

Reliability on high-frequency rail routes

– what passengers think
January 2020

Foreword

Transport Focus and Network Rail know that punctuality and reliability are critical to passengers. We are pleased to have worked together to develop our understanding of this on routes with a very high frequency service.

We wanted to explore how passengers think about service reliability when trains on their line come along every few minutes. Essentially, do they notice that the train they board at 08.27 is in fact the 08.17 running ten minutes late? Or are they just happy to board a train going to their destination within minutes of getting to the station?

The answer is quite clear: a late train is a late train, and late running damages passengers' trust in the railway even if they get to their destination with no effective delay. Passengers also associate late trains with overcrowding and inability to get a seat – because disruption leads to a build-up of passengers who squeeze onto the next train.

It is also clear that while many treat the Thameslink core (London Blackfriars to London St Pancras International) much like the London

Underground and turn up knowing there are frequent trains to their station, others are travelling to destinations beyond the core and have only a half-hourly frequency to their particular destination.

A frequent service is desirable, but frequency is no substitute for punctuality.



Linda McCord

Senior stakeholder manager
Transport Focus



John Halsall

Managing director
Network Rail, Southern region



Summary

Passengers' answer to the question "does punctuality matter on a route with very frequent services?" is unequivocal: "Yes, it does!" And it is the same whether passengers are making just a short journey using the Thameslink core (between London Blackfriars and London St Pancras International) or travelling further afield.

Not only is punctuality important in terms of passengers arriving on time at their destination, it is also regarded as an indicator of the railway's performance and impacts on passengers' trust in it to deliver against the promise made in the timetable.

Frequency can mitigate the effects of delays and cancellations, in that passengers have less time to wait for

an alternative train, but it does not compensate for basic punctuality and reliability.

In any event, few passengers see their service as truly 'high frequency'. They see the London Underground as providing a high frequency service in the central area where they expect a train to turn up every two or three minutes. While the Thameslink core comes close to such a frequency, few journeys involve only the core; most passengers travel to or from stations further afield where frequencies are down to one train every 15 or 30 minutes.

This latest research confirms that the findings of the National Rail Passenger Survey (NRPS) and *Rail Passengers' Priorities for Improvement* research apply equally whatever the service frequency. Punctuality and reliability are the key drivers of satisfaction and trust in the railway.

The importance of punctuality and reliability

In all the research Transport Focus undertakes among rail passengers, punctuality and reliability stand out as being critically important. They determine satisfaction with any individual journey, as well as perceptions of the railway overall and passengers' trust in railway operators.

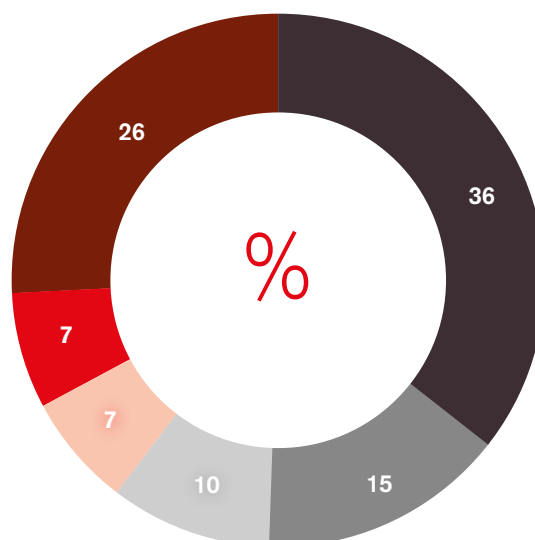
Punctuality and reliability are intrinsically linked. Some services may appear to be reliably five minutes late almost every day, but that is not the sort of reliability passengers are looking for! The railway timetable is the basis on which passengers plan and evaluate their journeys. If it promises a train at 08.16, then the passenger's expectation is that that train will depart at 08.16 – not 08.17, 08.20, 08.25, nor indeed 08.15.

Transport Focus's National Rail Passenger Survey measures passenger satisfaction with some 60,000 rail journeys each year. The questionnaire asks about 36 factors that are part of a journey. Analysis shows that there are five key factors with greater impact on overall passenger satisfaction than the others.

Based on the latest two 'waves' of NRPS (Autumn 2018 and Spring 2019 combined), 36 per cent of the variation in overall satisfaction is explained by punctuality/reliability¹. As such, it tops this list and is more than twice as important as the next factor (cleanliness of the inside of the train).

Factors driving satisfaction

- Punctuality/reliability
- Cleanliness inside the train
- Frequency of trains on the route
- Journey length
- Level of crowding
- Others



¹ <http://d3cez36w5wymxj.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/27081642/National-Rail-Passenger-Survey-Main-Report-Spring-2019.pdf>

And when asked for their priorities for improvement on the railway², train tickets offering better value for money comes top, with factors that contribute to punctuality and reliability dominating the remainder of the top 10.

