



Reliability on high frequency rail lines – the passenger perspective

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Introduction

- This report contains the findings of passenger research commissioned by Transport Focus in partnership with Network Rail's South East route (as it was at the time the project began). The qualitative research project was undertaken for Transport Focus behalf by the independent research agency, Illuminas, whose presentation slides form the basis of this report
- The aim of the research was to understand passengers' expectations in terms of punctuality and reliability and how these might differ on high frequency routes such as the Thameslink core between London Blackfriars and London St Pancras International stations which is designed to handle 24 trains per hour (i.e. a train every 2½ minutes)
- To understand passengers' expectations and attitudes we conducted a total of 12 focus groups and ten individual depth interviews with disabled passengers travelling to London from south of the river Thames
- The groups were recruited to represent a variety of journeys in terms of use of the Thameslink core, journey length, train operator, and the need to interchange, as follows:
 - just the Thameslink core
 - Thameslink services through the core but originating a short distance away from the core
 - Thameslink services through the core but originating a longer distance away from the core
 - Thameslink services through the core but requiring a change of train to use the core
 - journeys, with or without a change of train, but not using Thameslink



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Reliability on High Frequency Rail Research Debrief
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Research Background and Objectives

Research background: Unravelling 'reliability'

Reliability is a key priority for passengers.

Passengers' views on performance are often influenced by three key issues:*

- **Limited trust:** lack of trust is a recurring theme in passengers' assessment of railway performance and highlights significant cynicism towards the motives and behaviour of the railways, *per se*.
- **Lack of competition:** the railway is commonly perceived not to be subject to typical market discipline, reinforcing suspicion that it does the bare minimum to reach set targets.
- **Lack of transparency:** most passengers are unaware of what targets are set and by whom they are set and monitored, making it difficult to draw a link between these measurements and their own journey experiences.

It has, however, been suggested that high frequency services are qualitatively different to other routes, and that passengers' understandings of reliability may differ in this context.

Research was therefore necessary to unpick this complex and multifaceted issue.

*Train Punctuality: The Passenger Perspective, Transport Focus November 2015



Research objectives

To understand what passengers mean by reliability and punctuality, given how central they are to passenger priorities. In support of this, the following research objectives needed to be addressed.

What are passengers' current priorities regarding reliability?

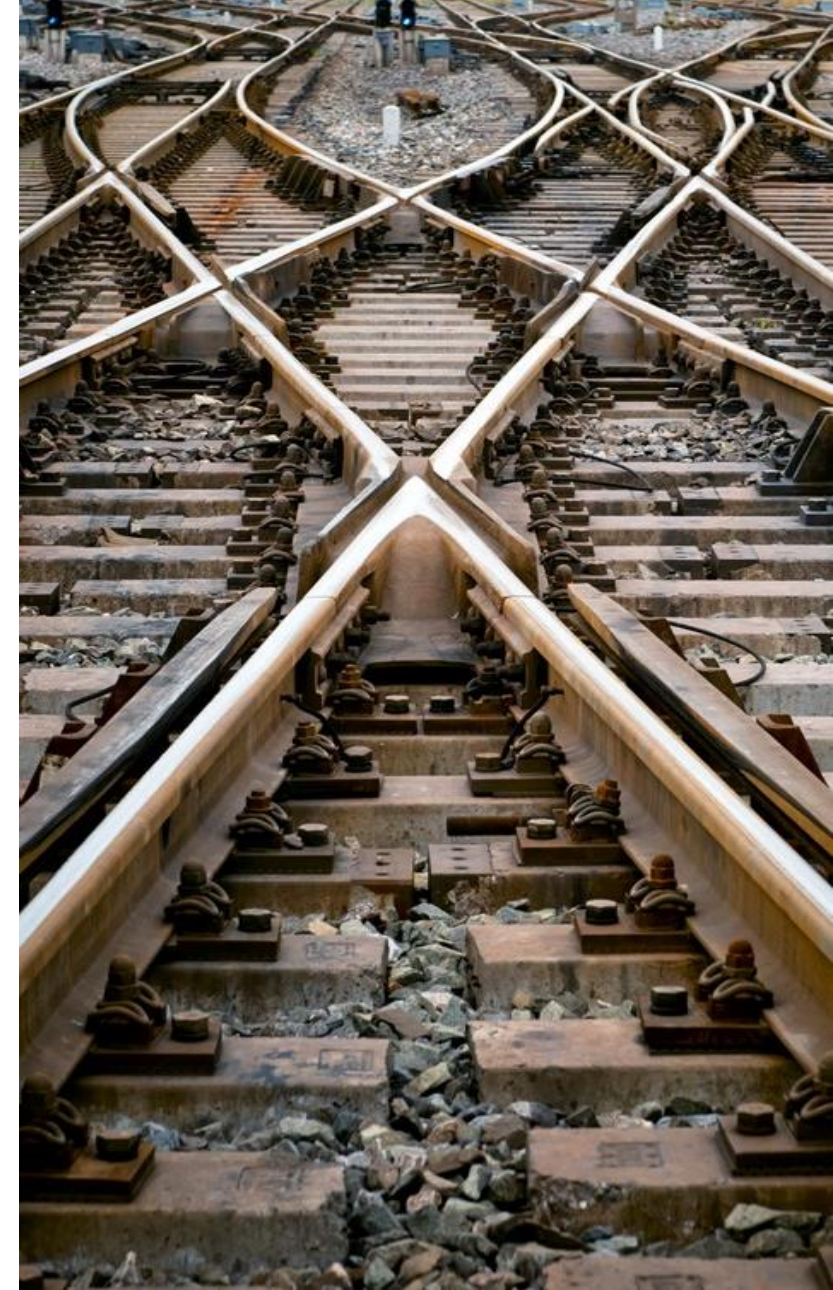
- How do they evaluate trade-offs and what priorities emerge from these trade-offs?
- What differences in priorities exist between different passenger types?

How important is frequency of service in comparison to punctuality?

- What do passengers think works best: high frequency trains and variations in punctuality, or fewer trains and more precise times?

How should passengers be informed about service performance?

- What sources of information would passengers like to have access to?



Summary of approach



1. Pre-Group Questionnaire

Before each session, passengers were tasked with completing a short questionnaire about their views on reliability and **overall satisfaction** with rail travel.

Given that we spoke to over 100 passengers,, the questionnaire has provided a useful opportunity to reinforce our findings with a degree of quantification.



2. Focus groups

Our approach included **12 x 90-minute focus groups**.

A combination of **individual trade-off exercises** and group discussion allowed us to explore individuals' initial priorities and observe whether / how preferences change as respondents were provided with more information and heard other participants' views and experiences.



3. Face-to-face depth interviews

10 depth interviews were conducted with vulnerable passengers.

Face-to-face interviews provided the optimum environment for vulnerable passengers to discuss in-depth, their additional needs in terms of rail punctuality and reliability.

- A total of 106 individuals participated in the research.
- Fieldwork was conducted between 8th and 29th of April, 2019

Sample Structure

12 Focus groups in central London

Journey Type	Journey Purpose
Core Only	Any
Non-Core (No Interchange)	Commuter
Core from Outside (Longer)	Business/ Leisure
Core from Outside (Interchange)	Commuter
Core Only	Any
Non-Core (No Interchange)	Business/Leisure
Core from Outside (Shorter)	Commuter
Non-Core (Interchange)	Leisure/Business
Non-Core (Interchange)	Commuter
Core from Outside (Interchange)	Leisure/Business
Core from Outside (Longer)	Commuter
Core from Outside (Shorter)	Leisure/Business

Thameslink Core

The Thameslink Core is a section of the route between London Blackfriars and St. Pancras International. The route between these stations is shorter, more frequent and interacts with TfL services, which can lead to differing assumptions about reliability and performance to those who do not travel within or into the core.

Interchangers

Those with an interchange in their journey (changing from one National Rail service to another) were included in the sample.

These respondents are likely to have more stringent requirements around punctuality and reliability in order to interchange successfully along their journey.

Journey Length

Both longer and shorter-distance passengers were included to ensure that a wide range of routes were covered.

Journey Purpose

Attitudes and expectations towards travel often differ by journey purpose – Illuminas therefore included both ‘elective’ journeys such as leisure and business trips, and those that are more routine.

10 In-depth interviews with vulnerable passengers

Interviews with passengers with long-term health conditions such as anxiety, vision or hearing problems, or arthritis, provided an insight into how priorities can change depending on individual circumstances.

