

Announcements on trains: the passenger view

November 2021



Background

Transport Focus has conducted new research to inform decisions about improving information for train passengers. This small-scale qualitative study sought to understand passengers' experiences of on-train announcements. Specifically, it looked at:

- how helpful/unhelpful on-train announcements are
- the extent to which passengers pay attention to the announcements
- whether there is anything annoying about on-train announcements
- which announcements are felt to be less important or unnecessary, if any.

Summary of findings

Among the passengers we spoke to the general view is that on-train announcements are fit for purpose. Not everyone feels that they need to listen to every announcement, particularly people who regularly travel on the same route, but almost everyone could see that they serve a useful purpose for at least some of the travelling public.

Live announcements from the driver or train manager/guard are often more problematic due to:

- poor sound quality
- having finished before you've tuned into what is being said
- there not being enough information/it is not provided quickly enough
- staff who 'like the sound of their own voice'.

Although passengers appreciate the value of a live announcement when there is a delay or disruption, the quality of message is not always as good as those which are pre-recorded. Also, more savvy passengers feel they get more information by looking at the National Rail app. Neither is desirable and can be problematic for some elderly and disabled passengers.

The majority of passengers we spoke to did not feel that there are too many general or public service announcements. Most had value, even though familiarity among regular travellers means they don't always pay them much attention. This finding was consistent regardless of whether people were travelling on intercity services or metro-style services with frequent stops.

Overall perceptions of on-train announcements

Among the passengers we spoke to there is a general sense that most on-train announcements do a useful job and the right amount of information is provided. Even if a passenger is familiar with a particular journey, they recognise that the automated 'next stops' and 'destination' announcements are needed for those who don't know the route. They simply tune out if they don't need to know.

Some passengers we spoke to mentioned that railway announcements, and on-train information in general, are getting better. There is an increased sense of courtesy and warmth, as well as consistency between information provided on trains and in stations. However, a number of passengers mentioned that on-train announcements are generally better than station announcements, which it is felt can be contradictory, repetitive or unhelpful.

Train destination and calling points

For most passengers in this research these are the announcements they tend to remember hearing while on board. These are mostly (but not always) automated, pre-recorded announcements and are seen as a critical element of the journey. They are particularly valuable for those travelling on a route they are not familiar with, but also for those travelling on intercity services with longer times between stops, who rely on the announcements to interrupt them from their work/reading/music and prepare to get off the train.

“To be honest, I do find the announcements useful. I go on auto-pilot when I’m on a journey I know very well, so it’s just good to sometimes have a little reminder of where we are”

Male, 55-64 (most recent journey: GWR, Maidenhead to Paddington, commuter)

“When I get a train to other places, I do pay slightly more attention to the announcements about the stations and stopping points”

Female, 65+ (most recent journey: GWR, Weymouth to Bristol Temple Meads, leisure)

Passengers generally feel that automated announcements are appropriate for providing information on the destination and calling points. The quality and clarity of a pre-recorded announcement is often better than when a live announcement is made.

“Automated ones are better. The driver can sometimes be distorted or crackly and you can’t always hear what he’s saying”

Male, 16-24 (most recent journey: GWR, London Paddington to Paignton, to/from education)

Regular commuters who know their route well tend not to need the announcements to keep track of the journey’s progress. This is the case both for those on longer journeys with less frequent stops, as well as for those travelling on trains with several stops on a shorter journey. They generally just tune out of the regularly played announcements, which for most are just there in the background without being intrusive.

“I tend not to really listen to the usual announcements. If I’m aware of a problem I’ll listen out. I recognise they’re not really for me but that someone else could need them.”

Male, 35-44 (most recent journey: Southeastern, Rainham to St Pancras, business)

It is felt that information is particularly important ahead of arrival at key interchanges. Examples given were stations such as Reading or Birmingham New Street. Some passengers have experienced announcements where detail was given about platforms for connecting services, or have had additional warning before the train arrives at such stations, giving passengers time to prepare for getting off the train.

