



# Communicating with passengers about engineering works during the pandemic:

Research among passengers on the  
West Coast Main Line and at Bristol  
December 2021

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# Foreword

**I**n this report we compare the findings of two recent studies that Transport Focus carried out during the coronavirus pandemic, along with similar work from before the pandemic impacted rail travel. They all look at the challenges around communicating planned engineering works to passengers and potential disruption to passengers' journeys.

The two recent projects looked at works on the West Coast Main Line (WCML), including at London Euston station, and the remodelling of Bristol East Junction close to Temple Meads station.

At the time of the research, travel was discouraged, except for key workers, and even when restrictions were eased, far fewer

passengers travelled by train. Hence the railway faced a challenge in communicating with passengers about the works and associated disruption to services. Because travel was discouraged and until restrictions were relaxed, many had no interest in travelling, did not visit a station, and paid no attention to communications from train companies.

In this report we restate, and where appropriate update, our recommendations for the management and communication of engineering works to minimise disruption to passengers.

**Guy Dangerfield**

Head of strategy



## Executive summary

**Our research highlights the challenges the rail industry faced in raising awareness of planned engineering work and the associated disruption to passengers' journeys during the pandemic.**

Many who had regularly used trains pre-Covid, stopped travelling until it was possible, and safe, for them to do so once more. This made it difficult for the West Coast Main Line (WCML)/Euston and Bristol East Junction projects to achieve the levels of awareness seen in pre-pandemic engineering projects.

The two channels most effective in raising awareness in the past, 'at station' and 'on train' messaging, were not as effective and digital media also struggled to make a significant impact with fewer people travelling.

However, those that were aware of the works showed a good level of understanding and support for the respective projects. Ultimately, satisfaction with the information provided for the WCML/Euston works was better than many previous projects had achieved, whilst Bristol East scored a little lower than Derby, an equally complex project affecting a regional station.

While the world was turned on its head, the findings suggest many of the main requirements passengers have, around communication of engineering work, endure. Those being that information is:

- relevant to their journey
- spread through a mix of channels to achieve the widest possible coverage
- available to passengers when they need it, especially when researching a journey or buying a ticket.

Indeed, some of the challenges were not unique to the pandemic. Difficulties of communicating with infrequent travellers persisted and there was confusion among some passengers distinguishing between the on-going roof work at Bristol Temple Meads station and Bristol East Junction track work.

Ultimately the research has highlighted the need to ensure that communication around programmes of work and the impact on passenger journeys is clear.



# Background

Passengers tell us that they want accurate, honest information about delays and disruptions, whether planned or unplanned. In 2012 we published research looking at passengers' experiences and expectations of planned engineering works in a generic sense (unrelated to any specific infrastructure project)<sup>1</sup>. In 2017 we conducted further research<sup>2</sup> to explore any changes in passengers' attitudes and behaviours but found few indications of any change.

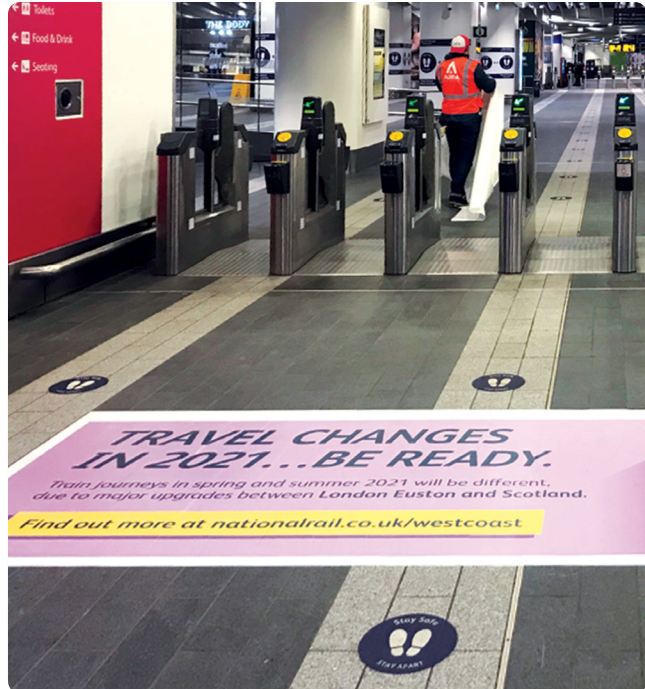
Building on this generic research, we have conducted research studies around a number of specific infrastructure upgrades including Reading, Bath Spa, London Waterloo, Derby, on the Brighton Main Line, and at London King's Cross. These individual studies are all available on our website<sup>3</sup>.

These studies have shown that every infrastructure project is different in its impact on passengers' journeys. The mitigations vary in terms of the timing of the works programme, diversionary rail routes available, the provision of rail replacement services (bus or coach), effective communications, and how passengers experience any disruption. The projects noted above were all conducted before the coronavirus pandemic began at the start of 2020. The pandemic and associated lockdowns had a substantial effect on rail travel with a dramatic fall in passenger numbers making reductions to service levels necessary on many routes.

Major railway engineering projects were themselves disrupted, with those trackworkers still able to work having to adopt Covid-safe working practices. However, projects that had been years in the planning still needed to go ahead given the preparations made and investment committed. At the same time, as the railway adapted to Covid restrictions, some work could be brought forward and conducted during this period when fewer people were travelling, to minimise the passenger impact.

The pandemic not only affected the planning and undertaking of these works, it also affected the railway's ability to communicate with passengers about the disruption. Those still using the railway needed the normal disruption updates. But with train travel not on the agenda for many, either because of restrictions on travel and meeting with others, or for personal safety concerns, train companies' communications became irrelevant to them and were frequently ignored.

Transport Focus had been asked to work with Network



Rail on two specific projects planned for 2021, which were inevitably affected by the pandemic. The first involved upgrade work at various points on the West Coast Main Line (WCML) including HS2-enabling works at London Euston station. The other related to the remodelling and resignalling of Bristol East Junction close to Temple Meads station.

Our aim with both projects was to assess passenger awareness of the planned works over time (as we have done with previous projects). This helps operators to monitor the effectiveness of their communications and make any changes needed to ensure passengers know of any disruption in advance of their journeys.

We have also included some details from a project conducted as the pandemic unfolded looking at the 'least bad' way to close parts of London King's Cross station for upgrade works in summer 2021 (see page 20).

It should also be noted that the pandemic meant Transport Focus had to adapt what had become a 'model' approach to researching passenger awareness and attitudes in the light of the research techniques available to us during the pandemic – see later section on the challenge of conducting passenger research during the pandemic (page 19).

<sup>1</sup> Please see: <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/publication/rail-passengers-experiences-and-priorities-during-engineering-works/>

<sup>2</sup> Please see: <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/publication/rail-passengers-experiences-priorities-engineering-works/>

<sup>3</sup> Please see: <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/publications/>

## Rail travel during the pandemic

**People were making far fewer train journeys at the height of the pandemic and it is taking time for passengers to return to the railway. Unrelated to Transport Focus's monitoring, the research agency BVA BDRC has been tracking people's use of trains throughout the pandemic. Its research shows the fluctuating usage of trains during the pandemic and the lockdowns that have occurred.**

This research shows that 15.7 per cent of UK adults had travelled by rail in January 2020, dropping to a low of 2.1 per cent in May. This figure recovered to 10.4 per cent in August 2020 but had fallen back to 2.9 per cent by January 2021, climbing back to 11.3 per cent in June (with social-distancing and the wearing of facemasks still mandatory) and 14.6 per cent in September 2021 after most restrictions had been lifted in England.