Contents

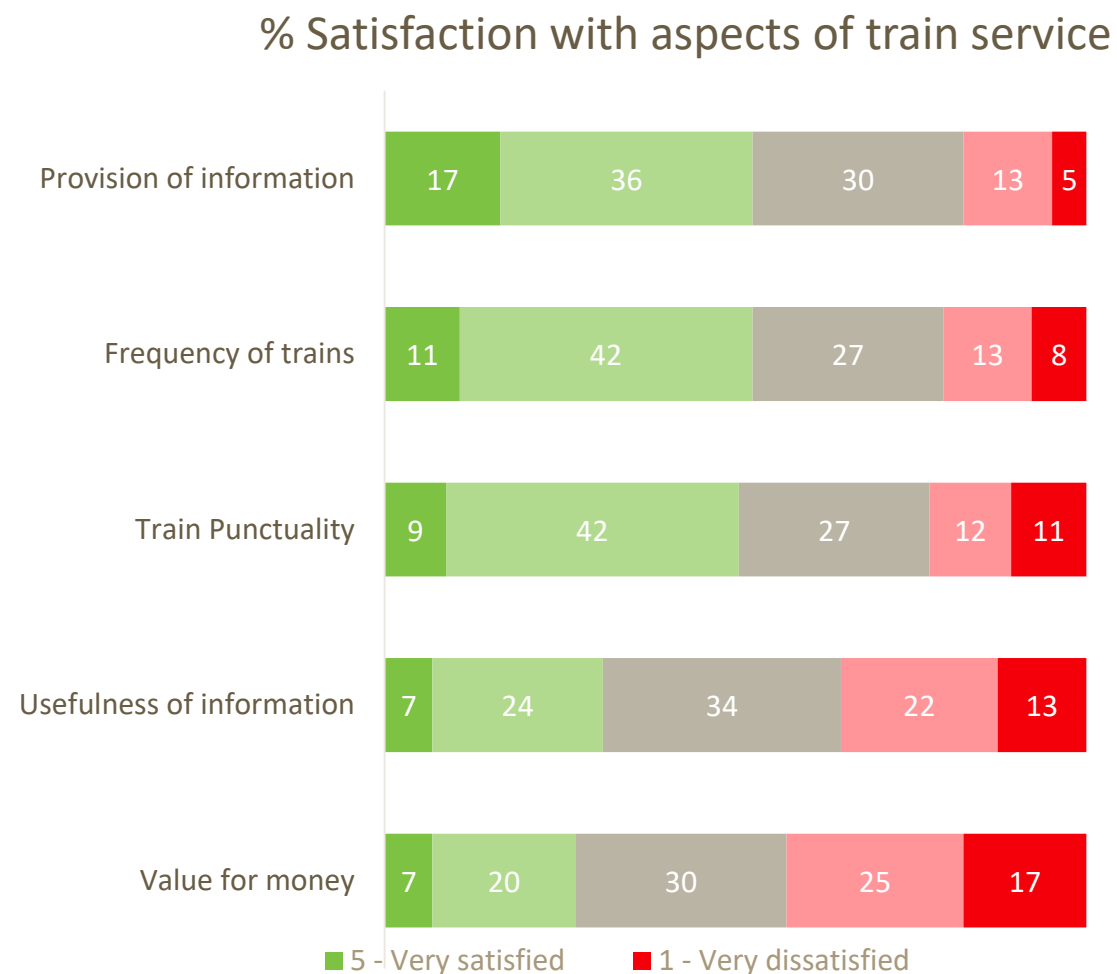
- Context: what do passengers think about the rail services they use?
- What makes for a reliable rail service?
- The importance of trust in assessing reliability
- How do passengers trade-off between frequency, punctuality and capacity?
- How do passengers compare rail to the Underground?
- How do passengers want rail reliability to be measured?
- What sort of service information is valued by passengers?
- Summary and conclusions



Context: what do
passengers think about
the rail services they
use?

Passengers are often ambivalent about their train service experience

- Almost all the passengers we spoke to felt that they enjoyed a frequent service, albeit many would not describe their service as ‘high-frequency.’
- Many of our passengers recognised that their services were much more frequent than the norm, and appreciated the convenience this brings.
- They also feel that a frequent service provides a degree of reassurance that the probability of severe disruption to their journey is limited.
- Passengers are also mostly realistic, and recognise that delays are to some extent inevitable on routes carrying many people into central London.
- However, frequent issues around delays and cancellations and lack of trust in rail operators limit their overall satisfaction.
- Given this, few respondents were actively enthusiastic about the services they used.



Frequent, minor delays and cancellations damage the passenger experience and undermine trust in the railway

While most passengers would consider their delays minor, persistent delays can make passengers question the customer focus and reliability of the service.

They argue that small delays of this nature 'add up' over the course of their time as a passenger and ultimately reflect poorly on the train operator as an organisation.

Cancellations, although rarer than delays, can be intensely frustrating. Likewise, short formations stick in the memory.

Crowding is a persistent frustration among rail passengers (exacerbated by cancellations and short formations). Many are pragmatic, arguing that the situation would be a great deal worse if the service were less frequent.

There's just something about cancelled trains. I have just got this perception that we, as a country, shouldn't be suffering cancellations. You go to Holland and Germany and everything seems to run on time.

Vulnerable Passenger, Vision

It is kind of strange how we are quite advanced with technology but all these things like signal failure... Where is that money going if you're telling me we can be delayed from signal failure? It doesn't make sense.

Core from Outside (Shorter)

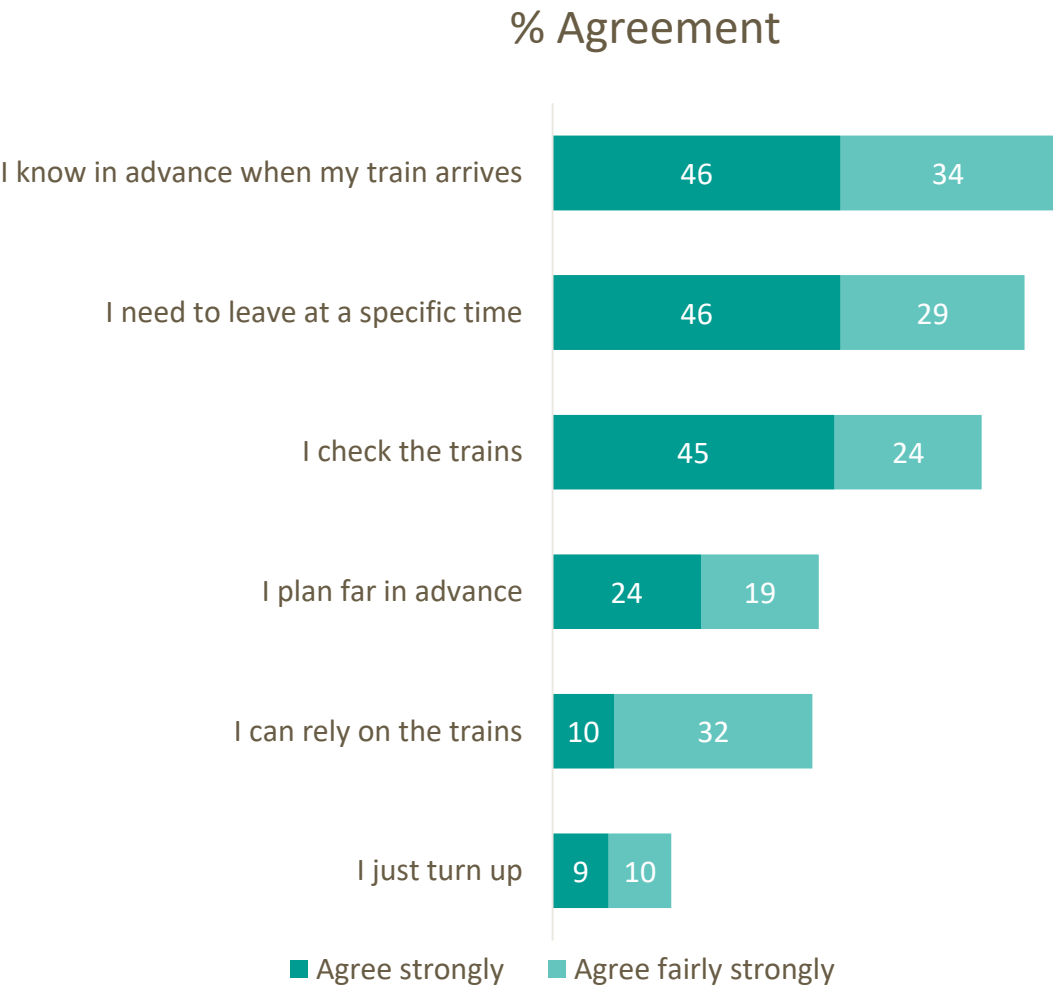
While passengers feel that higher frequency services reduce the need to plan ahead, a degree of planning is still common

Most passengers make a **mental calculation** about the longest possible time they may have to wait for a train. However, most still aim for a single, ideal train. Even though their behaviour is habit driven, a degree of planning is still seen as necessary.

