warning is downgraded, it is difficult to revert to the normal timetable
 - The process assumes that train companies have provided a fully worked up contingency timetable to Network Rail in advance, to be implemented in its entirety. This 'all or nothing' approach appears insufficiently flexible to respond to weather, or anything else, affecting routes – or sections of route – in different ways
 - Day A for Day B is envisaged to be available only in the winter.
- Ensure staff are at least as well informed as passengers with a smartphone. The fact staff sometimes know less than they do, baffles and frustrates passengers
- Train companies should continuously review how they communicate with the National Rail Communications Centre (NRCC) and online retailers during disruption, especially in relation to supplementary contextual information. Do all relevant staff, including communications/press office staff, appreciate how vital it is to keep the NRCC and online retailers informed; understand what those organisations need to know; and have the right email addresses at their fingertips?