



London King's Cross station closure

– August bank holiday weekend 2019
February 2020

Forewords



Investment in renewing and upgrading the railway is good news but

the impact of engineering work on passengers must be minimised. In recent years Transport Focus has carried out research, including at Derby, Bath, London Waterloo and on the Brighton main line, to help the rail industry deliver improvements with the least possible pain to passengers.

Transport Focus is very pleased to have worked with Network Rail and its partners to apply our knowledge from earlier major projects to the current programme of engineering work on the East Coast Main Line. This began with the closure of London King's Cross station over the

August 2019 bank holiday weekend.

While it is good to see many lessons from previous Transport Focus research being acted upon, it is concerning that information was not available sooner to enable passengers to plan their journeys – and their lives. We hope that as the East Coast upgrade continues the railway improves its provision of accurate, timely information ahead of planned closures.

Transport Focus looks forward to continuing this work to ensure the passenger voice is heard in planning and implementing the much-needed East Coast upgrade over the next couple of years.

Guy Dangerfield

Head of Strategy, Transport Focus



Transport Focus has been a valuable partner – sitting on our boards, acting as a critical friend,

playing an active role in helping us shape our comms. There's no doubt their insights helped us achieve what we did on August bank holiday weekend, when we achieved 77 per cent awareness of the work among passengers. This is a living project and we need to carry on learning as we go – so this report will be valuable in helping us do that.

We acknowledge the finding that, given short time frames, the campaign to manage passenger flows on the August bank holiday achieved 77 per cent awareness. As an industry we recognise there are improvements to be made, specifically that earlier agreement on access dates will allow for a more refined campaign which gives context within the wider East Coast Main Line programme and the benefits of this investment programme.

This was the first time such disruption has been seen on the East Coast route in a generation and, as such, demand suppression was a significant concern in order to prevent overcrowding at the southern end of the route.

We are pleased that this report reflects that achievement and also that good standards of customer service were provided during the weekend. The 'do not travel' message was amended following feedback and a suite of bespoke messaging for stations the length of the route is informing later waves of activity.

Similarly, we are working hard to achieve information cut-through at stations. King's Cross remains a challenge due to its listed status, however, we have mapped out key locations across the station, including high footfall ticket lines, information points and waiting areas to display promotional materials such as banners and leaflets. We are also carrying out targeted leafletting handouts to passengers using the station at peak times. At later stages in the programme where hoardings are available maximum use will be made of these.

We will continue to use insight from Transport Focus and others to make sure we are doing the best possible job for passengers as the work continues.

Ed Akers

Principal Programme Sponsor, East Coast Main Line, Network Rail

Introduction and background

Transport Focus, the independent watchdog representing the interests of rail passengers, has undertaken a wealth of research into passengers' expectations and experiences of planned engineering works. Our report, *Rail passengers' experiences and priorities during engineering works*¹, looked at passengers' expectations in a theoretical context. It has since 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, at Derby⁵ and most recently on the Brighton main line⁶.

With all these projects, one of Transport Focus's observations has been that every infrastructure project is different and the local context has to be taken into account in planning for the work and the inevitable disruption to passengers' journeys. This can be in terms of passenger flows and numbers, journey purpose, the alternative routes and modes available, local events and more.

With this in mind, Network Rail, working with the relevant train operators, approached Transport Focus for independent advice in planning for the temporary closure of London King's Cross station over the August bank holiday weekend 2019. The closure was the first stage of a project to replace ageing infrastructure on the approaches to the station and to remodel these to allow for more efficient and reliable operations in the future⁷. This work is part of the East Coast Main Line upgrade⁸.

The King's Cross project presents a particular set of

challenges with the involvement of five train operators (LNER, Grand Central, Hull Trains, Great Northern and Thameslink) covering both long distance and suburban traffic as well as a mix of commuting, business and leisure passengers – the latter being particularly difficult to target with communications regarding planned engineering and any associated travel disruption.

Transport Focus developed a programme of research to measure passengers' awareness of the works and their experiences during the closure to monitor the effectiveness of the rail industry's communications activity and operational arrangements for train diversions and replacement bus and coach services. The programme consisted of two waves of research, first in July and then during the blockade over the August bank holiday weekend (24th-26th August). The research used two ways of obtaining passenger feedback:

- handing out paper self-completion 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 posted on these organisations' social media channels.

The research agency's slide deck from the final wave of this research documents the changes in awareness and attitudes in the weeks before the closure and may be found on the Transport Focus website. This document summarises the research findings and offers some of our observations.