Passengers taking shorter, more habitual journeys use the train’s frequency to decide how rigorous the planning process has to be.

A more frequent service entails a more casual plan, aiming for a train but leaving a buffer based on the maximum amount of time they will have to wait.

All passengers value up-to-date information about the overall situation on trains, even if they are not looking for a specific train. (Apps play an important role here.)



Q4. Thinking about the journey you told us about when we reached out to you about this research...How far do the following apply to you? Base: All respondents (103)

Circumstantial and personality factors can increase the importance of planning, and therefore punctuality

Frequency acts as a reassurance that their journey can only be delayed up to a point

- However, some passengers question whether a delay may have a knock-on effect on subsequent trains. In this instance, information about the overall impact of a given disruption is seen as very helpful.

Some passengers are simply pre-disposed to plan ahead

- Several respondents claimed to plan ahead for even the most high-frequency journeys, including Underground travel. Differences in assumptions around reliability will differ by personality as well as circumstance.

Self-employed passengers worry that being late could cause them to lose a client

- These passengers are often nervous, making important, unpredictable journeys to locations they are not familiar with.
- Information is of particular importance for these passengers, and punctuality acts as reassurance that as long as they plan ahead, they will get to their destination on time.

Many see punctuality as vital for their career, and feel that train operators do not recognise this

- Commuters often feel that they are reliable in their work lives, leaving the house early in order to get to work on time. There is a strong belief that rail services are not reciprocating this effort.

Vulnerable passengers are particularly likely to plan ahead

If it's one I'm not quite familiar with I'll check the frequency and I might see 'Oh there's going to be one every 12 minutes' – that's good enough frequency.

Vulnerable Passenger, Mental Health and Dexterity

I always have to plan. I have to. The night before I like to check and then on the day I check on the National Rail board. I do it meticulously.

Vulnerable Passenger, Breathing

Today I was in Richmond and I knew I had to get to Waterloo – I didn't plan that at all; just knew they were regular. I happened to be three minutes late but the next train was in ten so I didn't have to worry.

Core Only

There are a few occasions where my bus is late and then I miss the connection on to the train; so I always have to plan ahead.

Core from Outside (Shorter)

Usage of and attitudes towards higher frequency services vary by passenger type

Frequent, shorter journeys

These passengers are the most likely to 'turn up and go' out of all respondents. Their journeys are habit driven and many can leave a short buffer of 15 or 20 minutes, being reasonably confident that a convenient train will arrive.

Sometimes I turn up and because it is quite frequent I can just check on the platform. It's not like when I get to a bus stop.

Core Only

These passengers tend to make short trips into central London, often with less at stake. They are generally more satisfied with rail on a day-to-day basis and prioritise amenities such as seating and Wi-Fi. Nonetheless, they are aware of the more 'macro' issues around rail travel and sympathise with those who commute.

Speed doesn't matter as long as you get there.

Core from Outside (Shorter)

Less frequent, shorter journeys

Frequent, longer journeys

These passengers are very familiar with their route but recognise that it can be complex. Their journeys are habit driven but may nonetheless require planning on the day of departure, checking for unexpected delays or cancellations. Given that their journeys are often in peak-time, they are more likely to benefit from the highest frequency.

I don't plan but I certainly double check. I never leave the house to get a train at a certain time without checking my phone because if there's a delay or a cancellation, I don't want to wait an hour.

Core from Outside (Longer)

These passengers are most likely to plan their journeys well in advance. Those travelling for business in particular value punctuality and do not have high expectations around frequency given that many are likely to have purchased a ticket in advance for a specific train.

I try to book my tickets in advance, if I can do it, I do it twice a week, and I try to book off-peak on Trainline because it's like £10 saving on a ticket.

Core from Outside (Longer)

Less frequent, longer journeys



What makes for a
reliable rail service?

Outside of rail, reliability is defined as consistently delivering an 'agreed' level of service

In a generic sense, a reliable service is one that is predictable, a known quantity, delivering the service that the customer feels he/she has paid for.

This expectation is underpinned by **trust** in the service, both that it will swiftly correct any issues and that the provider fundamentally has the passenger's interests at heart.

For some, a reliable service is one that runs smoothly enough that the user does not even think about it; they can expect a high standard and do not have to worry about the possibility of being let down.

Well, you don't notice it, do you? You don't notice your broadband working.

Non-Core (No Interchange)

A couple of years ago there was a problem in Wimbledon with the water so the company put in an outlet at the end of the street so people could drink and wash.

Core from Outside (Shorter)

Being there when you need them.

Non-Core (Interchange)

That if it does break, you can expect it to be fixed quickly. It's not breaking all the time, because then you'd just change providers. But with rail they're regional monopolies.

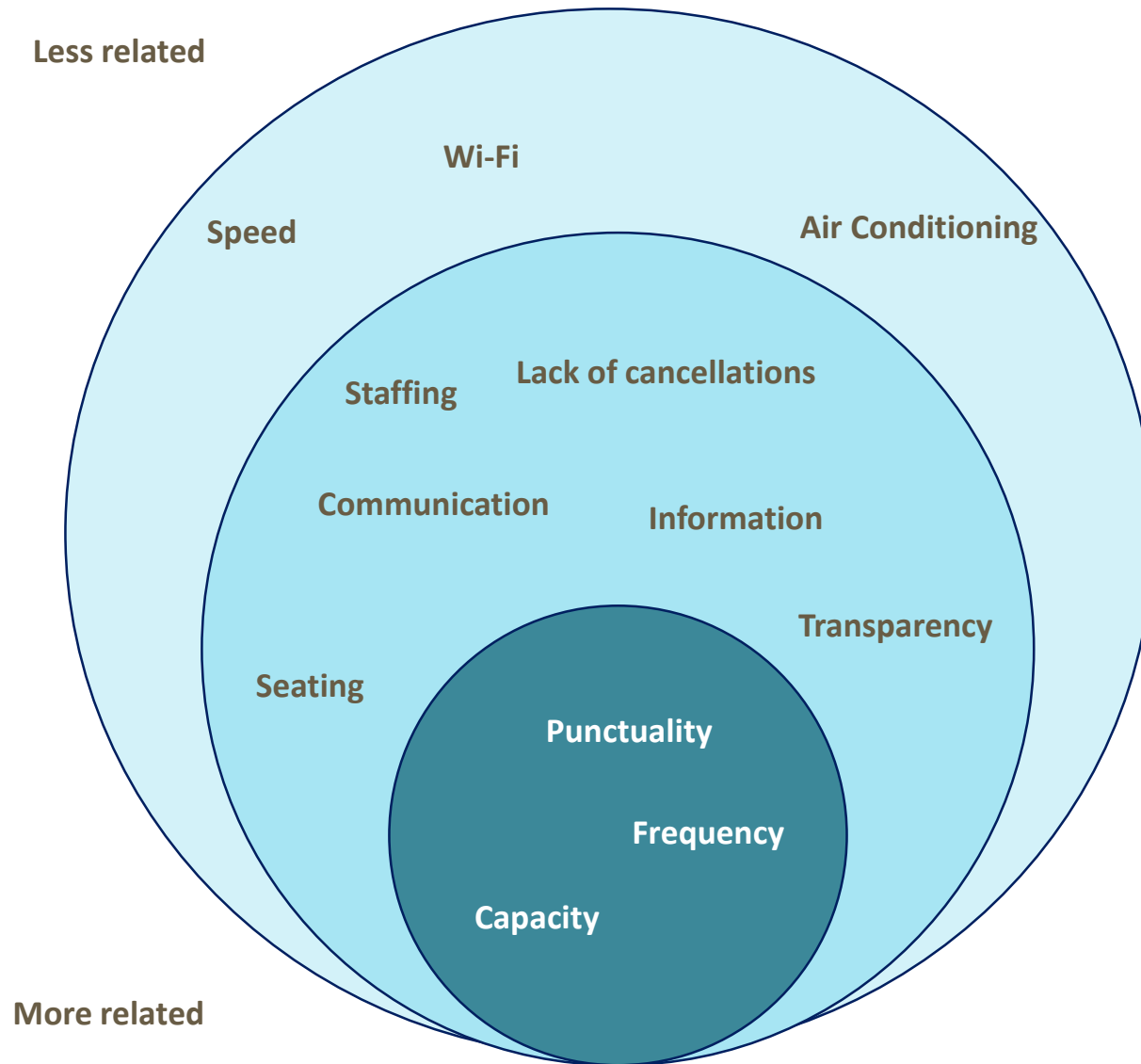
Core from Outside (Longer)

There is no single definition of reliability for rail, with most passengers seeing it as a multifaceted issue



Q10. If you had just three words to sum up what reliability means on this route, what would you say? Base: All respondents (103)

A hierarchy exists in terms of how closely different factors relate to 'reliability' on rail



Only passengers with **substantially higher expectations** see these as vital for a reliable service.