Top 10 priorities

↔ ↑ ↓ Rank order change vs 2014

2017 – total sample (n=12,804)			2014 – total sample (n=3,559)		
1	Price of train tickets offers better value for money	477 ↔	Price of train tickets offers better value for money	494	
2	Passengers able to get a seat on the train	318 ↔	Passengers able to get a seat on the train	367	
3	More trains arrive on time than happens now	178 ↑	Trains sufficiently frequent at the times I wish to travel	264	
4	Less frequent major unplanned disruptions to your journey	166 ↑	More trains arrive on time than happens now	178	
5	Fewer trains cancelled than happens now	161 ↑	Less disruption due to engineering works	163	
6	Trains sufficiently frequent at the times I wish to travel	156 ↓	Less frequent major unplanned disruptions to your journey	161	
7	Less disruption due to engineering works	116 ↓	Fewer trains cancelled than happens now	136	
8	Train company keeps passengers informed about delays	115 ↑	Journey time is reduced	132	
9	Free Wi-Fi available on the train	108 ↑	Well-maintained, clean toilet facilities on every train	105	
10	Inside of train is maintained and cleaned to a high standard	99 ↑	Free Wi-Fi available on the train	97	



Punctuality, reliability & journey times



On-train experience



Ticketing/prices

© Chime Insight & Engagement 2017

Previous Transport Focus research in this area includes *Train punctuality: the passenger perspective*³ published in 2014. That study found that:

- passengers expect 'on time' to mean a train arriving within one minute of the scheduled time, not the then industry standard of five minutes (or 10 minutes for long-distance trains)
- there is low awareness of any performance measure and a lack of trust in how the rail industry measures punctuality
- for every minute of lateness, that is, after scheduled arrival time, overall passenger satisfaction declines by one and a half percentage points (and three percentage points per minute of lateness for commuters).

² <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/rail-passengers-priorities-for-improvement/>

³ <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/train-punctuality-the-passenger-perspective/>

And in *Passenger information screens at stations*⁴ we looked at passengers' perceptions of customer information screens which display the number of minutes until the next few trains arrive (as is the case on the London Underground). Such screens are used at stations such as Clapham Junction (right) where there is a high frequency of service into a London terminus (in this case London Waterloo).

In that study we found that passengers generally appreciated the simplicity and clarity of the information presented, but that there was concern that these screens do not indicate if a given train is on time or whether there is general disruption to services.



Key findings

Transport Focus and Network Rail wanted to explore whether punctuality matters on a route with a very frequent service, with specific reference to the Thameslink 'core' – London Blackfriars to London St Pancras International. We tested the theory that those passengers making short journeys through the Thameslink core would care less about punctuality so long as the expected frequency is maintained, whereas those on longer journeys (with a lower service frequency) would prioritise punctuality and reliability.

Understanding 'reliability'

Consumers in general see 'reliability' as delivering something predictable, a known quantity, in a manner that justifies the price demanded. It may be expressed as "doing what it says on the tin" and it will often mean that the consumer doesn't need to think about things – they just happen.

Regrettably the railway isn't often seen as achieving this. Passengers experience delays and disruption all too often. Interlinked concepts of punctuality, frequency and capacity are core to reliability on the railway. Secondary considerations such as staff presence, timely information, transparency and honesty can help when punctuality fails, but they can never replace the basic expectation that the railway will deliver the promised service. And subsidiary factors such as functioning air conditioning, comfortable seats, power sockets and reliable Wi-Fi, are generally of much lesser importance.

Reliability means not having to anticipate and plan for delays. It means confidence in arriving for work on time,

of not being late for meetings, hospital appointments, the school pick-up or the match kick-off. It means arriving in a calm and collected frame of mind rather than all hot and flustered.

Multiple small delays 'add up' in passengers' minds and reflect poorly on train operators. Cancellations are a major cause of frustration, not just because it means a delay waiting for the next train, but also because that train will then carry two lots of passengers and the likelihood of getting a seat will be even lower.

The failure to deliver what is seen as a reliable service damages the passenger experience and their trust in the railway. It leads them to question the value for money of their ticket – especially if they are a season ticket holder.

Understanding 'high frequency'

The passengers we spoke to in this research were all based in south east England and making journeys into central London. Almost all recognised that they had a frequent service, certainly compared with rural areas.

Frequency relates to convenience. It can mean not having to worry too much about catching a specific train; if you miss one it's not too long to wait for another. Similarly, at busy times if a passenger can't physically squeeze aboard a train, the wait for the next may not be too long. This comes into play most frequently when there is service disruption leading to a train being cancelled, having fewer carriages than planned, or running particularly late.

But while their services may be seen as frequent, few would describe them as 'high frequency'. Most equate high frequency with the London Underground, with trains coming along every two or three minutes in the central

⁴ <http://d3cez36w5wymxj.cloudfront.net/migrated/Information%20Screens%20FINAL.pdf>

area. The Thameslink core comes close, and it is in part the frequency of trains through the core that leads many passengers to liken it to the London Underground. However, relatively few passengers use only the core; the majority travel from beyond it where frequencies may well drop to 15 or 30 minutes.