Our research was conducted over several waves – where the same questions are asked of different passengers at different points in time, allowing us to monitor how opinions change over time. The two waves

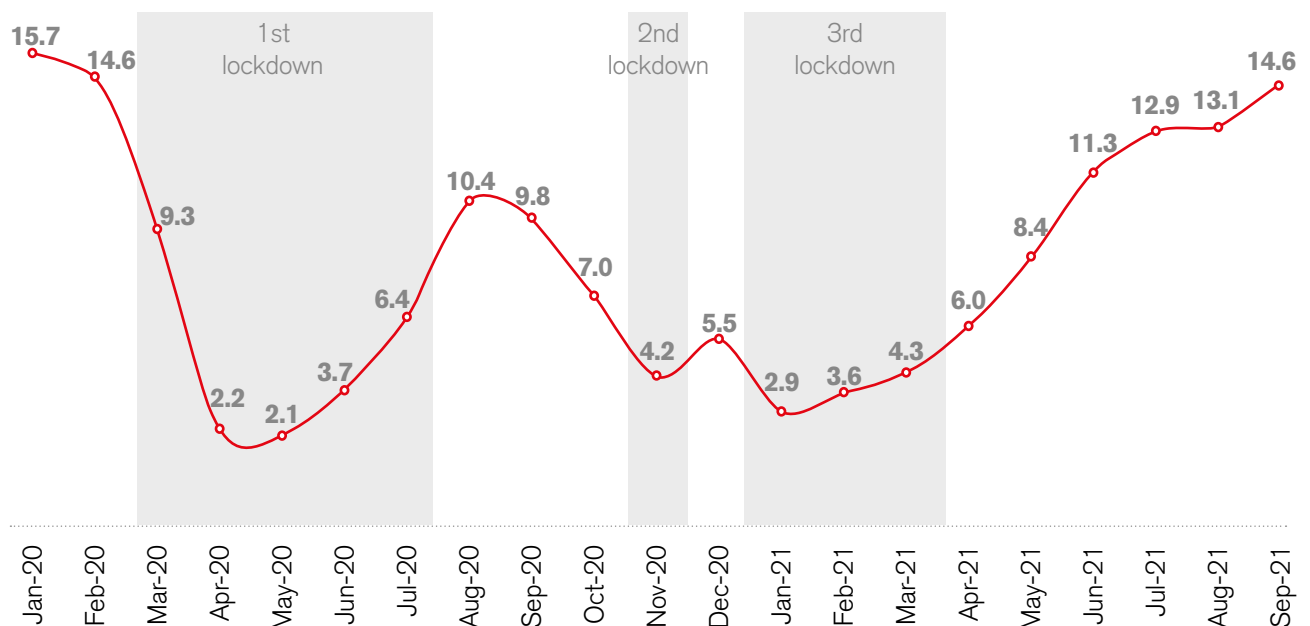
of WCML/London Euston research took place in February and May 2021 and the three waves for Bristol East in March, April and June.

The initial wave of research which forms the benchmark for each project was therefore around the time when the fewest passengers were travelling. At this point it was also uncertain whether passengers would want, or be able, to travel when the works were scheduled to take place.

While our own research specifically targeted people who had used and/or intended to use the two routes, we found that for WCML/London Euston (wave 2, in May), 20 per cent had stopped using trains, 44 per cent had greatly reduced their use, and 23 per cent slightly reduced their use. For Bristol East (wave 3, in June), 41 per cent had stopped using trains, 34 per cent had greatly reduced their use, and 17 per cent slightly reduced their use. Just 11 per cent for the WCML/London Euston, and six per cent for Bristol East, said the pandemic had had no impact on train use, while in both studies two per cent had increased their use.

### Usage of rail services during the Covid pandemic

% of UK adults claiming usage of a train during the applicable month



Q. When have you done the following activity/activities?

Source: BVA BDRC "Clearsight on recovery" survey [<https://hcontent.bva-bdrc.com/clearsight>]



# Key findings

## Awareness of disruptive engineering works

A key objective of any engineering project must be to ensure that passengers are aware of the work and any resulting changes or disruption to services before they embark on their journey. They need sufficient notice to plan whether and how to make that journey. Our research has always aimed to monitor the growth in awareness over time with a number of waves of research in the run up to the works happening.

When making comparisons across different studies it is important to be aware of various points. Firstly, the timing of the waves varies and there is no set pattern as to how far ahead of the works the research starts nor how much time elapses between waves. Secondly, the timing of communication activities varies across the projects and thirdly, the type of passenger and journey purpose mix differs across projects – some are London termini with a high proportion of commuter traffic, others are regional centres with a more varied passenger mix.

The table below presents the awareness measures from several pre-pandemic ‘benchmark’ projects, along with those from our recent work for the WCML/London Euston and Bristol East projects. More details about each study can be found in the appendix.

## Awareness of various planned engineering works over time

	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 3
Derby	28%	47%	63%
London Waterloo	41%	81%	88%
Bath Spa	42%	67%	84%
London King’s Cross	33%	77%	n/a
Brighton Mainline	45%	50%	88%
WCML/London Euston	29%	38%	n/a
Bristol East	21%	26%	29%

The **initial waves** (referred to as wave 1) have generally been undertaken before substantial communications activity. The lowest initial awareness level recorded pre-pandemic was 28 per cent, in Derby, but three projects achieved awareness of more than 40 per cent. Euston achieved a similar level to Derby at 29 per cent while Bristol East recorded only 21 per cent.

The **second waves** of research (wave 2), generally conducted after the communications campaign has launched, usually see a marked increase in awareness. Derby was again lowest at 47 per cent (but still a 19 percentage point increase) and three exceeded 66 per cent, with London Waterloo managing 81 per cent. During the pandemic, Euston increased awareness by nine points to 38 per cent (potentially reflecting an increase in campaign activity ahead of the bank holiday disruption), while Bristol East recorded an increase of just five points to 26 per cent.



Track and station upgrades

# Travelling via Bristol Temple Meads this summer?

There'll be **no direct services** between Bristol Temple Meads and Cheltenham or Gloucester **between 10 July and 3 September**

Please change at Bristol Parkway for replacement trains and buses

Before you go, check the latest information at [GWR.com/Bristol](https://www.gwr.com/Bristol)









## Communicating with passengers about engineering works during the pandemic:

Research among passengers on the West Coast Main Line and at Bristol

Where we have conducted a **third wave** (wave 3), we have seen awareness reach 63 per cent in Derby and well over 80 per cent for three other projects. However Bristol East achieved an increase of only a further three percentage points, to 29 per cent.

The awareness levels achieved in the two recent studies clearly demonstrate the challenge faced in communicating with potential passengers during the pandemic. Among passengers who had travelled on the two routes in the month prior to the research, awareness was higher: 60 per cent for WCML/London Euston (at wave 2, in May) against 27 per cent of those who travelled two to 18 months previously. The figures were 53 per cent for Bristol East (at wave 3, in June) against 29 per cent of those who travelled two to 12 months previously.

As might be expected, and demonstrating the effectiveness of at-station communications, it proved much easier to communicate with people who were still using the railway despite the pandemic. Particularly in the early stages, many people were unsure as to whether they would be able, or want, to travel. Consequently, they were not undertaking any journey planning during which they might have become aware of the planned works.

It is interesting that the WCML/Euston project had more success than Bristol East. We suggest that this

may be due in part to the geographical differences and passenger mix. We also note that Derby delivered the poorest figures among the pre-pandemic projects. Like Bristol, Derby is a regional centre with a varied passenger mix and had a complex range of works on different lines at different times. The WCML/London Euston project's success is noteworthy given the complexity of the campaign, with multiple periods of work and various closures at different points on the line.

Given the disappointing levels of awareness of the Bristol East works, at wave 3 (in June 2021) we showed our participants two communications that had been used to publicise the works. One third (34 per cent) claimed to have seen one or other of these. The Network Rail 'Bristol Rail Regeneration' piece (pictured below) was recalled by 18 per cent. We understand that this compares well with the index for Network Rail's 'Check before you travel' campaign of 19 per cent.

The GWR piece (pictured on page 7), or 'something very similar', was recalled by 30 per cent. However, we note that it uses GWR's house colours and while 'something very similar' was intended to refer to other versions of the piece for the different routes through Bristol, some passengers may have been thinking of non-disruption communications from GWR.

**BRISTOL**  
RAIL REGENERATION

# Check your journey

## Track upgrades 10 July – 3 September

This summer we're replacing a major junction near Bristol Temple Meads.