However, some will argue that due to the substantial cost of rail travel, a passenger *ought* to be able to expect these as part of a reliable service. For **vulnerable passengers**, air conditioning and other 'comfort' features may be more critical.

These are features that can **mitigate** and partly compensate for a failure of punctuality.

Delays and cancellations are usually seen to be the operator's fault. Passengers doubt the train operator's resilience in the face of inclement weather and other external forces.

Punctuality, frequency and capacity are seen as **mutually-dependent** and absolutely **core** to the concept of reliability.

Some feel that their expectations have been 'beaten down' to these three factors but would ideally like to see a service that reliably delivers more.

Depending on the individual, interpretations of reliability can vary

Some passengers consider reliability only according to its 'core' measures of frequency, punctuality and capacity.

For them, it is almost exclusively a question of making sure that they arrive at their destination on time, with less concern about how this is achieved.

Others take a much more comprehensive view of reliability, seeing it as a signifier of everything that makes for a successful journey.

These passengers feel that they have been promised a modern, high-quality service across most if not all aspects, given the higher cost of a ticket.

I know that I can get to where I need to get to on time.

Core Only

It's a bit of everything, because we're paying enough for a ticket.

Core from Outside (Longer)

I think reliability is about the service as a whole. Down to clean trains, to well-informed staff, to minimal cancellations. It could even be installing those LED signs on the trains.

Vulnerable Passenger, Vision

'Minimum' interpretation

I don't want to be late. So whether it's more trains or less cancellations, I just want less impact on my journey.

Non-Core (Interchange)

'Maximum' interpretation

You just think 'What am I paying for?' Everything has an impact on somebody.

Non-Core (No Interchange)

A reliable train service is one that lives up to passengers' expectations

However, expectations can vary, and come from a range of different sources

Passengers' expectations for service quality are mediated by price

Passengers, particularly those with season tickets, feel 'locked in' to the service and have paid a substantial sum for what they expect to be a reliable service. Trains are often held to a higher standard than buses in this regard, owing to the difference in cost.

People using online apps are told when their train will arrive and expect this to be accurate

Many passengers regularly used apps (CityMapper and Google Maps seemed to be particularly prevalent, although TOC, NRE and TfL apps were also used) to inform them of when their most convenient train will arrive. Some, particularly those on shorter routes, aim for this train in particular.

Therefore even in a high frequency context, habit-driven journeys can still be carefully planned.

Vulnerable Passenger – Breathing and Stamina

This passenger suffers from asthma and finds it extremely stressful having to run for a train. For this reason, travel makes her very nervous.

This is compounded by the fact that her work as a freelance voice actor means she travels to varied locations within central London. For this respondent, no matter how frequent the service, she will always plan ahead.

Amenities such as seating, air conditioning and cleanliness ensure that she does not have an asthma attack on the train.

I have asthma and it's really stressful having to run to the train, if it's a packed train it gets busy and I'm running out of breath. I had a bad experience last year where I fainted on the train and it was awful, so it just makes me nervous.

Vulnerable Passenger, Breathing and Stamina

Punctuality is still the strongest indicator of a streamlined and professional service

Frequency in and of itself is not seen as an indicator of reliability.

A frequent but unpunctual service indicates a **lack of control** on the part of the operating company.

The timetable emerged as a promise that train operators make to their passengers which should be adhered to as a bare minimum.

When challenged, respondents still feel that punctuality is the best measure of reliability, including for a high frequency service.

Punctuality holds symbolic value. A late service is unlikely to be seen as truly reliable regardless of how frequent it is

Because it says so on the timetable. When it issues a timetable it should stick to it. That's where my expectations begin: at the timetable. I'm relying on it.

Vulnerable Passenger, Breathing

Even if the trains were every ten minutes, that's still a joke – it's still not a good service [if there are delays].

Non-Core (No Interchange)

I don't mind there only being maybe two trains maximum, or three trains per hour because if I know when the train's coming, that's your job to be there on time.

Core from Outside (Interchange)

If that is happening regularly then you lose the trust in the service. You might just think, I will use something else next time as these are just late.

Core Only

Frequency can, to some degree, compensate for a lack of punctuality

But, for punctuality to become a secondary consideration, a train would need to arrive as often as every 2½ to 3 minutes

Frequency can compensate for a passenger running late, as well as the train

Passengers, particularly those with lengthier journeys to the station, health conditions, or variable routines, have to account for the possibility that they will be unable to catch their intended train on time.

These passengers use frequency as a countermeasure, ensuring that their delay will not have a knock-on effect.

Frequency reassures the passenger that they will not have to wait for longer than a certain interval

Again, however, a late service will still reflect badly on the train operator, virtually irrespective of how frequent the service is.

Ultimately, a service must be extremely frequent for these benefits to fully emerge

For some passengers, a train every ten minutes was still not frequent enough to compensate for the possibility of a delay, either on the passenger's part or on the part of the train operator.

I think it compensates for an unreliable service.

Core from Outside (Shorter)

[Delays] are less impactful if they are more regular.

Vulnerable Passenger, Vision

Five minutes is not a lot to wait for a train. If it's an hour, that's a different thing, or half-an-hour, but five minutes is nothing.

Core from Outside (Longer)

Because you know there's going to be one in five minutes, you'd never really be running late.

Non-Core (Interchange)

Capacity improves passengers' journeys in the moment and gives the impression of an ordered and calm service

Many respondents had personal experience of not being able to get on a train due to overcrowding

In this way, a lack of capacity **negates** any benefits around punctuality, given that the train arrived on time but was nonetheless inaccessible.

Some also highlighted difficulties getting off the train due to crowding. Again, these issues reflect negatively on the service's reliability due to the passenger not being able to complete their journey as intended.

Respondents can be particularly frustrated when a train arrives in short formation. They argue that train operators are aware of how many customers will attempt to board the train, and that providing a lower-capacity service is an illogical, unpredictable and (possibly deliberately) unreliable service.

We don't have a diplomatic way of queueing. I could've been on the platform first, but because the train's delayed, several other people gather round and because I haven't worked out where the doors will be I lose my space.

Non-Core (Interchange)

The thing is, even when you do get a seat you have to then wrestle people to get off your train, which makes it part of reliability because if you never make it to the door you can't get out of your own train to make it on time!

Non-Core (No Interchange)

My boyfriend always texts me saying that today it's six carriages, and the next day oh, it's twelve. You never know what you're going to get.

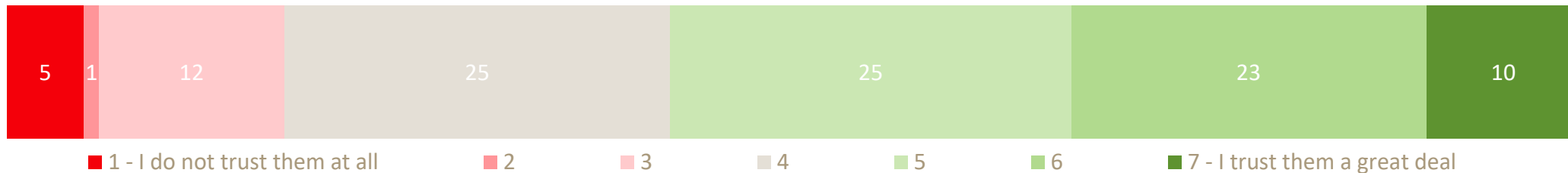
Core from Outside (Longer)



The importance of trust in assessing reliability

Few respondents feel that they can definitively trust train operators

To what extent do you feel you can trust the rail provider on that route? (%)



There was a stage last year where they changed the timetable on the Thameslink in the summer. I lost complete trust in the service. You just knew it was a mess.

Core Only

I've been let down too many times where I've thought the train is coming and then suddenly it's not. I've had too many negative experiences to say I could trust them.

Non-Core (Interchange)

On the whole I do trust the rail companies. I think we do live in an incredibly busy city and it's moving thousands of people around daily.

Vulnerable Passenger, Vision

I don't feel it's acceptable to be late every single day, even by two minutes. You can't trust what they're saying.

Non-Core (No Interchange)

Often things change, or they tell you the wrong information, or there's no one around. Then sometimes you do get really good train staff and they can be really helpful, but sometimes they don't have any information.