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.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/brighton-main-line-improvement-project-the-passenger-perspective/>

7 <https://www.networkrail.co.uk/running-the-railway/our-routes/east-coast/east-coast-upgrade/kings-uncrossed/>

8 <https://www.networkrail.co.uk/running-the-railway/our-routes/east-coast/east-coast-upgrade/>

Key findings

Awareness of the project and planned line closures

From a disappointing start point of 33 per cent at the beginning of July 2018, awareness had reached 77 per cent by the time of the closure over the bank holiday weekend. Awareness was highest amongst passengers using LNER (84 per cent), and lowest for Thameslink (67 per cent).

The achieved awareness level is comparable with that seen for Derby (75 per cent) but lower than for London Waterloo (97 per cent) and Brighton (90 per cent).

At King's Cross, passengers' level of knowledge

compares poorly with the other projects we have undertaken. Fewer than one in three (30 per cent) claimed to know either 'a fair amount' or 'a great deal' about the works. In contrast, the figure was 80 per cent for London Waterloo, 60 per cent for Derby and 53 per cent for Brighton. The level of knowledge was higher for Govia Thameslink Railway passengers (Great Northern had 54 per cent and Thameslink had 41 per cent) than for the long distance operators.

Understanding of the implications of the works

During the line closure itself more than eight out of ten passengers travelling at that time (84 per cent) were aware that there would be no trains in or out of London King's Cross on the Saturday and Sunday, while two thirds (66 per cent) were aware that the train companies were advising against travel to London.

However only 30 per cent were aware that the King's

Cross works were the start of the wider East Coast Main Line improvement programme, and of those eight per cent knew it would last three years. Few were aware of the benefits the works will bring, with just one quarter (25 per cent) aware that they will allow more trains to operate and 18 per cent knowing that the railway will be widened from the current four tracks into the station to six.

Implications of the works	Percentage aware
No trains in or out of London King's Cross on Saturday 24 or Sunday 25 August (the August bank holiday weekend)	84
The train companies are advising passengers not to travel to London on Saturday 24 or Sunday 25 August	66
The alterations affect all train companies that serve London King's Cross (LNER, Grand Central, Hull Trains, Great Northern, Thameslink)	43
The work on the East Coast Main Line and at London King's Cross will enable more trains to run on the main line	25
The track and signalling at London King's Cross were installed over 40 years ago and have to be renewed	22
The work at London King's Cross over the bank holiday weekend is the start of a wider improvement programme for the East Coast Main Line lasting for a couple of years	30
Ultimately, the works will see six tracks available for trains into and out of London King's Cross in place of the current four	18
The train timetable for the August bank holiday is available in the online journey planners	26
Passengers requiring travel assistance should contact the train companies	16
In total, the programme of works on the East Coast Main Line will span the next three years	8

Sample size: 288 (August wave)

Communications channels and satisfaction with information

As with other studies, the findings from the King's Cross project show that passengers expect to, and do, find out about the works and the disruption through a wide range of channels. It is clearly important to continue to use all available means for getting the message out. Posters and the like around stations remains a solid channel, with just under a third (30 per cent) of passengers reporting having seen these, with a further 30 per cent having found out when they bought their ticket. Almost a quarter (23 per cent) found out from a train company's website and just under a fifth (18 per cent) from announcements at stations.

Just under half of those travelling over the bank holiday weekend (48 per cent) reported being very or fairly satisfied with the information being provided to them – up from 23 per cent at the beginning of July. This is below the level seen for other recent projects (Bath Spa – 62 per cent; London Waterloo – 76 per cent; Derby – 56 per cent). When those who were unhappy were asked why, a big concern was that information had not been available sooner and that several had booked tickets for events or planned family gatherings with travel plans that they then had to change.

Awareness of the benefits of the works

Eight out of ten passengers (81 per cent) were aware of at least one benefit of the works, with up to half pointing to improved reliability (47 per cent), increased capacity (42 per cent) and better punctuality (39 per cent). One in five (19 per cent) were aware of new trains being introduced,

while the same number (19 per cent) mentioned improved passenger facilities at the station already delivered. 17 per cent thought there would be more platforms at the station which is not part of the plan.

Support for the works

When asked whether or not they supported the works, six out of ten passengers (62 per cent) were in favour. While not

as high as for London Waterloo (79 per cent) this is higher than for Brighton (51 per cent) and Derby (47 per cent).

Satisfaction with rail replacement services

Satisfaction with various aspects of the rail replacement services was between 64 and 85 per cent. This is broadly comparable with Derby and slightly higher than for Brighton. Two thirds of passengers using a rail replacement

service (66 per cent) reported that they travelled on a coach rather than a bus. While not statistically significant, the indication is that coach passengers are more satisfied with their journey than bus passengers.