[nationalrail.co.uk](https://nationalrail.co.uk) or [GWR.com/Bristol](https://GWR.com/Bristol)  
[#BristolRailRegen](https://twitter.com/BristolRailRegen)

BR Bristol & Bath Railway Circle crosscountry Department for Transport GWR | Great Western Railway Network Rail South Western Railway WEST OF ENGLAND Combined Railways



# Level of knowledge about the works

We expect that how much people claim to know about a project will generally increase over time. The level of knowledge (that is, passengers saying they know ‘a great deal’ or ‘a fair amount’) varies. Pre-pandemic we recorded figures of between 17 and 55 per cent, with most well above 30 per cent.

The WCML/London Euston project scored well on this – over 50 per cent in both waves. Bristol East started out very high at 65 per cent in the first wave, dropping to a (still respectable) 37 per cent at wave 3 (in June).

Throughout our research, work to restore the roof at Bristol Temple Meads station was ongoing. It was easily visible and widely promoted to anyone using the station. It is possible that passengers may initially have been under the impression that the Temple Meads roof works were the full extent of the works at Bristol.

As the roof works received a lot of publicity it may be these works that passengers said they knew about in the first two waves (February and May 2021), rather than

the Bristol East Junction remodelling work. By wave 3 (in June) there was greater awareness but little detailed knowledge of the track work at the junction.

## Level of knowledge about the planned works (among passengers aware of the works)

Passengers saying they knew ‘a great deal’ or ‘a fair amount’	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 3
Derby	31%	47%	55%
London Waterloo	17%	36%	38%
Bath Spa	34%	49%	n/a
London King’s Cross	25%	30%	n/a
Brighton Main Line	34%	18%	47%
WCML/London Euston	52%	53%	n/a
Bristol East	65%	49%	37%

# What passengers knew about each project

The detail of what passengers know about any project depends on the nature of the works being undertaken and the key messages used in any communications. Overall, we would expect passengers to focus on any disruption to their journey with the ensuing benefits being of less interest.

The WCML/London Euston works involved disruption over several bank holidays (and at other times) and this was the key message the project needed to deliver. Awareness of the bank holiday closure dates varied according to how ‘close’ they were at the time of the research; dates further into the future were less likely to be known (see chart on page 10). The Easter disruption was known by 45 per cent of passengers aware of the works at wave 1 (February). The Late May Bank Holiday disruption was known by 42 per cent and the August Bank Holiday works by 39 per cent at wave 2 (early May) – both figures having increased markedly since wave 1 (+13 and +19 percentage points respectively). However, just 25 per cent were aware of weekend disruption between April and August.

For Bristol East the picture was somewhat different (see chart on page 11). Passengers aware of the works knew about track works outside Bristol Temple Meads (44

per cent at wave 1, in March) rising to 50 per cent at wave 3, in June). At the same time, knowledge of the work to the roof at Temple Meads was only a little lower (32 per cent at waves 1, in March, and 2, in April, and 27 per cent at wave 3, in June).

Awareness that some trains would be diverted, and others replaced by buses or coaches started out at 25 per cent at wave 1 (in March), only reaching 41 per cent by wave 3 (in June). Similarly, knowledge of the dates of the works began at 33 per cent at wave 1 (in March) and grew to 45 per cent by wave 3 (in June).

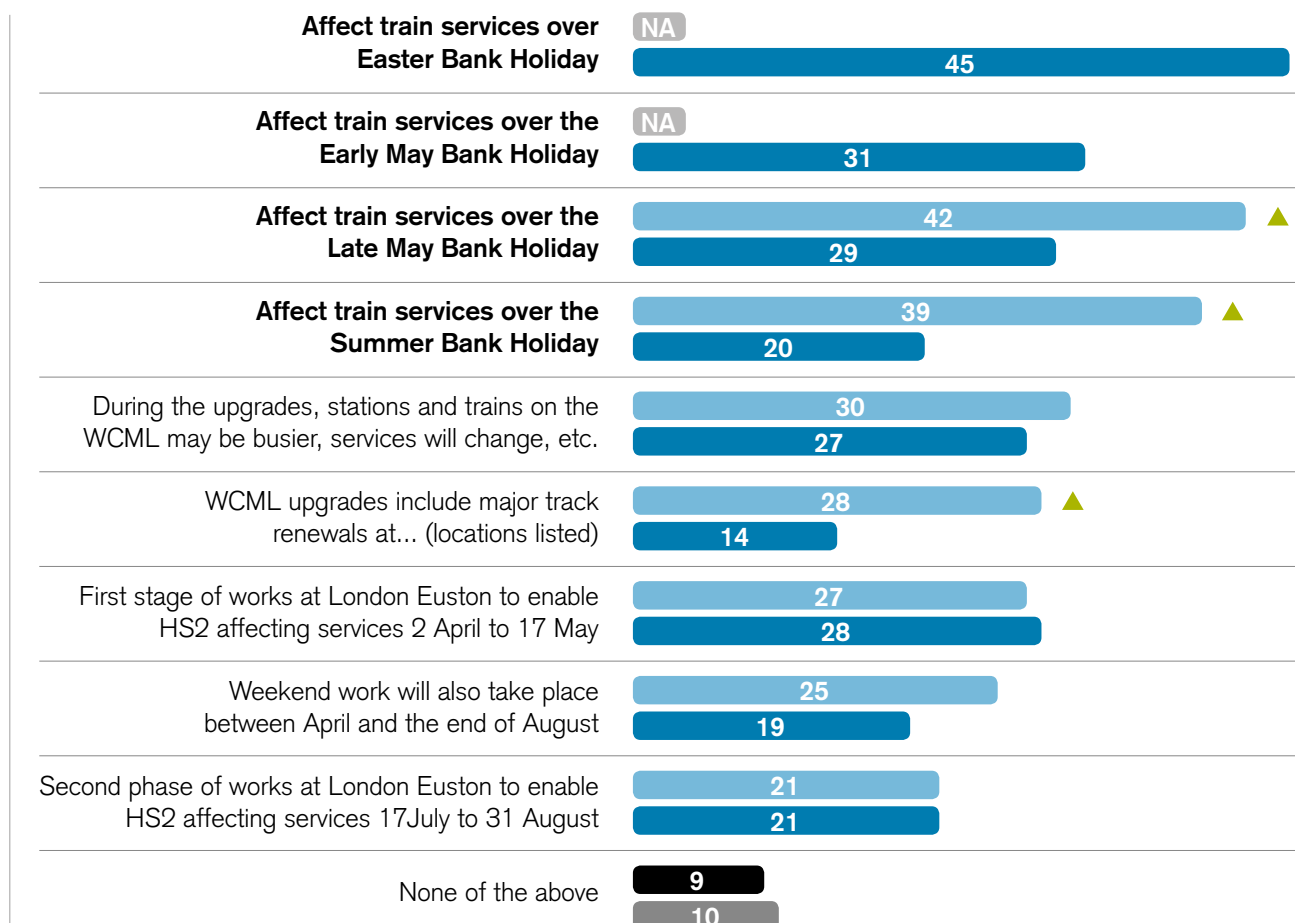
The growth in awareness of the different aspects of the works may be due, at least in part, to increasing communications activity. It may also be that the message had become more relevant with restrictions easing, more people considering travel and the works being imminent and therefore receiving more attention.

The earlier waves gave rise to some concern that passengers were conflating the track works with the Temple Meads station roof works (i.e. they saw the two aspects as a single issue). As such, they were not understanding the disruption that the track works would bring later in the year. The scaffolding for the roof works was already highly visible (and adorned with posted and banners about the work).

