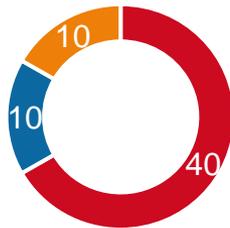# Transport User Community

Rail website and crowding information

September 2020

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Who are the sixty members of our rail community?

Location

- England: 40
- Scotland: 10
- Wales: 10
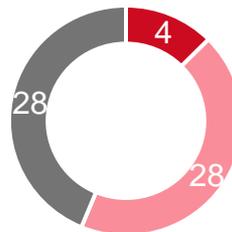
Interchange?

- Yes - across mode: 4
- Yes - within rail: 28
- No: 28

Gender

- Male: 29
- Female: 31

Access to a car?

- Yes: 43
- No: 17
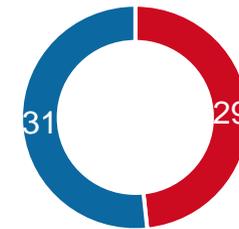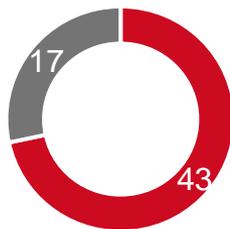
Currently commuting?

- Yes: 15
- No: 45
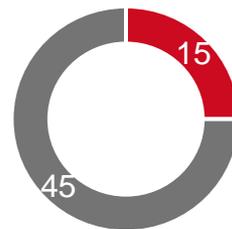
Season ticket?

- Yes - Current: 9
- Yes - Cancelled: 16
- No: 35

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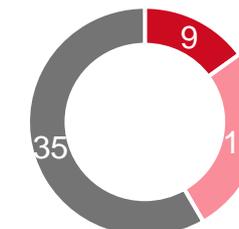
What did we ask our community?

Q1: Information on rail websites – an overview

Tasking respondents to visit their usual train operating company's website and evaluate the information they see. Is it clear, relevant, useful? And, does it inspire confidence in the operator as a whole?

Q2: Information on rail websites – an example

Tasking respondents to visit the Southeastern website to evaluate it as an example of information on rail travel during the pandemic. Does it serve as a 'gold standard' for this information or does it fall short in places?

Q3: Information on rail – how busy is my train?

- How do users feel about the way information on crowding is presented to them through train operating companies?

- Is the information clear, useful and relevant?

- What can rail operators do to improve the quality and presentation of this information?

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The community evaluated a range of different rail websites and were generally positive about what they found

Tone is essential. Coming across as overly optimistic about a 'return to rail' can come across as reckless and unsafe.

Even small details like not having a COVID-19 advisory in the most prominent part of the landing page can give the impression of **carelessness.** It needs to be the first thing a potential passenger sees. There is still some ambiguity around the importance of **booking.** Passengers know it's an option, but is it a **necessity** to comply with the rules laid out on the website?

Additional proof points include:

- Photos and other visual cues about exactly what the train operator is doing to ensure and enforce hygiene and social distancing. It isn't always enough to say that trains are being cleaned: how, and how often?

- Demonstrating proactivity – safety measures that go above and beyond the current guidance – although few can articulate exactly what this would look like.

- Demonstrating that the site is frequently updated to align with any and all changes in the guidance

ScotRail emerged as a successful website. The 'Five Rules' for travel are succinct, authoritative and clear and give the much-needed impression that the rules are non-negotiable.

"Rules four and five are better. Cover your face and keep most seats empty – although having been on a couple of trains there's nothing on the train sectioning off seats so the rule doesn't seem to be adhered to."

Male, 39, Scotland

"The information on ScotRail's website is clear and useful and relevant to the situation. I don't think anything is missing however I would like the COVID section moved to the top to stand out."

Female, 46, Scotland

"The information is clear, but I don't feel it's gone far enough. It's not useful. It seems they are giving passengers the choice of wearing face coverings."

Female, 64, South East

"I haven't seen anything about whether we have to buy before we board or can we still buy on board or buy at the station? I assume you can still buy at the station but what if it's overcrowded?"

Female, 30, Scotland

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The Southeastern rail website was seen as succinct, comprehensive and effective

While having to scroll down to see information relating to COVID-19 was a frustration for some, there was a general sense that the information is laid out clearly

Having service interruptions flagged up clearly on the home page gives an intuitive sense of how 'safe' the service is, given that interrupted services are assumed to be crowded or chaotic.

The sheer amount of space that the site gives to safety information is in itself reassuring – it shows that Southeastern is making a real effort, more so than other rail operators the community is familiar with.

At this stage in the pandemic, 'busy' is a shorthand for unsafe. As such, seeing this information right at the start of the user journey is essential. Measures of interruption to individual lines, rather than the service as a whole, is well laid out and clear.

Our community is familiar with the Safer Travel Pledge and as such the main issue is still around enforcement. It is recognised as a fairly straightforward reporting of the regulations as they currently stand, with opportunities to go further and position them as 'rules' rather than 'guidance'

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Tonally, and in terms of the overall user experience, the Southeastern website could improve further

Many would prefer to see a more authoritative and 'no-nonsense' approach to instructing passengers about safety

Even small signifiers like avoiding use of the word 'Coronavirus' imply that the rail provider is not taking things seriously. Rail companies need to meet passengers where they are on this issue: concerned and careful, rather than optimistic and light.

