



Engineering works at King's Cross

Passenger reactions to planned disruption
September 2020

Forewords



Transport Focus has considerable knowledge of passengers' expectations when engineering work disrupts rail services, including the temporary closure of major stations. But every project is different, and the varied nature of the railway's passengers and their journeys means it is critical to look at each one in its local context.

In our latest research we have worked in partnership with Network Rail to look into the potential impact of works planned for the approach to London King's Cross station and to understand what plans for alternative services were favoured by passengers. These alternatives included the closure of the station, running shorter trains, trains making more stops (and consequently journeys taking longer) and using rail replacement buses, among others.

The research took place in March 2020 before the full impact of the Covid-19 pandemic was understood by the industry or passengers. Experiences since are likely to have influenced attitudes to home working, and may well lead to greater consideration of this as an option in the event of major engineering work. While we believe the preference for, or objections to, the various proposals tested are likely to hold good in overall terms, the degree to which attitudes to home working are likely to have changed may now mean that some proposals are more palatable, or less alarming, than the research suggests. In addition, the current requirements for social distancing are likely to have altered passengers' acceptance of crowded trains during disruption. The findings from the research need to be read with these considerations in mind.

As Network Rail develops its plans for the train service that can be delivered during the works at King's Cross, the research findings will provide useful guidance as to how passengers are likely to react to various potential service alterations - both for King's Cross and for key projects elsewhere.

Guy Dangerfield
Head of strategy,
Transport Focus



The East Coast Main Line is one of the UK's vital rail routes, connecting East and West Yorkshire, the north east of England and Scotland with London and the south east.

Work to improve the East Coast Main Line is underway through a £1.2 billion investment programme and includes modernising the tracks and signalling at King's Cross and on other key parts of the route. When completed it will allow more trains to run between London, the north and Scotland, and deliver quicker, more reliable journeys across the route.

However, we know we cannot improve the line without causing some disruption to passengers. We therefore worked with Transport Focus to understand the impact on passengers of potentially reducing capacity at King's Cross. The research provides useful insights, and while it was carried out before the impact of Covid-19 was known, it will help inform our passenger handling and communications plans. It will also assist us in working with our industry partners to provide clear advice to passengers in advance of major engineering work.

We shall continue to deliver the East Coast Upgrade through this year and next year so we can unlock capacity on the East Coast Main Line for generations to come.

Ed Akers
Principal programme sponsor, East Coast Upgrade
Network Rail

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Introduction and background

Network Rail is upgrading the East Coast Main Line and, among other works, this includes replacing and reconfiguring the track and signals on the immediate approach to London King's Cross station. To undertake the works, various overnight and weekend closures have already taken place and more are planned. These include a planned closure of half of the station at a time for up to eight weeks in early 2021.

The plan as tested in our research envisages running only around half the usual number of trains, leading to significant impact on passengers. Depending on which half of the station is closed, it would also mean shorter trains than normal, adding to crowding. On top of this, to provide a reasonable level of service at all stations into King's Cross, some trains might have to call at more stations than normal, increasing journey times and further adding to likely crowding. Network Rail and the train operators wanted to understand how passengers would react to these proposals and which timetable options were preferred, or at least seen as more bearable.

Transport Focus commissioned Future Thinking, an independent market research company, to carry out a programme of passenger research. This was planned as a two-part project consisting of both qualitative and quantitative elements, so as to get both a detailed understanding of passengers' attitudes as well as to 'put some numbers' behind their preferences for the proposed service alterations.

Unfortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic forced us to adapt the approach we had originally planned. Even before formal lockdown, it became evident that it would be irresponsible to ask passengers to gather in close proximity for face-to-face focus groups, and many were already reluctant to do so. We completed one mini focus group before changing the approach. The topic guide and stimulus materials developed for this group were adapted and used with an online 'community' where passengers (recruited to the same criteria as planned for the face-to-face focus groups) were shown various disruption scenarios over the course of a week and asked for their views. The community included passengers using Peterborough, Cambridge, Hitchin, Stevenage and Welwyn Garden City stations to travel to London.