## Communicating with passengers about engineering works during the pandemic:

Research among passengers on the West Coast Main Line and at Bristol

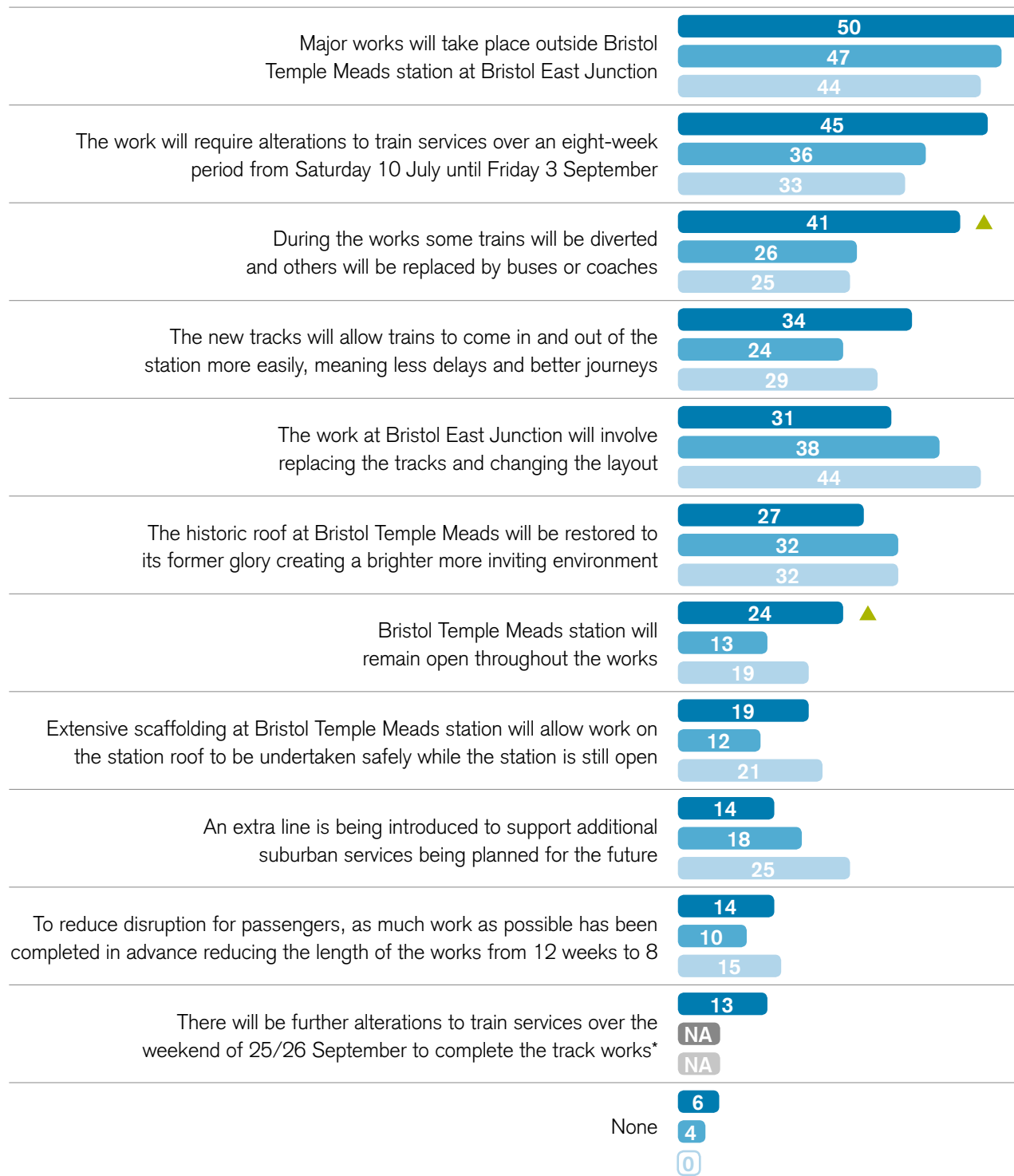
### Understanding the implications of the works on the WCML/at London Euston



■ Wave 2 ■ Wave 1 ▲ / ▼ Indicate significant difference vs Wave 1

Q. Which, if any, of the following statements about the infrastructure works on the West Coast Main Line were you aware of before today?  
Base: All aware of the WCML project W1/W2 (156/186)

## Understanding the implications of the works at Bristol East Junction



■ Wave 3 ■ Wave 2 ■ Wave 1 ▲ / ▼ Indicate significant difference vs Wave 2

\*New statement added in Wave 3 therefore no comparisons to previous waves possible

Q. Which, if any, of the following statements about the works in Bristol were you aware of before today?

Base: All aware of works W1/W2/W3 (84/106/123)



## Communicating with passengers about engineering works during the pandemic:

Research among passengers on the West Coast Main Line and at Bristol

It may have been that passengers failed to pick up on the fact that the track works would necessitate changes to train services with potential disruption to their journeys. Many passengers' responses, when asked about the work taking place, focussed on the roof rather than the junction – even at wave 3 (in June).

*"That they are planning to modernise the station area and improve the roof."*

Bristol East passenger

*"That the whole station is being upgraded including the roof and undergoing major changes to make it more climate friendly."*

Bristol East passenger

Others indicate a difficulty in assimilating the dates of the works.

*"I can't remember the dates this is happening, so it would be good to make the dates more pronounced, or easier to remember e.g. "Early July" rather than "4th to 14th."*

Bristol East passenger

*"Impact on journeys presented in a calendar format (potentially colour coded by days indicating the extent of impact) rather than just a list."*

Bristol East passenger

Later communications activity made sure to highlight the disruption to train services in July and August and to mention the diversions and replacement buses/coaches. As shown in the chart on page 11, this was valuable as knowledge of the disruption messages among those aware of the works did increase at wave 3 (in June, just before the works started on July 10).

Even where the information is available, passengers always tell us they would like to know more about any project. Crucially, what they say they would like to know about can be helpful in assessing how well, or poorly, communications are working.

Often passengers are worried about whether the works will be finished on time. With Bristol East, 41 per cent of passengers aware of the works at wave 2 (in April) were asking for more information about the timings and duration of the works. This was still at 37 per cent in wave 3 (in June). For WCML/London Euston, 21 per cent (wave 1, in February) and 14 per cent (wave 2, in May) wanted to know how long the works would take and when they would be completed – potentially reflecting the longer-term nature of the project with multiple closures at different times. While we saw people asking about the benefits of the works, we recognise that understanding the benefits sits much lower in passengers' hierarchy of information needs, than knowing that the works are happening, and when and how they will affect their journeys.

Among those aware of the works, a higher proportion were able to identify a benefit than had been the case with most pre-pandemic projects – 84 per cent for Bristol East and 81 per cent for WCML/London Euston (at wave 2, in May). For Bristol East, it was again the work to upgrade the roof delivering a more pleasant experience when using Temple Meads station that was most prominent in the minds of passengers (47 per cent at wave 3, in June). Delivering more reliable journeys was the lead benefit for WCML/London Euston (58 per cent at wave 2, in May) and the second most mentioned for Bristol East (42 per cent at wave 3, in June).

### Awareness of the benefits of works

Passengers aware of any benefit	Wave 2
Derby	48%
London Waterloo	69%
Bath Spa	76%
London King's Cross	81%
Brighton Main Line	55%
<b>WCML/London Euston</b>	<b>81%</b>
<b>Bristol East</b>	<b>84%</b>

# Information channels

Information at stations and on trains has always been important in raising awareness of forthcoming works. This presented a big challenge during the pandemic with such low numbers of passengers using the railway.