Core from Outside (Interchange)

I don't have massive issues with them, but I find them quite expensive.

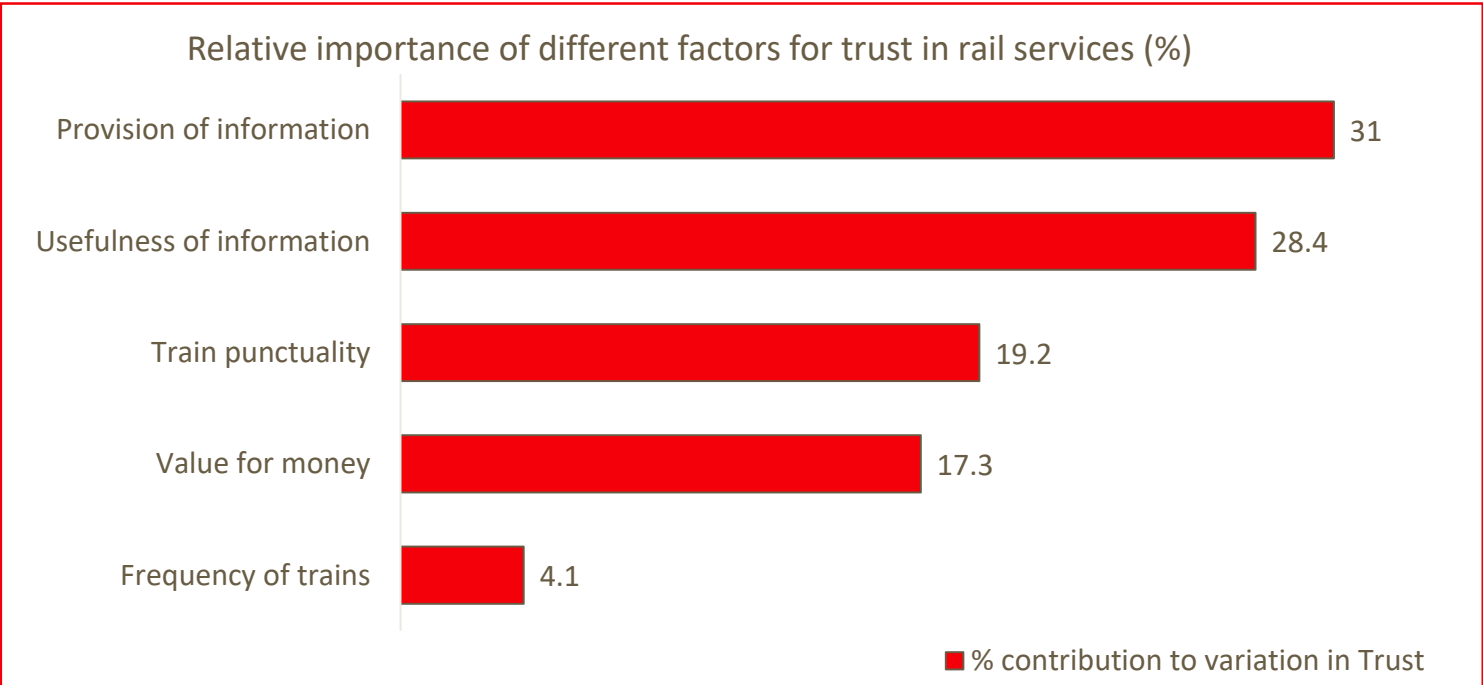
Core from Outside (Shorter)

Trust is driven by a positive relationship with the customer, premised on communication and information

Quantitative analysis suggests that the provision and usefulness of information are the strongest predictors of trust in that service. Again, while frequency is important, it has a weaker relationship with trust.

Honesty about the causes and consequences of a delay create trust, offering effective and transparent advice to help the passenger manage the situation.

Qualitative research suggests that staff presence at the station is also a significant determinant of a trustworthy and reliable service.



Shapley value regression. Dependent variable: Q8b. Independent variable: Q7. Base: All respondents (103)

With trains, there are two types of service. There is the actual service of the train, then there is the service that you receive as in when you ask someone to help, as in the customer service.

Core Only

I had an incident at Selhurst, and the train came in early on a different platform that people didn't know about, and it wasn't advertised, and even the guard didn't know that the train had left early and gone on a different platform, so he had to phone East Croydon. So I don't know that staff are fully informed when there are problems.

Non-Core (Interchange)

Having a lot of staff there to advise you what to do. It is a horrible feeling when you are panicked, especially if you are in a place you are not aware of. So that is important.

Core Only

I've had occasions where the bus has just stopped and then the driver will come over on the tannoy and tell you the reason, and then everyone says 'okay, fair enough, I'll accept that' and the driver's quite apologetic. It kind of makes everyone in the cabin a bit more understanding.

Core from Outside (Shorter)

Compensation is a means of showing passengers that the operator is being held to account

However, the system is seen as inaccessible and opaque

Compensation could potentially make up for a significant delay, but there is a general assumption that the process is tedious and complicated.

A robust compensation scheme signifies that the train service holds itself to a high standard of reliability.

Some respondents have claimed compensation in the past, but many simply assume that it is not worth the effort.

Trust plays a significant role. Several passengers argued that train companies deliberately make the process difficult which can prevent other passengers from even attempting to claim.

It's just the whole customer service thing – with the best will in the world you're not going to get it right all the time but compensation makes it easier for the customer to get their money back.

Non-Core (No Interchange)

It's almost as if cancellations have become the norm. You expect to see a cancellation within the week. It's the norm.

Non-Core (Interchange)

If it's late for a certain amount of time, 45 minutes, whatever it was, you get compensated. Last time I had to get a bit of compensation, it was emails backwards and forwards, it took me nearly four weeks to sort out.

Core from Outside (Longer)

I have [claimed] for long journeys, but not for this train journey because it is not worth it, it costs me £2.40 and then you have to submit all these forms and be on the phone for a million hours.

Core from Outside (Shorter)

Vulnerable passengers tend to view reliability in much the same way as those without longer-term health conditions

However, for these passengers, the issue of capacity on trains is of major importance. A crowded train can be stressful, particularly for those with mental health conditions.

Crowding and not having a seat can make me anxious. If I get overwhelmed by transport, especially at busy peak times I might opt to get a taxi.

Vulnerable Passenger, Mental Health

I need a seat – and I'm not afraid to tell someone to get out of one either!

Vulnerable Passenger, Mobility

Vulnerable Passenger – Arthritis

This passenger has recently started taking the train again after her rheumatoid arthritis caused her to retire early. She actively enjoys taking the train for leisure purposes and has very few complaints about the train service itself.

She values having a seat on trains and on the platform, but sometimes feels ignored by station staff, having to 'fight' to get the information and support she needs, both as a relatively new rail user and as a passenger with mobility issues. She has felt abandoned by staff and passed from one staff member to another as though she were a burden.

When something's delayed, it's just a rush of passengers all trying to talk to the staff and it's like 'Hello? I'm completely lost!' – I can't get anyone to help.

Vulnerable Passenger, Mobility



How do passengers
trade-off between
frequency, punctuality
and capacity?

Punctuality, frequency and capacity are at the core of reliability

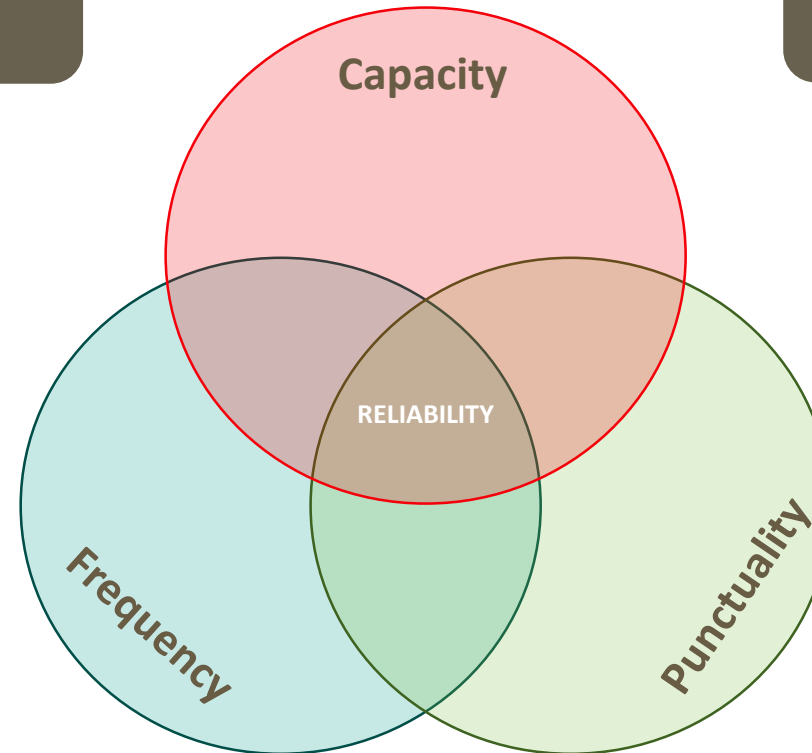
However, if even one of these three elements is lacking, the service can appear unreliable

In our heads, we would see it as a Tube service, you don't need to know the time, you just know you come and a train will turn up.