We had intended to interview passengers on trains into, and on the concourse at, King's Cross station. Given Covid-19 concerns, we switched to an online approach, targeting postcode areas along the routes

from Peterborough and Cambridge and identifying people previously using the railway into King's Cross on a frequent basis.

Passengers were asked to think about their 'usual' travel behaviour prior to Covid-19 and any changes this had forced upon them. At such an early stage in the crisis there was little discussion of what the pandemic might mean for the future of work and travel, although those already working from home were inevitably starting to understand its benefits and limitations. This will undoubtedly have influenced passengers' reactions to the proposed service alterations, and it is to be expected that attitudes could be quite different if we were to repeat the research today with people having greater experience of not working, working from home, or travelling under the restrictions that have subsequently come into force.

Nor, at the time of the research, had people begun to consider the impact of social distancing on public transport or the requirement to use face coverings. These issues need to be borne in mind in reading the report, although we believe the research still provides valuable insight into how passengers view the different options, even if their preferences might now be somewhat different.

On the pages that follow we summarise the key findings from the research. The full results are available in the slide deck provided by Future Thinking and can be found on the Transport Focus website¹.



¹ Transport Focus, Engineering works at King's Cross - passenger reactions to planned disruption September 2020 <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/engineering-works-at-kings-cross-passenger-reactions-to-planned-disruption/>

Key findings

In this report we have taken the decision to portray 'normality' as it existed before the Covid-19 pandemic hit, because that is the basis on which passengers were commenting. Many erstwhile commuters are currently working from home, are furloughed or have lost their jobs, and passenger numbers generally are much reduced.

The 'new normal' may be quite different to the old and, while passengers' views may now be different, we cannot second guess just what the future will hold.

Commuters are creatures of habit

While the stereotypical image of a bowler-hatted, broly-wielding, besuited City gent is well out of date, prior to the Coronavirus pandemic a good number of passengers were still following his set routine of getting the 08.16 to town and the 17.39 home again, five days a week, Monday to Friday.

That said, many had moved to traveling just three or four days a week, or doing Wednesday to Sunday, or taking the 20.16 out and the 05.39 home. Others travelled to different destinations on different days or had different destinations from one week to the next. Whatever their individual routine, they all classified themselves as 'commuters'.

While there may be variability in days, times and destinations, for the majority there was a pattern and a degree of regularity to their travel habits. The pandemic aside, events which upset this routine are not welcome, whether caused by signal failures, driver shortages, severe weather, planned engineering works, or anything else. How people react to such events depends to a large extent on their life situation and their work, and the flexibility these factors afford them.

Passengers with childcare responsibilities have to fit their travel around school, nursery or childminders' hours, and being late is not only a frustration and an inconvenience but can also have financial implications (either in 'penalty' fees or in taking taxis to avoid too great a delay). Those in service industries or posts with fixed working hours can end up risking their jobs as well as suffering docked wages if they are delayed. Getting to or from the station can be challenging if bus connections are missed or your lift has to wait. The self-employed risk both their professional reputation and losing business if they are late for appointments.

Even where life-stage, employment and lifestyle allow for flexibility in the daily routine and travel behaviour, advance notice is still wanted to plan accordingly, and short notice disruption can still be an issue. But for relatively short duration events, those

with sufficient flexibility can plan to avoid travelling, or to travel at different times or via alternative routes.

Alternative travel options

Although most passengers have a routine, they have generally experienced a sufficient number of journeys affected by planned or unplanned disruption to know what alternatives are available to get to where they want to go. Sometimes these alternatives may be used regularly according to where passengers are working on a given day, what time they managed to leave the house, where they anticipate congestion or 'hassle', or what their plans are for the evening.

Routes or options may have been tested over the years, and a preference evolved based on experience of parking at stations, getting a seat, journey time, crowding, and so on. While there may be a reluctance to use a given route on a daily basis, in extreme circumstances many regular travellers have the knowledge to switch if made aware that things have gone awry with their preferred option.