Many services now include scrolling information inside carriages with the train destination, calling points and next station. This is felt to be very helpful, and a useful supplement to announcements – particularly for those with a hearing impairment or simply those who are listening to something on headphones during their journey. Some passengers with visual and hearing impairments use a variety of information sources to make sure they are fully informed about the journey’s progress.

“I do look at the screens when I’m on the train. I do find those useful as well as the pre-recorded announcements.”

Female, 55+, hearing impairment (most recent journey: Scotrail, Helensburgh to Glasgow Queen Street, leisure)

“All the information that I’ve got is appropriate for my needs. That’s including knowing when the journey is starting and finishing, having something else such as an iPad app that can give me additional information if I need it, and having the announcements on the train. So when you add those all together I’m quite happy with the information that I’ve got. If I was short of one of those I might feel less confident.”

Male, 55-64, visual and hearing impairment (most recent journey: Northern, Leeds to Sheffield, leisure)

The only slight niggles mentioned about journey-related announcements were that sometimes they go out of sync with the journey progress, so the incorrect station is announced. Transport Focus is also aware that some passengers dislike staff repeating the information an automatic announcement has just provided.

“It can be annoying when they are out of sync sometimes and you know that the station they say you’re arriving at is the one you’ve just left.”

Female, 65+ (most recent journey: GWR, Weymouth to Bristol Temple Meads, leisure)

Suggested improvements relating to destination and calling point announcements:

- Making sure there is an announcement of train destination and calling points/interchange stations shortly before the train doors close. While applicable everywhere, this is particularly important for departures from key stations and for airport routes.
- Getting the timing right for next-station announcements. Not so far in advance that passengers are standing by the doors for a long time, not so late that the train is already pulling into the platform and people struggle to get their belongings together in time.
- Ironing out the causes of automated announcements getting, geographically, out of sync and announcing the wrong information.
- Discouraging staff from repeating as a live announcement what has just been said by the automatic system.

General announcements, including those related to safety and security

Most passengers felt that there were about the right number of general announcements, and that they were not overly intrusive or annoying. Even those people who are very familiar with them due to frequent train travel recognise that there could always be one person who hasn't heard them before, or that they might have particular relevance on a specific day, and the reminders could therefore be useful. One passenger who travels regularly on a metro-style route said that on longer journeys with lots of stops it can be a bit more repetitive, but still said that generally she understands the need to make the announcements.

“On a longer journey it can be a little bit more annoying when they scroll through the automated announcements, but I guess there is always someone who might not have got that train before.”

Female, 25-34 (most recent journey: Southeastern, New Cross to London Bridge, commuter)

The majority of passengers we spoke to in this research were able to recite “See it. Say it. Sorted.” It was one of the most frequently recalled of the ‘general’ on-train announcements. However, among those who travel most regularly, there was some suggestion that the message is losing its impact due to familiarity and that there could be benefit in changing the wording or modifying the message to encourage people to re-engage with it. Rather than messages becoming annoying due to repetition, the concern is more that they become ‘white noise’ and don’t get the attention they deserve.

“I have to say, that ‘See it. Say it. Sorted.’ message. It’s been played so many times it’s just white noise now. When something like that is repeated too often it just becomes white noise.”

Male, 55+, Mobility impairment (most recent journey: Avanti West Coast, Birmingham New Street to Blackpool, leisure)

A number of passengers mentioned the current announcements with regard to mask-wearing on trains. Most of those voiced concern that, although the announcements were being played at regular intervals, many people were not complying with the request. This was of particular concern for a minority of passengers who had recently experienced overcrowded services, and the proximity to others gave them greater anxiety about the lack of mask-wearing by some other passengers.

Other announcements that were found to be useful by passengers included:

- advance notice of engineering works
- information about onboard catering.

Suggested improvements relating to general on-train announcements:

- for messages that are played regularly over time, particularly those about safety and security, it could be helpful for the wording and messaging to be changed more often, so that frequent travellers are prompted to tune in to listen rather than not paying much attention.