Core Only

When they're every half an hour, they're packed – they're more busy.

Core from Outside (Shorter)



Frequent trains without punctuality can feel **chaotic**, leading some to feel that the train operating company is not **in control**. However, passengers concede that the service will ultimately meet their needs.

A punctual service without frequency can leave passengers feeling **nervous** – they are aware that a cancellation would lead to a potentially **serious delay**.

In these circumstances, passengers need reassurances that the train they ultimately board will have space for them.

When presented with a stark choice, passengers would rather have a frequent service with sporadic delays or cancellations

We presented passengers with a deliberately stark choice, recognising that in practice the trade-off would be less dramatic.

This resulted in the strong preference for a frequent but less punctual route indicated in the chart opposite.

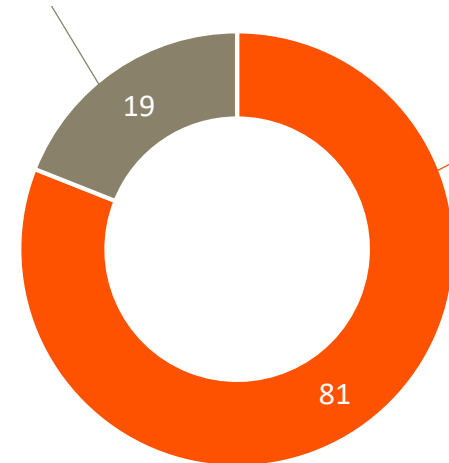
When questioned however, this is not necessarily viewed as the best option. Some passengers see high frequency routes as **'efficient'** rather than reliable.

Due to the lack of trust in rail operators, passengers can be concerned that a high frequency route gives rail operators 'permission' to be lax about punctuality.

Frequency offers passengers the best chance of achieving their journey on time. It does not, necessarily, make the journey reliable and few passengers are willing to 'give up' punctuality.

% Preference for trade-off

A train that arrives every half an hour and is hardly ever late.



A train that often arrives five minutes late, with six scheduled per hour.

If it gets delayed by a few minutes, I can allow it as long as it is going to come. Delays don't bother me so much, it is the cancellations.

Core Only

Frequency has got to be the highest because if there are cancellations, at least there's another one coming not long after.

Non-Core (No Interchange)

Passengers are more divided about the relative importance of cancellations

When asked to consider a trade off between delays and cancellations, neither option is seen as constituting a reliable service.

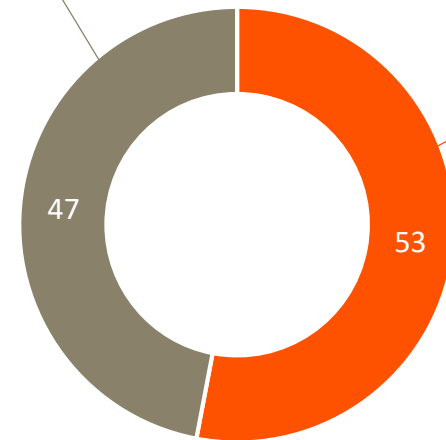
Passengers are unwilling to trade off and do not see it as an appropriate way for rail to operate. This exercise often raised the question of why the railway cannot provide both.

Even a small possibility of cancellations can make passengers feel as though they are playing a 'game of chance', with no guarantee their journey will be successful.

Cancellations also imply a knock-on effect, bringing capacity into the calculation. A cancelled train, regardless of frequency, raises the risk of a more crowded and uncomfortable journey for the next available train.

% Preference for trade-off

A train that runs every half an hour, with some delays, but is virtually never cancelled.



A train that arrives frequently and on time, but a train is cancelled every few days.

I don't agree with any of them of course, I would like to live in an ideal world.

Non-Core (No Interchange)

Cancellations are just annoying and similarly to what you said, you just get everyone packing on to the next train, and that's never ideal. So I really don't mind waiting, but cancellations can really mess up plans and things.

Core from Outside (Interchange)

I think they are both quite bad actually!

Non-Core (Interchange)

You just hope it is not you.

Core Only

In the event of delays, passengers feel that train companies should prioritise returning to the planned schedule

Again, passengers can feel that adhering to the schedule is a hallmark of a reliable service

In the focus groups, few were willing to concede that a train service should be allowed to deviate from its schedule. Even when there is major disruption, a speedy return to normal service is expected.

The timetable can feel like a promise made by the operating company to its passengers, acting as a **signifier** for punctuality and reliability.

Some felt that for very high frequency services such as the Underground, the timetable is less relevant, but even for those taking Core journeys, adherence to a schedule felt like a necessary aspect of a reliable service.

Prioritise the fast train, sure, but make sure it's not going to be a scramble to the death!

Vulnerable Passenger, Breathing and Stamina

Even if it doesn't affect you that much, it's like, well that's not doing it's job, what am I paying for!?

Non-Core (No Interchange)

Some feel that all journeys should be treated equally in terms of importance

A common refrain during the research was that 'all journeys are important to someone.' Many argued that prioritising commuters, **while logical**, felt **unfair** and would not reflect well on the service.

But if you're the poor person who lives in that hamlet...

Core from Outside (Longer)



Passengers making journeys within the Thameslink Core view frequency as a stronger component of reliability

The service from Blackfriars to St Pancras is reliable enough to be trusted as a frequent service

Travel within the Thameslink Core is easily understood

Passengers travelling within the Core can board any train and feel certain that they will reach their intended destination. For this reason, concerns around **route information** are given less weight.

As discussed, longer journeys lead passengers to account for more **uncertainty** and a higher chance of things going wrong. For this reason, beyond-Core journeys lead passengers to factor in more time for delays.

In addition, Thameslink services benefit from being seen as modern, up-to-date and high-capacity services within the context of the Core. These additional features contribute to a sense of **trust** that the service will deliver frequency without a sense of chaos or a lapse in punctuality.

Yes it's reliable. It can be quick but busy, but it gets you there fast and that's the main thing.

Core Only

I think those stations like City Thameslink and Blackfriars, the attention is there. They're the priority, so things have to go well.

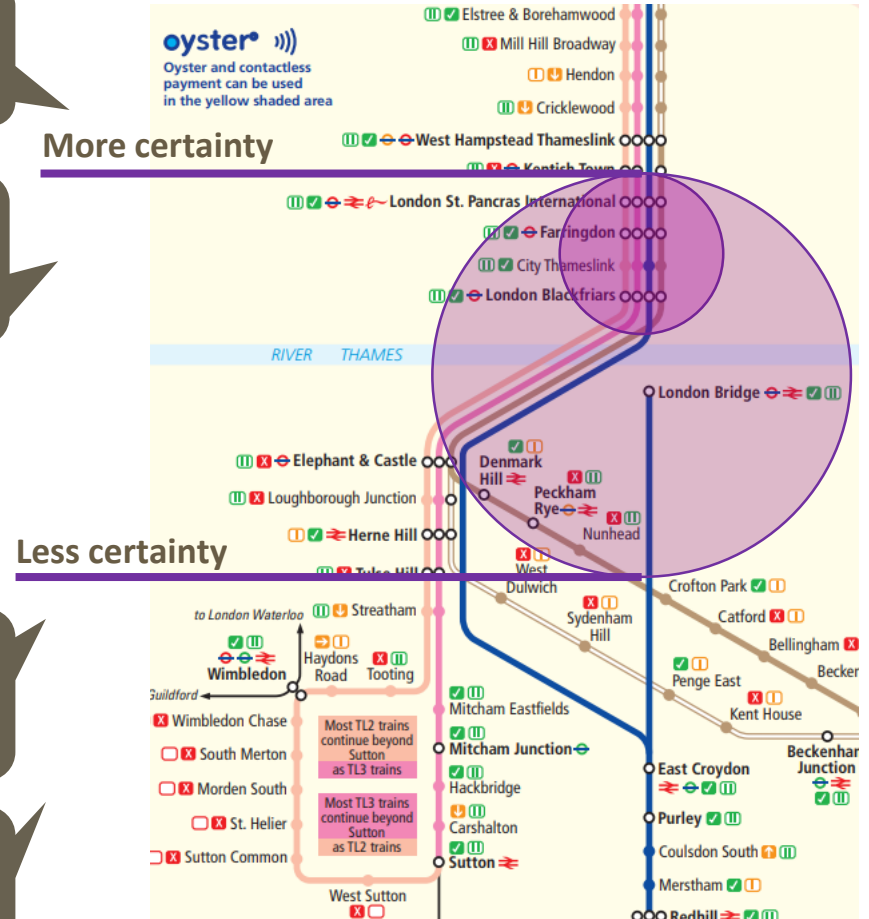
Core Only

Into London on the Thameslink, there are four trains an hour. There's two, then a big gap, and then two quite close together.