The alternatives available vary according to the 'normal' departure station used. These may include: starting out from an alternative station, getting there by car, bus or some other means, choosing an alternative London terminal (for example Liverpool Street or St Pancras instead of King's Cross), or changing to the Underground or a bus at a station on the way (such as Finsbury Park). The slide deck provides full details of the perceived options for key stations along the route.

In addition to any alternatives the railway can offer such as replacement buses or amended timetables, commuters tend to have a good idea of what 'regular' options are available to them in the event of major planned disruption. On the other hand, less frequent travellers may have much lower awareness of their options and need more assistance in re-planning their journeys.

Attitudes to the King's Cross works

Nobody welcomes the disruption they expect any works to bring. That said, they do not generally anticipate such an extended period of weekday disruption as mooted for early 2021 – up to eight weeks. Most seem to expect just overnight or weekend works, even if such disruption continues over several weeks.

The realisation that any work might last even a week is a shock for many, and causes them to think seriously about their options and possibly altering their travel behaviour. Even so, it is only the outright closure of the station that is seen as forcing them to work from home or use an alternative option. Other scenarios where a service – albeit massively reduced – is still running, leads many to think they will just 'give it a go'. They might set out earlier, or



later if they can, but they have a strong belief that they will muddle through as they always do when there is unplanned disruption. They are not unused to overcrowded trains and having to stand. Their yardstick is often simply whether they can physically get on the train or not.

Depending on their job and the flexibility attached to it, prior to their experience of lockdown many felt their employer would expect them to travel whatever challenges they may have to face. As such, informing businesses about the works and encouraging understanding and the desire for greater flexibility during any works is seen as essential.

Indeed, communication about any planned engineering work is key to minimising disruption and persuading passengers to change their travel behaviour. While passengers' priority is to understand when and how any disruption will affect their particular journey, explaining the benefits of the work helps them to understand why the work is necessary. Any communications should be explicit and honest about the likely severity of the resulting disruption and that it is probably not going to be like previous weekend closures that they may have experienced.

Communication should begin well in advance so that passengers can make arrangements not only with work or for childcare, but also when buying season tickets or planning holidays. It may also be helpful to prompt

passengers to consider the wider good and the needs of more vulnerable passengers rather than just their own inconvenience.

Working from home

More than two thirds of the passengers interviewed were accustomed to working from home at least occasionally prior to the Covid-19 lockdown. On the other hand, one in three said it was not an option. Most worked from home just occasionally or for just one or two days per week, although almost one in five said they enjoy the flexibility to work from home whenever they like. We suspect the number of people able and prepared to work from home may have increased given passengers' and businesses' experience of home working during lockdown.

As well as working from home, a number of passengers have the possibility of working from a different site, which would mean they do not have to travel into King's Cross. Some do this occasionally in any case, and some would be able to arrange to do this during planned disruption.

A relatively small number of passengers mentioned taking annual leave during any period of planned disruption, possibly because the works are mooted for the winter months. At other times of the year, and with sufficient advance notice of the disruption, it may be possible to encourage some passengers to book holiday.

Alterations to train services during the works

In the online survey passengers were presented with four scenarios for how the timetable would be impacted during the works and asked to rank them from worst to 'least worst':

- shorter trains (because the platforms available at King's Cross would not be able to accommodate longer ones)
- half the number of trains (because of the reduced number of platforms available)
- trains making more stops (to maintain a service from all stations), meaning that the journey takes up to twice as long
- shorter trains which also make more stops, thereby lengthening the journey.

Shorter trains were considered to be the 'least bad' option. Passengers seem to think this gives them the greatest chance of 'muddling through' the situation even if they have to stand in crowded carriages.

But when shorter trains are combined with extended journeys through making more stops, this is seen as the very worst option. Half the number of trains is deemed less bad than trains stopping more often leading to longer journey times.

On the issue of crowding, while just under half would like a seat for their (normal) journey, as many are happy to stand for some or all of it. Getting a seat is generally seen as more likely the further from London a passenger's home station is. During disruption, just over half say they would be able to stand for 26 minutes or longer; a quarter could not stand for even 15 minutes.