> *"We're in the middle of a pandemic and there's no mention of the word 'COVID.' This to me means they're not taking it seriously and it does not inspire confidence."*
>
> **Male, 32, Wales**

Several hiccups with the user experience can harm confidence in the website and limit the information at passengers' disposal:

- Being redirected to the National Rail journey planner – users expect to remain on-site
- Overall lack of clarity around how the SeatFinder app works and how reliable it is
- The 'carousel' of different options can be confusing as passengers miss the option they wanted to click.

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"Information on whether trains are able to practice social distancing in seated and standing areas, as well as information on how regularly the trains are cleaned and how would be useful."

Male, 46, South East

"I would say that effort and thought has been put into the website and I feel that they'd have the situation more under control."

Female, 32, Wales

"It's just the way it's mapped out – it's clear, relevant, user-friendly and instant."

Male, 32, Scotland

"I think the information further down the page is fairly useful and clearly set out, so you can click and find the page most relevant to you, but there's no mention of there being a £100 fine for not wearing a mask."

Female, 25, North West

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The community feels rail information needs an overhaul in terms of how the data is collected, and presented, during Covid-19

Rail users' information needs have fundamentally changed

When presented with information on crowding, several pick up on the fact that the data is based on historical average demand. The community feel that the pre-COVID methodology for assessing crowding is no longer fit for purpose and argue for a more dedicated and explicit explanation of 'pandemic crowding' and its unique drivers. One even suggested a live camera feed of the platforms so that passengers can see exactly what is going on in real time.

The general principles for a well-presented page with crowding information are straightforward

- Understanding how busy specific carriages are, rather than the train as a whole, is useful

  - **For those booking a seat, this information helps contextualise the journey** and what carriage they should book for

- Passengers don't want to click through multiple pages to see this information – it is the first thing they need to see

  - **Again, this is a signifier of the importance the rail company places on the pandemic** and keeping passengers safe

- In-the-moment information like National Rail's 'Keep me updated' messenger tool is well liked

  - **There is strong recognition that crowding during the pandemic is unpredictable**. As a result, any live alert system for crowding will help users plan their journeys based on the most accurate and up-to-date information, rather than what they can sometimes perceive as an educated guess.

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LNR crowding information is seen as very well presented, telling passengers exactly what they need to know immediately

The landing page 'Responsible travel starts here' immediately signposts passengers to information on social distancing and reinforces its importance

This is exactly what passengers want to see. The 'traffic light system' is immediately intuitive and splitting it out by line provides the level of detail that passengers expect to reflect the nuances of crowding. Again, questions of **accuracy** emerge, but the live Twitter feed goes some way to reassure passengers that the situation is being closely monitored.

Passengers would use this information to proactively plan their journeys – it encourages them to **alter their travel times rather than abandon their journeys altogether.**

One improvement could be to provide greater clarity around what 'Busy' or 'Not busy' mean in practice. The community recognises that a busy service can still enable social distancing and the main question they are trying to answer is **'am I safe to travel'?**

"I think the traffic light computing works very well! I'd definitely like to see this going forward, even after the pandemic – it would make travelling easier for me and I'd feel safer on the journey and able to choose an alternative if it were too busy."

Female, 32, Wales

"I liked the layout of the Northwestern website – I found the anticipated reservation levels easily accessible and I liked the option of being offered a Twitter link to follow any live updates."

Male, 46, North West

"Super clear and very useful – I really like when you're provided with extra information that you may not necessarily need because I always think that shows it's been well thought out and they're trying hard."

Female, 22, South East

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Southeastern rail can suffer from presentation and user interface issues but still out-performs many other providers

In addition to the information not being front-and-centre on the website, presentational issues include:

- The seat finder tool only working for live departures rather than journeys that may be planned further in advance

- Others argue that there is 'too much information' unrelated to COVID-19 on the website that could cause problems for smartphone users

- Overwhelmingly, passengers prefer the clarity of LNWR's traffic light system

Several saw this lack of information as the site 'crashing' or not presenting the information they needed, undermining confidence in the service and suggesting that Southeastern is not taking the question of congestion seriously

	Departures	Arrivals		
Due	**Destination**	**Platform**	**Expected**	**Usual seat availability**
13:34	London Charing Cross	1	On time	n/a
13:53	London Charing Cross		On time	n/a
14:34	London Charing Cross		On time	n/a
14:53	London Charing Cross		On time	n/a

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"On the site I couldn't access the information on the availability of seats – if they're going to advertise the option, then it should be available. What hope will it give people if they can't view the information?"

Male, 47, South East

"Southeastern could definitely work on making their website as instantly easy to navigate as LNWR. It's literally just a few seconds' difference but if they could tweak things like making it instantaneous without needing instructions it would be much improved."

Female, 50, South East

"I preferred Southeastern Rail – it's a lot more sleek and tidy, easier on the eye. I find it simpler to navigate the page with distinct areas to look at. The UI is more suited to how I would go about looking at a website."

Male, 33, South East

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