Transport Focus observations

Adherence to earlier recommendations

In Transport Focus's report, *Rail passengers' experiences and priorities during engineering works*¹, we 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 the train operators responded to those recommendations in planning for the closure of London King's Cross station.

Use replacement buses only as a last resort

Capacity on other lines affording alternative routes into London meant that, other than a handful of Hull Trains

services that could be diverted into London St. Pancras International, trains from the East Coast Main Line could not be diverted to an alternative London terminal. Connections were available at a number of places on to routes into London Liverpool Street, London St. Pancras International and London Euston but services on these routes were already busy with bank holiday traffic. In these circumstances the railway chose to advise against travel on the Saturday and Sunday.

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

Although journey planners eventually showed the correct schedules and provided appropriate 'do not travel' advice, T-12 (timetables correct 12 weeks in advance) was not achieved. The replacement buses operating on behalf of Govia Thameslink Railway were not showing in public-facing systems until significantly later than T-12 and there were a number of information issues with third party ticket retailing websites. Any explanation about what to expect, in particular about the crowding you were likely to experience if you did travel, was generally poor – and improved only when Transport Focus highlighted issues and offered suggestions for improvement.

We also note that the 'do not travel' message was displayed at stations where many journeys were still possible over the bank holiday weekend and it was not clear that the advice applied specifically for travel to London.

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

There is no evidence from this research to say that customer service over the weekend was unsatisfactory and the industry should be commended for initiatives such as goody bags and temporary waiting rooms as a contingency. Nevertheless, we encourage all operators to see what lessons may have been identified locally and which can be improved on during future closures.

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



Temporary passenger waiting area at Peterborough

Two thirds of passengers using a rail replacement service travelled on a coach rather than a bus. While the sample of bus users in this research is too small to draw any substantive conclusions, previous research has shown that users of replacement road transport give higher satisfaction ratings when using a coach rather than a bus. We note that whatever vehicles are used, provision must be 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 relatively poor; it was lower and less detailed than for similar projects. Given that the East Coast Main Line improvement project will disrupt passengers' journeys over several years to come, we feel that more can be done to explain the reasons behind the disruption and the benefits to be delivered in the longer term.

As is research was undertaken during the blockade this was before any 'thank you' activity would have taken place.

Communicating the bank holiday works and station closure

Transport Focus is disappointed that the communications campaign for the London King's Cross station closure did not start sooner. We acknowledge the challenges faced by Network Rail and the train companies in agreeing the dates for the work and the detail of the train plan that would operate. However, not communicating effectively led to passengers making arrangements on the assumption they would be able to travel into London King's Cross when this was not the case. Where passengers said they were dissatisfied with the information provided, it was often because there had been no warning, or no effective warning, when they bought their ticket.

Information to passengers at the point of purchase was a major weakness, in part because T-12 was not met and in part because ticket retailers, whether train companies or third parties, are rarely good at presenting information that allows an informed purchase when there

is engineering work. In addition, we believe that passengers should be warned of line closures such as this well in advance of the T-12 deadline at which point tickets go on sale.

It would appear that the 'do not travel' message largely achieved its objective for the August

LNER poster at Peterborough; this example correctly states "to London".





Examples of London King's Cross poster and a scrolling display screen on the station concourse.

bank holiday weekend closure. However, Transport Focus does not want to see such advice being given too frequently nor for longer periods of time. The railway is about facilitating travel not deterring it. The way the words 'do not travel' are presented also needs careful consideration. In this instance, it was not always obvious that the message applied to journeys to and from London specifically and that other journeys, particularly where the message was displayed well away from London, were still possible.

We also question whether as full a range of channels were used to advise passengers of the closure as could have been. In particular we noted that until immediately before the bank holiday weekend it was far too easy to walk through King's Cross without taking in any disruption messaging; the information that was there seemed to lack cut-through.

Posters are an integral part of any station visit and can easily be overlooked in the plethora of communications bombarding station visitors. In our work on London Waterloo and Derby we felt that banners displayed in places where there is generally no messaging stood out and achieved valuable cut-through. Similarly, window stickers and seat back leaflets on trains catch passengers' eyes for being 'unusual' and difficult to overlook. On the other hand, scrolling messages on information screens do not appear for long enough and can get lost amongst other advertising.

We are pleased to have worked with Network Rail and the train operators on this first significant passenger survey as part of the East Coast Main Line improvement works. We encourage them to continue to put the needs of passengers at the forefront of their planning and communications. We recommend further passenger research around future significant disruptive work on the line.



Examples of a prominent banner in an unusual position at Derby, highly visible hoardings on the concourse at London Waterloo and window stickers on the doors of a South Western Trains carriage in the run-up to the London Waterloo works.



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