Core from Outside (Longer)

Well I come from the Thameslink fiasco from last year – so I don't really trust them – How could you not have enough drivers?

Core from Outside (Longer)





How do passengers
compare rail to the
Underground?

London Underground is trusted to deliver a high frequency service

Passengers acknowledge that delivering a high frequency service is more straightforward for the Underground than it is for National Rail

- Distances between stations on London Underground services are seen as shorter, facilitating a faster and more efficient route than National Rail.
- The service is often underground, which many feel makes it less vulnerable to weather-related disruption they experience on National Rail.
- Alternative routes are accessible throughout the Transport for London network.

London Underground services are felt to be more reliable and customer-oriented

- There is a greater sense of unified management on the Underground (and TfL more widely), which provides reassurance in terms of there being an overarching organising principle underpinning the service, in contrast to the often perceived fragmentation of rail services.
- Underground staff are also often seen as particularly helpful and informative, providing a high standard in terms of the quality and quantity of information.



I don't think you can knock the Underground, really – I mean I know it can be a pain but really it's quite good.

Core from Outside (Shorter)

I think the Underground is a lot better than it was. There's been an awful lot of work done to make the Tubes better, and they are.

Core from Outside (Longer)

The Thameslink Core is seen as similar to the Underground and in some ways superior

However, the trains are generally not seen as frequent enough to compensate for a lack of punctuality. Expectations around frequency are very high.

The Thameslink Core is seen as sleek, modern and spacious

Those with disabilities noted that they could usually get a seat and felt that the service met their needs in terms of amenities and comfort.

The trains are recognised as frequent, however many passengers still plan to catch a specific train

As mentioned, passengers using various journey planning apps are shown a specific train that they can catch. Many, therefore, leave the house with an expectation to catch a scheduled train and are frustrated when this changes.

Some point out that the Core can feel more 'metro-like' than some parts of the Underground

More suburban branches of the Underground are recognised as slow, sometimes unreliable, and less frequent. Several respondents who had a choice about which service to catch would proactively aim to use the Thameslink Core rather than an Underground service.

More specific comments about the Core emerged:

- Some sense that it covers more ground with fewer stops, resembling an express service.
- Others noted that the train can sometimes stop outside of Blackfriars (from the south) and take a while to proceed.
- Those with disabilities appreciated the toilet facilities on the train.

*I'd prefer frequency, because then I'd never be late: **There's always a train.***

Non-Core (Interchange)

I avoid the Underground as much as possible...it's hot and sweaty...people are just more rushed, they seem like they are going faster than they need to be.

Core from Outside (Shorter)

There's a Thameslink one less than every ten minutes. So when it gets cancelled or if it's a bit delayed, it doesn't really impact my journey.

Core from Outside (Interchange)

The new Thameslink are great actually. They've all been revamped.

Vulnerable Passenger, Breathing



How do passengers
want rail reliability to
be measured?

Performance measures are impacted by passengers' assumptions about trust

Passengers' views on performance measurement are informed by the wider context within which they assess the railways. There are three key issues:

- **Concerns about trust** - lack of trust is a recurring theme in passengers' assessment of railway performance.
 - As such, there is a tendency to suspect the worst rather than give the benefit of the doubt.
 - Passengers can therefore be reluctant to take a view on performance measurements, assuming that the train companies will not act on the data in the first place.
- **A 'captive' audience** - while passengers are often sceptical about the claims made by train operating companies, this is compounded by a belief (whether right or wrong) that the rail industry is not subject to the same level of competitive market discipline as other sectors.
- **Lack of transparency** - for the most part, passengers do not know what targets are set, by whom they are set or how they are monitored. Furthermore, even when they are informed about targets, they struggle to see a link between these measures and their own journey experience.

Measuring would hold train companies accountable for their good or bad service if they're being ranked. I don't know about you guys but sometimes I feel like the trains don't actually really care.

Core from Outside (Longer)

You can't change it, so what's the point?

Core from Outside (Shorter)

It might be numbers on a graph to you but no, go back to the human aspect of it and there are people who are dealing with this, and we're paying money and we're doing it because there's no other option.

Non-Core (No Interchange)

Attitudes towards reliability varied by journey type

Thameslink

Core Journeys

Key metric: Frequency

These passengers were the warmest towards the idea of maximising frequency in the service. Their journeys were often high-stakes, multi-stage, and tended to involve making **client visits** as they were self-employed or freelance workers.

They value having a plan B, particularly within the Core, as a common assumption was that delays on the service could be **substantial**.

Beyond-Core Journeys

Key metrics: Frequency, Capacity

Those taking longer journeys can be more concerned with capacity and are more likely to plan for a specific train.

Shorter journeys are more *ad hoc* and most likely to involve a 'turn up and go' mentality – for these passengers, frequency is a major draw. They would like to see train companies accounting for the more **spontaneous** and less planned nature of their travel.

*Just for sanity, I think trying to have a contingency plan is important so I know what's going to happen. I have three trains **and I plan the middle train** so I connect with the trains on either side.*

Core Only

*It always feels like the commuters are penalised on price – they have no choice, they're stuck in that train like sardines and the prices are **astronomical**.*

Core from Outside (Longer)

*I tend to just leave my house, look at Google Maps and **decide whether I have to run!***

Core from Outside (Shorter)

*I don't know, if it's six an hour then you have more time and I dilly-dally. **It's always a kerfuffle in the mornings.***

Core from Outside (Shorter)

Attitudes towards reliability varied by journey type

Interchangers

Key metric: Punctuality

Passengers with interchanges out of central London naturally had more concerns than those making a more central interchange. These passengers tend to leave a larger 'buffer' than others to account for what they see as a greater degree of uncertainty and risk.

Information about expected delays later on in the route is a major indicator of a reliable service for these passengers.

Vulnerable Passengers

Key metric: Service

Vulnerable passengers view the trade-off between frequency and punctuality in almost the exact same way as passengers without a long-term health condition or vulnerability.

These passengers value amenities at the station, clarity of information around delays, and advice about alternative routes in the event of personal or service disruption, seeing all of them as potential indicators of reliability.

I always plan. I don't ever just turn up and see. The trains are about every 15 minutes.

Non-Core (Interchange)

*For me it's punctuality. Obviously we've got places to be at a set time and there are delays like **crowds**.*

Non-Core (Interchange)

*You are standing the other side of the barriers and you are waiting for the boards to change, then there is a **big surge of people** through the barriers to get to the right platform and you have got a visual problem, like me, that just creates even more anxiety.*

Vulnerable Passenger, Vision

*When my arthritis was really bad, there was **always a person on the platform to help**. That's not so much now.*

Vulnerable Passenger, Mobility

Reporting train performance was very low salience

Word-of-mouth, social media and the lived experience of travelling day-to-day are the strongest indicators of a train operator's performance. It is not a concept that most passengers would measure statistically.

Passengers value knowing that train operating companies are **acting** on performance data internally, and expect it to be measured and reported, but are less interested in hearing about this data *per se*.

Some would be interested in seeing **performance data tailored to their route** (possibly through an interactive portal), however aggregated data about performance is less valued and few are able to comment critically on how it should be presented.

I'm not really one for statistics. I just know what it does for me when it impacts me. Maybe if you could see that something has actively improved...

Vulnerable Passenger, Vision

Maybe if it were in a digital format and you could highlight, hover and break things down and see what's going on...

Core Only

...like the standard that they need to adhere to could be rubber banded by frequency. So, if it's one an hour, it can't have any cancellations. If it's two an hour, it can afford one a week... If it's every five minutes, it can afford to do four a day. So, I think it should be rubber banded.

Non-Core (No Interchange)



Punctuality seems the most appropriate measure for reliability

However, passengers question its relevance to them personally

In discussing how train performance could be measured, respondents were shown The New Industry Measure. This was seen as a suitable metric and easy-to-understand, but not engaging

Passengers felt that measuring train punctuality to the minute was an effective way of keeping train operating companies accountable.