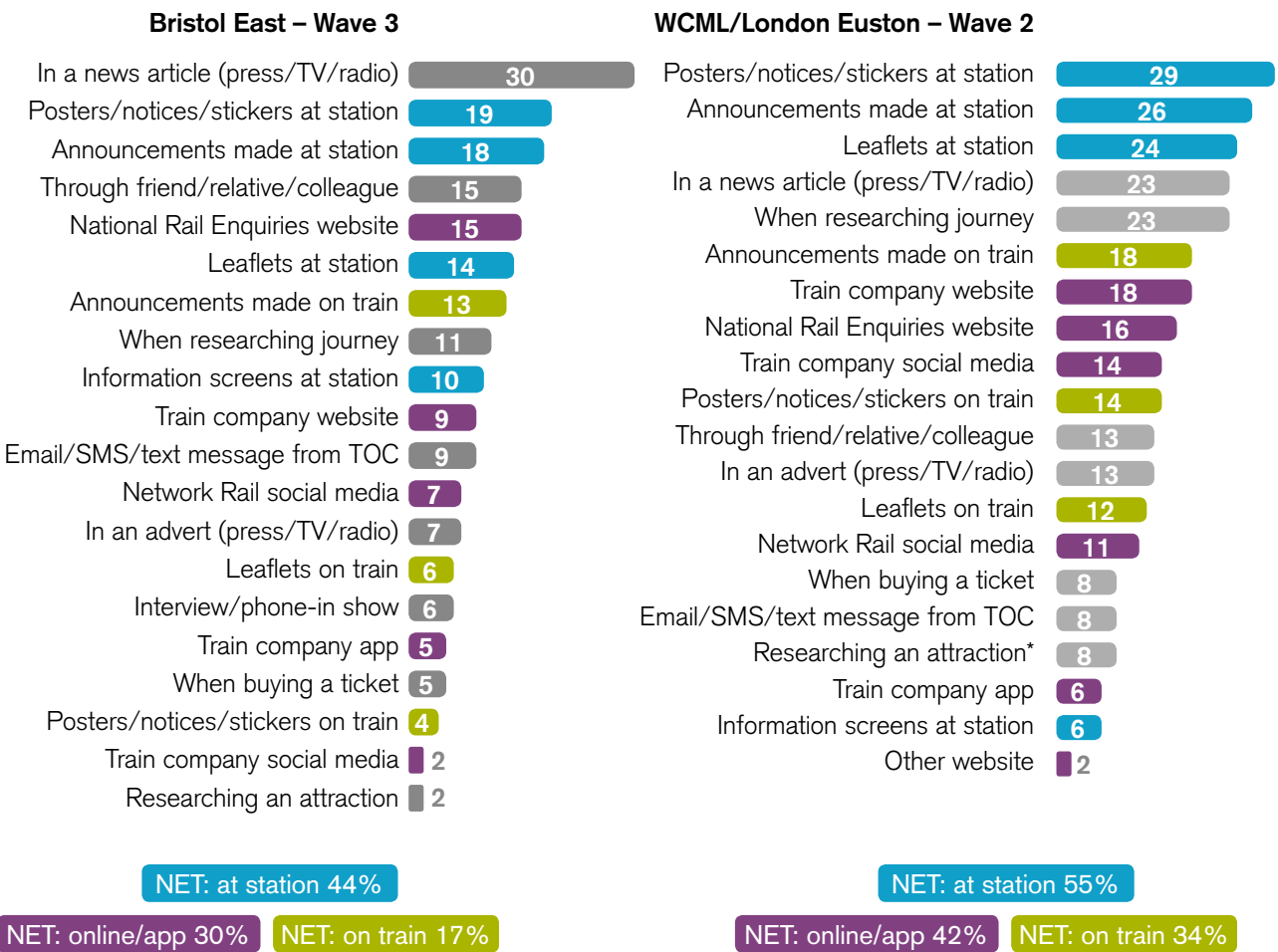
'At station' and 'on train' information channels still played a major role in creating awareness of the works for both the WCML/London Euston: 55 per cent mentioning at least one 'at station' channel and 34 per cent an 'on train' one (wave 2, in June), and for Bristol East: 44 per cent 'at station' and 17 per cent 'on train' (wave 3, in June).

Unusually, press articles featured strongly for Bristol East with 30 per cent mentioning this channel (at wave 3, in June). This is likely because of a local media event shortly before interviewing took place, coupled with a greater reliance on local news sources away from London.

The figures for 'when researching a journey' (WCML/London Euston 23 per cent, Bristol East 11 per cent) and 'when buying a ticket' (WCML/London Euston eight per cent, Bristol East five per cent) are perhaps disappointing given the reliance on digital channels during the pandemic, although it is likely that relatively few people would have been contemplating or researching a rail journey at the time.

## Information channels contributing to awareness of the works

Based on all aware



Q. In which of the following ways did you find out about the works in Bristol?  
Base: All aware of works (Bristol East: 123; WCML/Euston186)

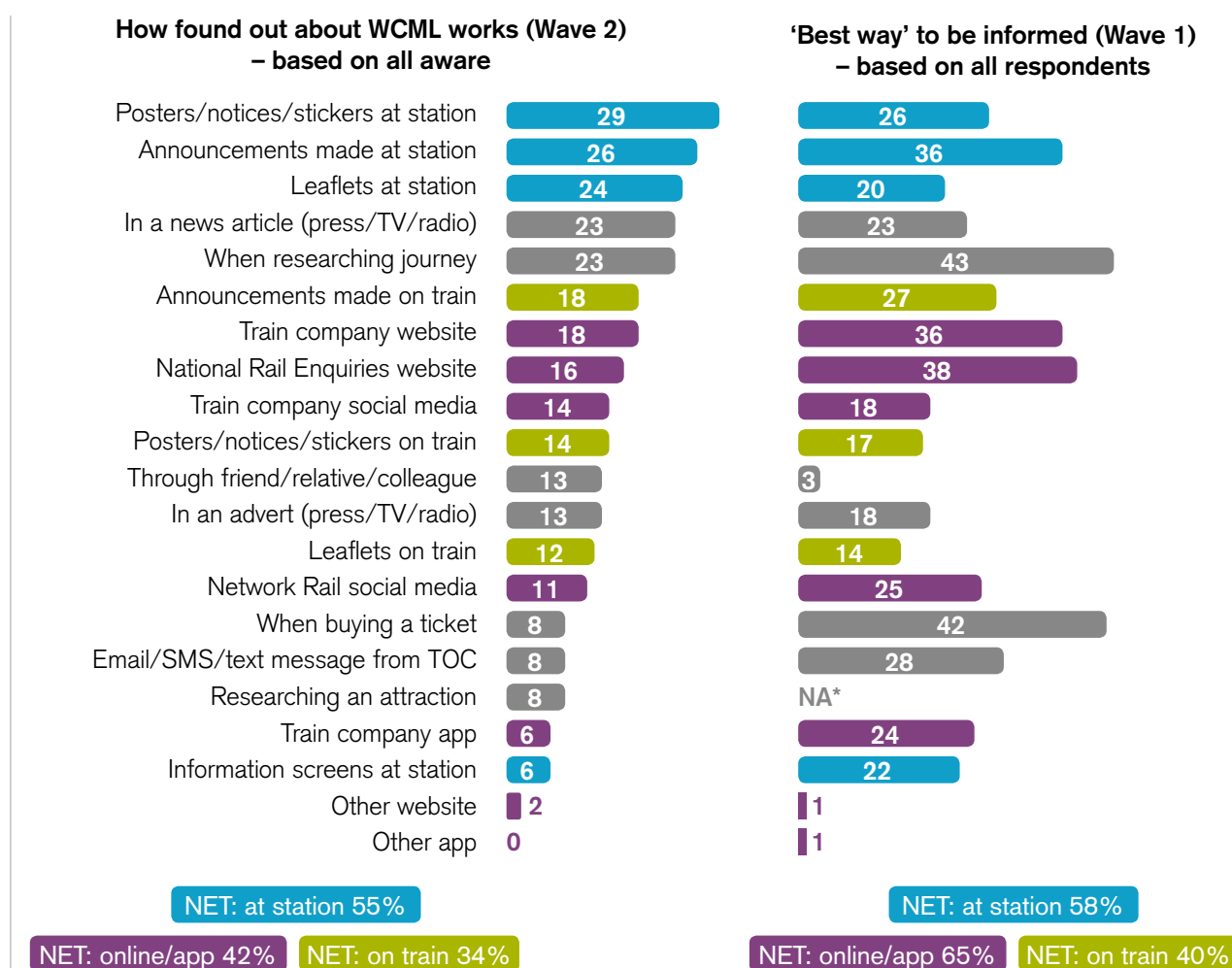
## Communicating with passengers about engineering works during the pandemic:

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To that point, it is helpful to look at what passengers said would be the 'best way' to inform them about disruption. The chart below compares the way passengers from the WCML/London Euston research said they had found out about the works (left hand column) with what they said would be the 'best way' to inform them (right hand column). 'When researching a journey' (43 per cent) and 'when buying a ticket' (42 per cent) are deemed 'the best way'.