The benefits of higher frequencies

A few passengers, especially those using the Thameslink core as if it were the London Underground, may be in the fortunate position where they can just turn up at a station and catch the next train without the need to consult a timetable. But the majority will aim for a specific train – either after consulting a journey planner or through habit and regularly catching that same train or a selection within a specific ‘window’. For them ‘turn up and go’ is a nice idea, but frequencies at their station will mean this is not actually the case.

However, frequency does relate to convenience. It means that if you miss a train, it's not too long to wait for another. As well as when you have simply struggled to get out of bed, this can be beneficial when there is service disruption and a train is cancelled or running particularly late. And if the disruption means a passenger can't board a train, the wait for the next may not be too long.

To an extent, the prevalence of disruption encourages some passengers to plan ahead and to catch an earlier train than the timetable indicates is necessary. Passengers attending appointments (be they for business or to have a tooth filled), self-employed workers dependent on creating a good impression on clients, vulnerable passengers who will travel only if they can secure a seat, will all factor these considerations into their journey planning and a frequent service may mean they do not have to allow quite as much additional time.

Higher frequencies do not compensate for a lack of punctuality

Although a higher frequency service may mitigate the impact of any service disruption, it does not make up for what the passenger sees as poor performance and it still impacts on trust in the railway. A late train is a late train, and punctuality holds an almost symbolic importance. Even if a late train runs in the path of the train the passenger intended to catch and they are not themselves late, they still recognise that the train is late.

One unintended consequence of higher frequency services can be that passengers are less likely to be eligible for Delay Repay compensation. The timetable may be in chaos, trains may be overcrowded and seats impossible to come by, passengers may be annoyed and frustrated, but if they arrive within 15 minutes of their scheduled arrival time, they receive no financial compensation for the disruption experienced. In this respect, passengers from further out of London with a 30-minute service frequency may be more likely to receive compensation.

Train running information

Passengers using the Thameslink core are generally satisfied with train running information displayed on the platforms. They like the fact that all stops are shown for the next two services and that scheduled departure times and a ‘countdown timer’ (in the example below, showing a train as arriving in four minutes) are both shown. They criticised use of the single word ‘delayed’ with no indication of by how long, and also the way times often appear to ‘slip’ once a train becomes delayed.

1st train **Due**
22:06 Sutton
 via Wimbledon
 Calling at:

- Loughborough Jcn
- Herne Hill
- Tulse Hill
- Streatham
- Tooting
- Haydons Road
- Wimbledon
- Wimbledon Chase
- South Merton
- Morden South
- St Helier
- Sutton Common
- West Sutton
- Sutton**

ended on the Bakerloo line.

2nd train **4 minutes**
22:10 Brighton
 via Gatwick Airport
 Calling at: **Page 1 of 2**

- Farringdon
- City Thameslink
- London Blackfriars
- East Croydon
- Gatwick Airport
- Three Bridges
- Haywards Heath

declassified. Services are part suspended

Later trains	Departs
3rd 22:36 Sutton	29 min
--- 22:40 Brighton via Gatwick Airport	Cancelled
4th 22:54 Brighton via Gatwick Airport	45 min
5th 23:06 Sutton	59 min
6th 23:24 Brighton via Gatwick Airport	77 min

22:06:00

Measuring performance

Passengers have limited, if any, understanding of how the railway measures performance or where they might go to find out such information. However, they assume that 'somebody' monitors performance and that train operators are incentivised or punished according to their level of performance. Nevertheless, there is inherent scepticism about statistics and their potential for manipulation to present a rosier picture.

Train punctuality was seen as the most appropriate performance metric. And when shown the new industry measure (which tracks if a train arrives within 59 seconds of its scheduled time at every station where it should stop) this was seen as an acceptable measure.

Appendix: methodology

Working in partnership with Network Rail, Transport Focus commissioned independent market research agency Illuminas to conduct qualitative research.

We held 12 focus groups and an additional 10 depth interviews with vulnerable passengers. These were designed to collect the views of a spread of commuter, business and leisure passengers making journeys of varying lengths (with some involving a change of trains), both through the Thameslink core and on other lines. The Thameslink 'core' is the stretch of line between London Blackfriars and London St Pancras International with

stops at City Thameslink and Farringdon stations. Trains from Cambridge, Peterborough and Bedford (along with intermediate stations) to the north, and Sutton/Wimbledon, Horsham, Littlehampton, Brighton, East Grinstead, Orpington, Sevenoaks and Rainham to the south, all converge on this two-mile stretch of railway and together provide a train through the core every two or three minutes at peak times.

Further details regarding the research are available in the research agency's report available on the Transport Focus website (<https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/agency-report-reliability>)

Contact Transport Focus

Transport Focus
Fleetbank House
2-6 Salisbury Square
London
EC4Y 8JX

0300 123 2350
www.transportfocus.org.uk
info@transportfocus.org.uk

Transport Focus is the operating
name of the Passengers' Council