Passengers' preference for the different scenarios is fairly consistent whatever the duration of any planned works. If it is a one-off for just one day, there is a greater likelihood they will attempt to 'muddle through' and still travel, but if the work lasts for two to three weeks then working from home and other solutions (for example, travelling at different times or using alternative routes) gain traction; and for works lasting seven to eight weeks the picture is little different.

Other alternative provisions during the works

There is a general dislike of replacement bus or coach services based on prior experience of these during unplanned disruption or occasional planned weekend works. They are seen as uncomfortable and slow, subject to road congestion at peak hours, and not something to be endured on a commuting journey.

Where there is no alternative to a bus or coach, a direct service into London is favoured over taking a bus to an alternative departure station (potentially on a different line) to catch a train from there. This option is less likely to be rejected by passengers who live further from London – with passengers from Peterborough the least inclined to dismiss this as an option. And although their normal train might stop at several stations on the way, there is a clear desire for



buses or coaches to run non-stop to passengers' destination (or an interchange) rather than tediously wending its way to every station.

Prior to their experiences of working during lockdown, around one third of passengers expressed a degree of interest in using some form of remote working space or hub provided by the railway at or near their normal departure station, with one in eight saying they would be 'very interested'.

For those who have the option, driving directly to their destination, or to somewhere they will be able to park within easy walking distance of an Underground station, was a possibility – mentioned by around one in 10 of the passengers we spoke to, and the proportion wanting to avoid the train post-Covid may well be higher.

Incentives can encourage passengers to change their travel behaviour – or at least make the disruption more palatable. Financial compensation tops passengers' suggestions, including season ticket refunds, reduced fares (either overall or off peak as an incentive to travel at a different time), and reimbursement of additional parking (and/or fuel) costs. 'Freebies', in the form of bottled water, tea or coffee (or vouchers) particularly if offered for off-peak travel, and free Underground/bus travel are also suggested, along with first class upgrades.

Summary and recommendations

- Communication is key to alerting passengers to any work (whether at King's Cross or elsewhere), getting them to understand the severity of the disruption, and what they will most need to know: what it means for their individual journeys.
- The sooner the message is put out, the more chance of passengers absorbing the information and considering what their alternatives are. Messaging should target a wider audience than just passengers, ensuring that the wider community, including businesses and other local stakeholders, is aware and can take account of the challenges the work will present, whether it be for staff or customers.
- Commuters' instinctive reaction to disruption is to 'tough it out' and to try to continue with their journeys as normal. Messaging should not shy away from delivering a 'bad news' story that makes it clear how disruptive the work will be – both for the individual and for other, possibly more vulnerable, passengers.
- Passengers' willingness to accept overcrowded trains during disruption is likely to have changed given current requirements for social distancing, and this may deter more passengers from travelling than the research suggests.
- There are opportunities to change commuters' behaviour. The Covid-19 pandemic is likely to have added to the proportion of passengers able and willing to work from home (or another site) or who opt to drive.
- Travelling at different times may not be an option for those with set working hours, but others may be able to travel after the peak. Others are open to changing their route and/or travelling to an alternative station.
- Running shorter trains is seen as the 'least bad' option given a belief among many passengers that they will still be able to 'squeeze aboard' (and with a good number being prepared to stand if necessary). Running fewer 'fast' services and having trains call at more stations is the least palatable option.
- There is a dislike of rail replacement buses or coaches, although some rail users are prepared to consider them (or have no other options), particularly for longer journeys and if the bus or coach goes direct to their destination, rather than simply taking them to a rail interchange.
- Those with access to a car may consider driving to an alternative station (or even all the way into London). For them, parking (availability and cost) is a key consideration.
- Commuters, in particular season-ticket holders, expect some form of fare reduction or compensation for any disruption. Beyond this, incentives to travel outside peak hours, such as bottled water, free tea or coffee, free onward travel in London, or first class upgrades have a role to play.
- Once final plans for the works are publicly available, it would be prudent to update the research, both to ascertain the extent to which attitudes post-Covid have changed, and to understand the precise impact of the final plans and their implications at each station. Research should also be used to monitor passengers' awareness and understanding of the forthcoming disruption and what more information they may need.



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