Passengers in Bristol responded in a similar fashion but with slightly higher importance given to press articles/television (29 per cent), probably reflecting the relative success of this channel in raising awareness at wave 3 (June).

### 'Best way' to inform passengers about disruption – WCML/London Euston



\*Not asked as a 'best way' to be informed

Q. In which of the following ways did you find out about the infrastructure works on the West Coast Main Line?

Q. What would be the best way(s) to let you know about disruption to your journey in the future?

Base: All respondents Wave 1 (537); All aware of the WCML project Wave 2 (186)



# The timing of communications activity

Transport Focus has always encouraged providing passengers with plenty of notice about planned engineering works. This enables passengers to plan for any service alterations, causing them the least disruption. With sufficient notice passengers may choose to take annual holiday to avoid some or all of the works. While the number of season ticket holders may be smaller in future, historically they have often taken forthcoming major engineering works into account when buying or renewing their season ticket.

Both these considerations point to alerting passengers around Christmas time. Holiday advertising typically begins on Boxing Day and many annual season tickets are renewed in January, often just ahead of any fare increase. Warning of works also allows passengers to arrange to work from home or an alternative location, or to arrange childcare if the works are likely to interfere with their normal routine.

On several projects, we have observed a reluctance to begin publicising the works before the timetable has been confirmed. While it is understandable that the railway does not want to publish a timetable that is subject to alteration, passengers still appreciate knowing that the works will be happening alongside a broad indication of their impact. Ideally, the operator would give an estimated date for when the revised timetable will be available.

If the passenger intends to go on holiday or to work from home during the works, they don't need to know the detailed timings of replacement buses/coaches or diverted trains – just that there will be no trains.

Across the three waves of the Bristol East research, less than one in five of those passengers aware of the works said they had learnt about them more than a month before they completed the survey. Throughout the research we heard passengers expressing surprise that they had not previously known about the works.

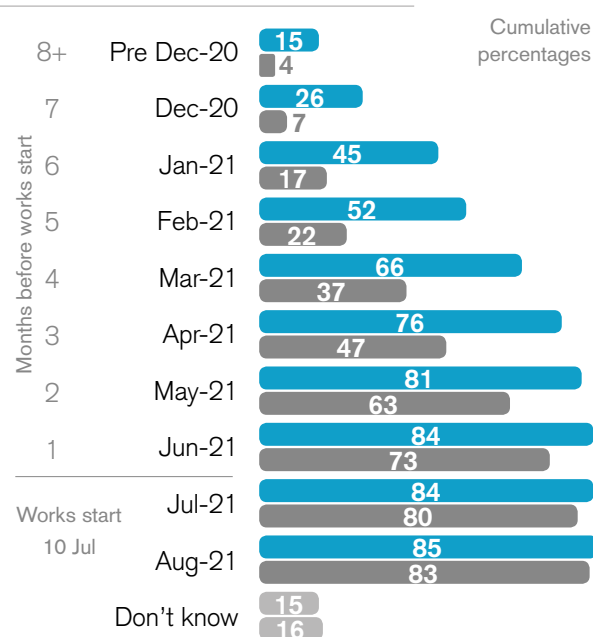
Alerted to this fact, in the final wave of the research we asked passengers how far in advance they would have expected to learn about works such as those being

undertaken at Bristol East. We also asked how far in advance they would expect the detailed timetable to be published.

Over half (52 per cent) of the passengers we spoke to for the Bristol study at wave 3 (June) said they would have liked to have known about such works in February or before – a mean of 5.3 months in advance – and a quarter (26 per cent) would have liked to have known in December 2020 or before.

In terms of when the timetable should be published, the mean drops to 3.2 months in advance. This suggests that restoring the industry's pre-Covid 12-week target (known as 'T-12') for publishing the final timetable and opening ticket sales remains valid, although Transport Focus supports efforts to put tickets on sale further ahead where possible.

## When passengers would like to be informed about the works



Means (in months before works)

Informed in the first place – 5.3 months

Detailed timeline – 3.2 months

\*\*Don't know' responses excluded

Q. While the railway knows it will be carrying out improvement works well in advance, it often doesn't know the detail of the timetable until much later. In the case of works like those taking place in Bristol, firstly, how far in advance would you have expected to be informed that there was going to be disruption. Secondly, how far in advance would you expect the detailed timetable to be published?

Base: All Bristol East respondents Wave 3 (420)

"I have not seen any information on this disruption and bearing in mind it is significant, I would have thought that Network Rail would have used every avenue to get the message out there."




Bristol East passenger (wave1, in March)

# Impact of the works on passengers' journeys

Half of those passengers interviewed for the WCML/ London Euston (51 per cent at wave 2, in May) and the Bristol East (50 per cent at wave 3, in June) projects expected their journeys to be affected by the works. Given the different research methodology used because of the pandemic, we are cautious in comparing these figures with the pre-pandemic surveys.

Looking at the responses for Bristol East, a substantial proportion were considering avoiding rail or choosing an alternative means of transport (both 15 per cent at wave 3, in June). Some 13 per cent said they would expect delays and 11 per cent were expecting rail replacement services to be in operation (a reason for some to avoid travelling by rail).

## Anticipated effect on travel plans – Bristol East

		Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 3
<b>Spontaneous – based on those saying the works will have an effect</b>   /  Indicate significant difference vs Wave 2  NOTE: only response codes >3% shown Q. Why is that? Please tell us how you expect your travel to be affected and what you might do differently? Base: Significant/limited effect W1/W2/W3 (206/174/209)	May choose to use alternative methods of transport	10	13	15
	May avoid/reduce rail travel	7	9	15
	Expect journeys to be delayed	17	14	13
	Expect rail replacement services to be in operation	9	15	11
	Expect alternative routes to be required/diversions	7	11	10
	Expect journey times to be extended/will need to allow more time	10	13	9
	Expect to make different connections/use different stations/platforms	5	5	8
	Will need to adjust schedule/travel at different times	4	7	6
	Will need to plan my journeys better	5	4	5
	Expect to be inconvenienced/for journeys to be more difficult	6	3	5
Related to COVID		3	1	5 

"I would have liked to be able to use the train for a day out but given the alternatives I will probably not."

Bristol East passenger (wave 3, in June)  
– anticipating a limited effect

"I expect to be delayed due to the junction works but this is unlikely to deter us as we are only making leisure trips."

Bristol East passenger (wave 3, in June)  
– anticipating a limited effect

"I expect my travel to be affected because the trains I board might be replaced with buses which I'm not so comfortable with now because of the coronavirus pandemic. I might stop the use of trains for a while."

Bristol East passenger (wave 3, in June)  
– anticipating a significant effect

"I plan to go back to work and take the train on a regular basis. I do not believe I will be able to commute during this period... I am likely to continue working from home a little longer."

Bristol East passenger (wave 3, in June)  
– anticipating a significant effect

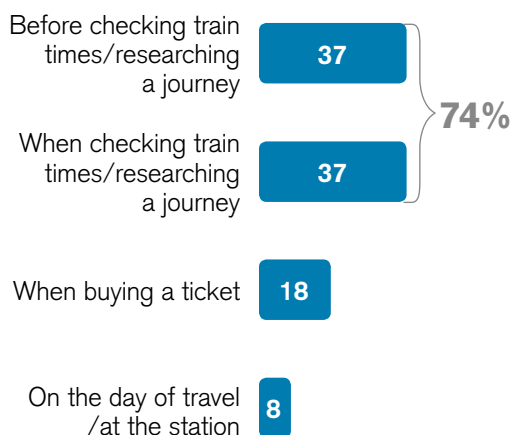
In wave 2 of the WCML/London Euston project (in May), we were able to ask about the actual impact of the works on any passengers who had travelled (or wanted to travel) in April and early May. Just under half (46 per cent) reported travelling or wanting to travel during this time – 24 per cent over Easter, 19 per cent over the Early May Bank Holiday, and 15 per cent over another weekend.