“I do wonder if the same thing could be said in different ways to make people pay more attention to them. Regular travellers probably don’t listen to some things anymore”

Male, 65+ (most recent journey: Northern, Heald Green to Manchester Oxford Road, leisure)

Announcements at times of delays and disruption

Most passengers find that announcements relating to delays or disruption are normally made ‘live’ by the driver or train manager/guard. The very fact the announcement is being made by a human rather than being pre-recorded is often signal enough that this is something of immediate importance to their journey and therefore prompts most people to listen. It is also felt appropriate to have a human voice when something is going wrong.

“I do think that there’s nothing like having a human voice when things go wrong.”

Male, 55-64 (most recent journey: GWR, Maidenhead – Paddington, commuter)

“I tend to pay a bit more attention when the announcement is being made by the train manager. For pre-recorded announcements I often don’t concentrate on what is being said because I know the journey very well.”

Female, 55-64 (most recent journey: GWR, Charlbury to Paddington, business)

However, the fact that some announcements are live can sometimes lead to problems in itself:

- sound quality is often worse – either lack of clarity or ‘crackling’; volume is variable – for some too loud, for some too quiet
- there is often no warning that an announcement is coming, and by the time passengers have tuned into it, critical information has been missed and they are left wondering what is going on
- there can be frustration when there isn’t enough information provided – particularly among those who, through the use of apps or other information sources, have been able to find out more detail than is being announced on the train.

“The main problem is sound quality on the driver announcements when there are disruptions. You often just can’t hear them at all.”

Male, 45-54, Mental health condition (most recent journey: GWR, Slough to Reading, personal business)

“Live information, things like ‘we are stuck outside such and such a station’, they tend not to be as good quality.”

Male, 55-65, visual and hearing impairment (most recent journey: Northern, Leeds to Sheffield, leisure)

Both regular travellers and those with more complex multi-leg journeys feel that there is sometimes not enough information provided, or provided early enough, particularly with a view to helping them make decisions about what to do. Some passengers have options: they might be able to go home/back to where they started rather than persevere on a likely-to-be-delayed train. For them, although they understand it is not always possible to give *certainty* on the extent of the delay, the train manager/guard needs to share as much information as is available. However, other passengers mentioned that information during delays has improved and there is generally enough detail provided.

“Disruption announcements are generally fine. They generally have a good handle on what is going on.”

Female, 65+ (most recent journey: GWR, Weymouth to Bristol Temple Meads, leisure)

These findings align with other research that Transport Focus has conducted on passenger information during disruption. For example, that passengers prefer a human voice at times of disruption as well as getting frequent updates. Previous research on rolling stock design has also found concerns about the audibility of live announcements, either due to the volume being too loud or too quiet or due to a lack of clear speaking on the part of the on-train staff making the announcement.

A few of the passengers we spoke to in this research mentioned not always trusting the information that was given, underlining the need for openness about what is going on in addition to accuracy and timeliness.

“I don’t trust the announcements. You won’t even get an announcement unless there is a major problem, and it’s often just untrue. I rely heavily on the app instead.”

Male, 45-54, Mobility impairment (most recent journey: Southern, Eastbourne to London Victoria, personal business)

Suggested improvements relating to delay/disruption announcements:

- signalling that an important announcement is imminent, either by sounding a particular tone or sound, or by prefacing the information with something attention grabbing
- if trains are crowded it can make it harder for some passengers to hear what is being said, therefore special attention should be given to getting the volume correct and enunciation as clear as possible
- provide information in a timely manner, so if an issue appears to be developing that might have an impact, passengers know sooner rather than later.

“What would be quite handy, would be to make a certain noise, to precede the announcement if it was important information about the journey.”