Again, passengers are suspicious about the possibility of statistics being manipulated, but the new industry measure strikes most as essentially tamper-proof. Likewise, the measure is still seen as appropriate for high frequency services.

While many concede that up to the minute punctuality measurement may be less relevant to a truly high frequency service such as the Thameslink Core, they are still reluctant to let go entirely of the need for timetabled punctuality.

There is a general sense that stations should be treated equally when measuring performance

For some, weighing one station more heavily than another would feel dishonest.

For respondents who are less interested in performance measurement, there is some sense in which the simpler the measure, the less open it is to being manipulated.

The schedule can also be seen as an indicator of capacity: if a replacement train is used, some fear that the train will be crowded and unusable.

Measuring the time it takes to recover from delays is also seen as a useful metric

A fast recovery signifies that the train operator has the situation under control and can therefore be relied on.

The Industry Measure measures train punctuality to the minute. Cancellations are also included, as well as early arrivals

A key station to one of us might not be a key station for another person.

Core from Outside (Shorter)

Figures and statistics could be massaged – it makes more sense to see how many trains got in on time rather than human beings.

Core from Outside (Longer)

Concentrate on crowd control. Moving the numbers. If it means changing the timetable, then fine.

Non-Core (No Interchange)



What sort of service information is valued by passengers?

Information on the platform should advise passengers about alternative routes

Passengers want to know quickly what is happening to their target service, as well as the general situation on the service as a whole.

Passengers are less familiar with National Rail services than the Underground, and more information is seen as preferable to less.

Some describe a state of uncertainty where they are unsure whether a delay is severe enough to warrant finding an alternative route. For this reason, passengers value knowing either from staff or from signage, the point at which they should consider abandoning the journey and seeking a different mode of transport.

Information about navigating the station is necessary, particularly for vulnerable passengers or those making less regular journeys. Several described having to run from one end of the station to the other in order to catch a train that arrived at an unexpected platform.

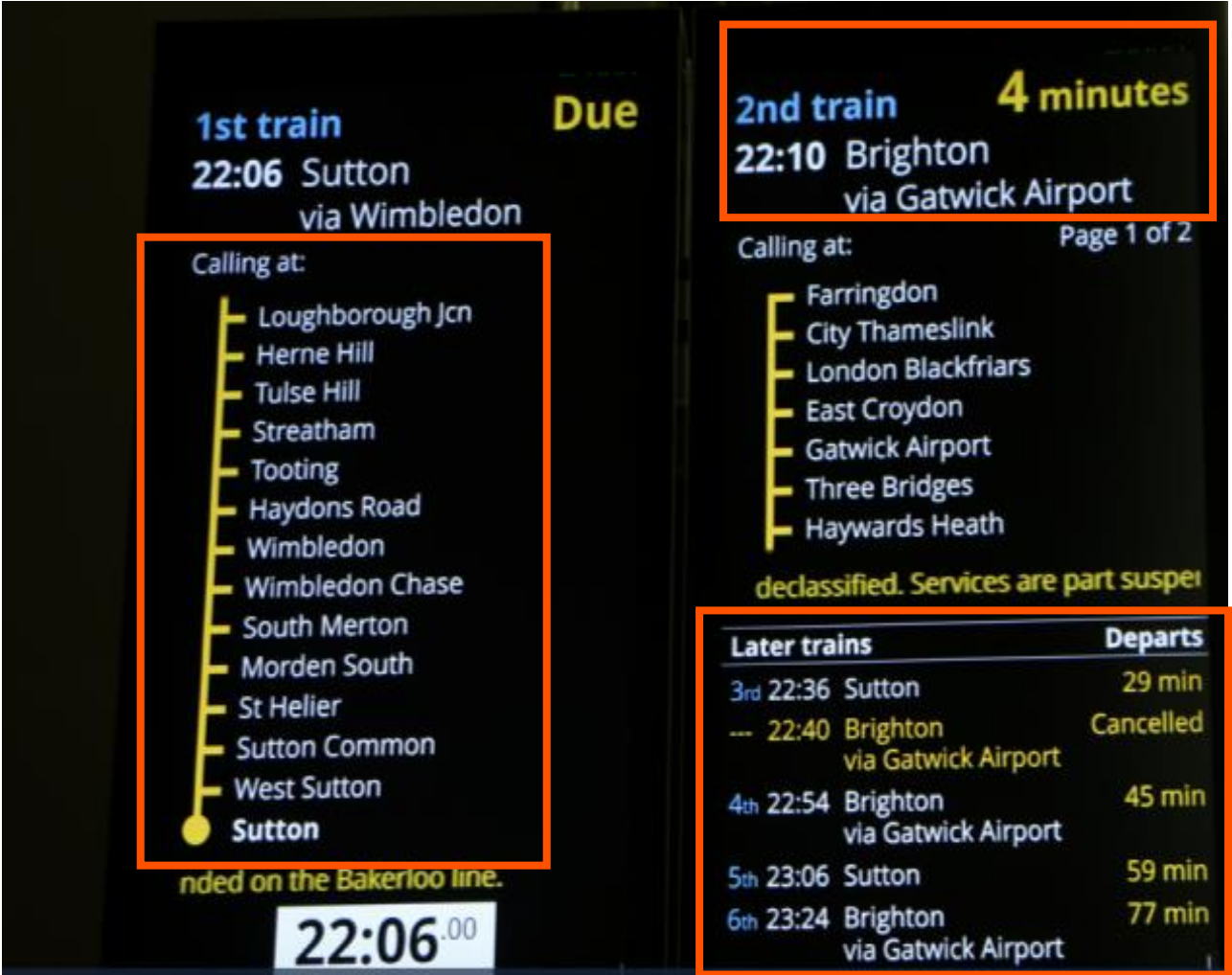


Thameslink signage is very well-liked as a means of conveying information about high-frequency routes

Seeing all stops simultaneously was the most popular feature of Thameslink information. Even frequent passengers may be less familiar with the details and seeing all options at once can help with planning alternatives.

Blackfriars to Kings Cross is obvious because they all stop there but some stop at West Hampstead, some at Kentish Town...

Core Only



The use of both a countdown and the time of departure is well-liked, although several were frustrated by seeing the times 'slip' as the train is delayed.

If it just says 'Delayed' and not tell me by how much, that's really unhelpful.

Non-Core (No Interchange)

Passengers value seeing information about later trains. Most Core users are able to identify which one they need based on the destination station.



Summary and conclusions

Summary and conclusions

- A **reliable service** in any sector is one that delivers on its promises: it is **predictable**, performs to a **consistent standard** and the **‘product-quality is a fair reflection of the price paid**. Reliability is underpinned by trust: a reliable provider will have its customers’ best interests at heart and if anything does go wrong, users can be confident that it **will ‘do the right thing’** to put things right.
- Reliability in rail reflects these generic priorities but is a multifaceted issue. Ideally, passengers **want a service that is both reliable and frequent and as such, can deliver enough capacity** to make journeys at least tolerable, if not comfortable.
- **Priorities do vary by journey type** in terms of the relative emphasis that passengers place on punctuality, frequency and performance, but overall the view is that there is **no reason why the train companies can’t deliver against all three factors**, particularly when set against what passengers feel they are entitled to expect given the fares they pay.
- In this context, **punctuality is very important both of itself** (in providing predictability) and in terms of its **symbolic value**: it is a straightforward and easily understood **signifier of a reliable service**.
- **Frequency, on its own, is not synonymous with reliability.** It is conceded that frequency can, to some degree, compensate for a lack of punctuality, but even on higher frequency services, **punctuality demonstrates that the provider sets itself high standards** and is therefore reliable. In part this reflects the lack of trust that passengers have in train operators. **Having to adhere to a timetable is a way of ‘keeping the operators honest.’**
- **Only on the most high frequency services** (London Underground or the Thameslink Core) **does frequency overtake punctuality in terms of importance**. The frequency bar is set high - for punctuality to become a secondary consideration to frequency a train would need to arrive as often as 2½ to 3 minutes. Other features of the Core (modern rolling stock, new stations) contribute to a sense of trust.
- **Most passengers do not want to embrace a trade-off between frequency and punctuality.** A truly reliable service would deliver both, particularly given the fares paid to travel.
- **Passengers want rail reliability to be measured.** While very few are interested in seeking out such information, they like the reassurance that train operators are being monitored and (they hope) incentivised / punished as appropriate. Punctuality (to the minute) is seen as the most appropriate measure for reliability, even on high frequency routes. Even for the truly high frequency Thameslink Core, passengers are reluctant to let go entirely of the need for timetabled punctuality.

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