Three quarters of these passengers (74 per cent) had been made aware of these works before or while researching a journey and 18 per cent when buying a ticket. Just eight per cent said they had found out on the day. Around a third (31 per cent) reported experiencing a delay while similar numbers used a different rail route (31 per cent), used a rail replacement bus or coach (28 per cent), used a different means of transport (28 per cent), or travelled at a different time (26 per cent). Overall, 80 per cent were satisfied with the information provided about the works.

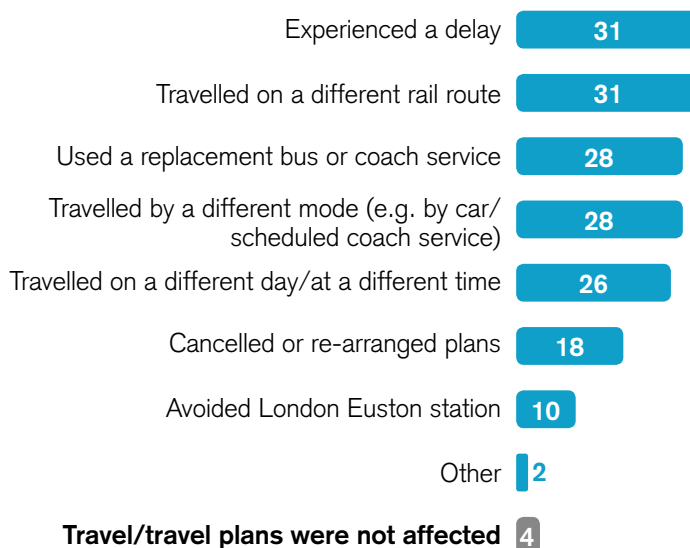
The industry was advising WCML passengers to travel either side of the Early May Bank Holiday. Over half (55 per cent) of the passengers we spoke to in wave 2 (in May) claimed to be aware of that advice. One fifth (19 per cent) travelled or wanted to travel at that time. Although this is a small base (just 36 passengers) and breaking it down further can give only an indication of their behaviour, just three per cent of them were unaware of the advice, while 47 per cent travelled over 1-3 May regardless. 38 per cent did as advised and 12 per cent used a different means of transport.

## Effect of April/May works on travel plans – WCML/London Euston

### When first found out about the works



### How travel plans were affected



Q. When did you first find out about these particular works on the West Coast Main Line?

Q. And how, if that all, were your travel plans affected by the infrastructure works on the West Coast Main Line at that time?

Base: All aware of WCML project and travelled/wanted to travel on WCML over key dates (83)



## Satisfaction with the information provided

Satisfaction with the information provided by any project can generally be expected to rise over time as the communication campaign takes effect. Interestingly, satisfaction for Bristol East remained constant at 38/39 per cent across all three waves. As such it was higher than any of the pre-pandemic projects at wave 1 and marginally lower than all of them at wave 3. Drilling down into the Bristol East figures, at wave 3 (in June), satisfaction among those aware of the works was 67 per cent – but just 26 per cent among those not aware.

### Satisfaction with information provision

	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 3
Derby	14%	30%	43%
London Waterloo	16%	35%	42%
Bath Spa	19%	35%	62%
London King's Cross	23%	48%	n/a
Brighton Main Line	16%	21%	43%
<b>WCML/London Euston</b>	<b>48%</b>	<b>52%</b>	n/a
<b>Bristol East</b>	<b>39%</b>	<b>39%</b>	<b>38%</b>

The WCML/London Euston project delivered a 52 per cent satisfaction level at wave 2, in May, better than most projects in their final waves.

Passengers' comments as to why they were dissatisfied with the information often reveal strong emotions. They demonstrate passengers' dislike of replacement buses, an acceptance that the work is essential, and that not using the train may be why they are unaware.

"Because it is going to prevent me from using trains for a while as they might get replaced by buses. But I'm just 'fairly dissatisfied' as the engineering works are to improve the rails."

Bristol East passenger (wave 3, in June)

"I was not aware of the works stated in this survey. But as I haven't travelled by train for a while, I haven't been looking at train information."

WCML/London Euston passenger (wave 2, in May)

"They have been timed perfectly to disrupt people's free time before we are put back into lockdown, and I have no doubt that it's deliberate."

Bristol East passenger (wave 3, in June)

"I did not know about this infrastructure work until now. I recently checked train times from Euston for a trip up after lockdown and saw no mention of this."

WCML/London Euston passenger (wave 2, in May)

"I had no idea there were any works going to be ongoing. The thought of bus replacement isn't great."

Bristol East passenger (wave 3, in June)

# Support for the works

**Despite disruption to passengers' journeys, many recognised that the works were essential and will provide longer-term benefits. This led to them expressing support for the works, and this support was consistent over time.**

The promise of longer platforms, longer trains, and greater capacity at London Waterloo is believed to have led to this project attracting the highest level of support among our 'benchmarks'. The two recent surveys achieved a similar level of support.

## Support for the works

	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 3
Derby	36%	36%	40%
London Waterloo	69%	69%	66%
Bath Spa	46%	54%	58%
London King's Cross	56%	62%	n/a
Brighton Main Line	49%	41%	51%
<b>WCML/London Euston</b>	<b>60%</b>	<b>65%</b>	n/a
<b>Bristol East</b>	<b>59%</b>	<b>63%</b>	<b>63%</b>

For the WCML/London Euston project we had mentioned that some of the works likely to cause disruption were to enable the construction of HS2. As well as asking passengers about their support for the works on the route, we also asked about their support for HS2. Over half (53 per cent at wave 2, in May) said they supported it while a fifth (21 per cent) did not. Opposition to HS2 was also evident in some passengers' comments.

*"I think there is a lack of explanation about why this is necessary. I am also upset to learn that some of it is to do with HS2."*

WCML/London Euston passenger (wave 2, in May)

# The challenge of conducting passenger research during the pandemic

**Historically we have used an 'intercept' approach for our disruption research – approaching passengers at stations and/or on trains and inviting them to take a self-completion questionnaire which they return in a Freepost envelope once completed. This ensures that participants are genuine passengers using the railway at the time of the research.**

In recent times we have given passengers the option of providing their email address so they can be sent the questionnaire online. This still ensures they are genuine passengers, and the questionnaire includes the date when they were approached to assist them in recalling that specific journey.

With far fewer passengers travelling, not only were there fewer people to survey, but covid-safe face-to-face interviewing was not possible. As a result, we had to adopt an online approach whereby we could contact a much

larger number of individuals and where there would be no in-person contact with the passenger.

Yonder, an independent research agency, ran both projects for us and used its panel of people who have agreed to participate in survey research to identify rail users. Because of the low numbers travelling at the time, we could not realistically restrict ourselves to 'current' passengers. We opted to select people with recent experience of using the lines in question and who might intend to use them in the future at a time when the works would be taking place. These methodological differences need to be borne in mind when comparing the two 'pandemic projects' with those conducted previously.

In the past we have sometimes boosted our intercept passenger sample with online interviews. For these latest surveys we arranged for operators to send email or social media invitations to take part in the survey. Participants recruited in this fashion have generally been shown to be

more engaged with the railway than those approached at stations and to be better informed about any disruption, meaning that we have always been careful to report intercept and operator-sourced samples separately.

We attempted to use Network Rail, Great Western Railway and CrossCountry social media channels

to boost interview numbers for the Bristol East project but this generated too few responses to be of value. We assume that, with so few people travelling or planning to travel, people had stopped following or simply had no interest in train operators' social media posts.