Male, 16-24 (most recent journey: GWR, London Paddington to Paignton, to/from education)

“The trouble is if someone gets all the information over in the first couple of seconds of starting the announcement you’re just catching onto the fact that there is an announcement before you realise what’s been said. So there may be some benefit in having a slight pre-amble to wake people up to realise it’s coming, or repeating the announcement.”

Male, 55-64, visual and hearing impairment (Northern, Leeds to Sheffield, leisure)

Specific needs of passengers with disabilities

Where passengers have a Passenger Assist booking for their journey, additional support would be appreciated if there are delays or disruption. In addition to general announcements, it would be helpful for the train manager/guard, where there is one, to offer specific assistance to passengers with disabilities or additional needs.

Knowing that there is an actual person on hand for help, or just for reassurance, is very important.

“They should offer assistance from the train manager to help people understand what might be happening to their connections and what the impact is going to be of the delay.”

Male, 55+, Mobility impairment (most recent journey: Avanti West Coast, Birmingham New Street to Blackpool, leisure)

It is particularly important for passengers with hearing problems that there is a focus on speaking clearly and slowly. When there are important delay-related announcements, these should be repeated so people have a better chance of picking up what has been said. Pre-recorded announcements generally don't cause problems. It is when there are live announcements during delays that passengers can have problems hearing them, despite their being – at that moment – more important than standard announcements.

“They really need to focus on clear speech. And speaking slowly. They should repeat what they've said. I find that noise on the trains can be quite problematic.”

Female, 55+, hearing impairment (most recent journey: Scotrail, Helensburgh to Glasgow Queen Street, leisure)

Some disabled passengers mentioned that it would be beneficial to receive text message updates in the event of disruption. This is the most simple and effective way to be able to receive and understand updates, as some struggle with live on-train announcements and can have problems using apps or other online information sources.

Onboard screens and scrolling information displays are very helpful for some disabled passengers, particularly those with hearing impairments. It was suggested that important information beyond destination and calling points could also be displayed more on screens during the journey to ensure the key messages are accessible to all passengers.

“On some trains they have very good screens that show the progress of the train so it's easy to see how things are going. Obviously it needs to be accurate as well.”

Male, 55-64, visual and hearing impairment (most recent journey: Northern, Leeds to Sheffield, leisure)

Methodology and sample

On 15 October 2021 Transport Focus sent an invitation to take part in an in-depth interview about on-train announcements to members of its Transport User Panel who had told us previously that they make journeys by rail. This invite included a link to a screening questionnaire which ensured that all participants had made a journey by train within the last four months.

From the responses received we selected and contacted 17 passengers to participate in an interview. The selection was made to ensure that the final sample would include people who had made a variety of different types of journeys, for a variety of different reasons. The selection included five disabled rail users.

By the close of fieldwork on 9 November we had completed 15 interviews. A full profile of the final sample is available below:

Recency of last train journey	
Within the last fortnight	10
Within the last month	4
Within the last four months	1
TOTAL	15

Frequency with which that journey has been made	
Very / Fairly often	4
Occasionally	11
Never made previously	0
TOTAL	15

Purpose of that last journey	
Travelling to or from work or education	3
Travelling for business (outside commuting)	1
Travelling on personal business	4
Travelling for leisure	7
TOTAL	15

Journey Type	
A journey of less than 20 minutes with lots of stops	2
A journey of less than 45 minutes with only a few stops	3
A journey of between 20 and 45 minutes with lots of stops	3
An 'intercity' journey of more than 45 minutes with not many stops	7
TOTAL	15

Age	
16-24	1
25-34	2
35-44	1
45-54	2
55-64	3
65+	6
TOTAL	15

Gender	
Male	10
Female	5
Prefer another term / not stated	0
TOTAL	15

Disability	
No disability / impairment	10
Mobility impaired	2
Vision impaired	1
Hearing impaired	3
Cognitive impairment	1
Other impairment (dyspraxia and anxiety)	1
TOTAL	18*

*10 participants have no long-standing disability or impairment, while five do. Some of those that do, have multiple disabilities.

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