## The partial closure of London King's Cross station – March-April 2021

**Transport Focus also worked with Network Rail to explore what passengers felt was the 'least bad' option for train services during planned engineering work at London King's Cross. This would have seen one half of the station closed at a time between March and April 2021<sup>4</sup>.**

The research was in progress when the first lockdown took effect in March 2020 and had to switch to an online methodology.

Many of the passengers we spoke to were working from home because of lockdown restrictions. This meant that many of them were open to considering working from home or another location if there was likely to be significant disruption to journeys into London King's Cross during the planned works.

This was despite many saying that their employers would have been unlikely to allow this pre-pandemic. Working from home was still a novelty for many when we undertook the research, but we imagine that there would be even greater preparedness to work from home during disruption if the research were repeated in the future.

The research also looked at people's readiness to stand on a crowded train if there were fewer or shorter trains. There was a high degree of tolerance towards standing based on pre-pandemic experiences. However, it is likely that attitudes towards standing on crowded trains will have changed in the light of Covid.

Ultimately, the reduced numbers of people travelling during the works meant that services were reduced in any case and the partial closure of London King's Cross could be accommodated without significant inconvenience to passengers.

<sup>4</sup> Please see: <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/publication/engineering-works-at-kings-cross-passenger-reactions-to-planned-disruption/>



# Conclusions and recommendations

## Conclusions

Our passenger research during the coronavirus pandemic shows the challenges that the railway faces in generating awareness of the works and the associated disruption to passengers' journeys. With so few people making journeys by train, two of the channels which have been key in communicating the message on past projects, 'at station' and 'on train' messaging, were not able to make a significant contribution.

Digital media also struggled to reach its target audience. It is likely that many of those not travelling during the pandemic turned off alerts, did not open train operators' apps, deleted them altogether or simply had no interest in reading train companies' social media posts or emails. Not only would this have reduced the effectiveness of the communication campaigns, but it may also explain why social media posts were of little value in getting people to complete the survey.

Where passengers were aware of the works, their uptake of the messaging, their understanding of the benefits and their support for the works were on a par with past projects. Many passengers unaware of the works were frustrated that the railway had not made more of an effort to publicise them – although some acknowledged that they had not been using the railway so were not surprised that they had not seen anything about the potential disruption.

The research has again demonstrated how important it is to be able to deliver information about any works when passengers research a journey and go to buy a ticket. As soon as possible, the industry must get back to its 'T-12' target of having this information available at least twelve weeks in advance.

It should also aim to announce that there will be works at least six months in advance, even if the timetable information is not available. Ideally, such information for any

given year should be available by the December before, so the impact can be considered when booking holidays or buying/renewing season tickets ahead of the annual price rise in early January.

We know that some passengers are actively discouraged if their journey involves a rail replacement bus or coach. While coaches are generally seen as being 'better' than buses, for some, any rail replacement service is an instant 'turn-off'. From passengers' comments, replacement coaches or buses appear even less acceptable now that people have experienced social distancing and the compulsory use of face coverings on public transport.

We suggest the 'Bristol Rail Regeneration' campaign may have led to confusion for some passengers with its initial focus on the restoration of Temple Meads' station roof. It was only later in the campaign that messaging about the track works at Bristol East Junction, and how diversions and rail replacement services would be in place, started to cut through against the benefits to come when using the refurbished station.

It may have been beneficial to differentiate the work on the station roof from the track works at the junction so messaging around the disruption associated with the track work did not get lost among everything else.

We acknowledge that our research was impacted by the need to go online in place of our preferred station intercept approach. Comparisons with our 'benchmarks' from previous studies are indicative given that the projects all differ in terms of geography, passenger mix and timing of both the works and the research waves. With the latest two studies, it is important to note the online approach and the fact that we had to ask about past journeys, rather than one that people were currently making, as was the case with the pre-pandemic studies.

## Recommendations for managing planned engineering works

Over the years we have made various recommendations for managing planned engineering works and the resulting disruption to passengers' journeys. For completeness we restate them here, whether or not the latest research addresses each point. We have also added to or updated the list in the light of the coronavirus pandemic and its impact on passengers and their travel behaviour.

- Passengers generally appreciate the need to undertake maintenance and make improvements to the railway but do not appreciate the disruption this may entail.

**Engineering works should be planned to cause minimum disruption** and may need to take account of changes in the passenger mix/journey types post-pandemic.

- Many passengers react negatively to the idea of buses or coaches providing a rail replacement service – especially the disabled and passengers travelling with buggies or heavy luggage – and the coronavirus pandemic may have heightened some passengers' reluctance to use shared road transport. **Where possible passengers should be offered a rail**

- alternative if a line is closed.** Coaches are generally seen as offering a better experience than buses.
- Disabled passengers can have fewer alternative travel options if there is rail disruption. **Their needs must be considered in planning and managing disruption and accessible rail replacement services.**
  - We regularly hear passengers expressing frustration when the railway is closed at key times when they wish to travel – notably for family reunions over Christmas and the New Year. **The railway should continue to evaluate the ‘least bad’ time to undertake disruptive engineering work** bearing in mind changes in the passenger mix brought about by the pandemic.
  - While it remains to be seen just what the passenger mix and travel patterns will be post-pandemic, there may well be fewer commuters and business travellers than previously. **The railway should consider whether short term weekday closures (such as over school half terms) may be preferable to longer periods of weekend and/or overnight works.**
  - Passengers like to know about disruptive engineering works well in advance so as to be able to plan their lives. **A broad outline of the impact on passengers’ travel options should be given at least six months in advance** (for example, to allow holidays to be arranged to avoid the works and so people are aware when renewing season tickets).
  - Our latest research has shown that passengers expect timetable information to be available, on average, three months in advance. **The industry must get back to ‘T-12’** (providing accurate timetable information twelve weeks in advance) **as soon as possible** (and work to better this wherever it can), so that passengers can book their tickets and make seat reservations with confidence.
  - Passengers expect timetable information to be accurate and to reflect any planned alterations so they can reliably plan their lives. **If the timetable has not been finalised, passengers should be warned that ‘something’ will be happening and when they can check for detailed timetable information.** The railway must ensure that the dates and the disruptive impact of any project are prominent in any communications.
  - The pandemic has underlined the difficulties of communicating with infrequent travellers. **Train operators should continue to use all channels at their disposal**; we note a number of particular areas for consideration:
    - digital media may be effective only when people are engaged with the railway and actively looking to travel
    - getting passengers’ permission to receive marketing communications and signing them up to a marketing database can provide a valuable communications channel
    - for longer projects, creating a database of people interested in receiving regular updates/newsletters can also be valuable and can help with awareness in the broader community
    - facilitating news coverage in local media can be effective in generating awareness and support for the works, but at the same time needs careful handling, should anything ‘go wrong’ during that time.
  - Passengers dislike changing trains and especially having to change to a bus or coach (especially at stations with which they are not familiar). **Operators should have adequate provision for staff at interchange points, directional signage, and labelling of road vehicles to make the process as pain-free as possible.**
  - There is a widely held view that train fares should reflect any inconvenience to passengers. **During sustained periods of disruption the railway should offer compensation such as temporary fare reductions or ‘extra’ days on season tickets.**
  - Passengers do appreciate knowing what work is being undertaken and why, but this comes much lower in their priorities than knowing that work is going to happen, when, what it means for their journey, and what their alternatives might be. **The railway must ensure that the dates and the disruptive impact of any project are prominent in any communications and are not subsumed within any narrative about the benefits to be delivered.**
  - It can be little things that make all the difference to a passenger’s journey experience. **Operators should look to provide covered waiting areas with seating and toilet facilities at bus/coach interchanges, approachable marshals, and refreshments to make disrupted journeys more tolerable.** Some projects have distributed free teas and coffees, bottled water, ice creams, and child activity packs, for example.
- With a view to tackling climate change and environmental issues, people need to return to (or adopt) rail as a sustainable form of transport. **The industry must listen to people’s frustrations and expectations and must ensure the passenger perspective is foremost in its thinking** – including in managing planned engineering works.

# Appendix: 'Benchmark' studies referenced in this report

Within the report, we have made comparisons with several pre-pandemic Transport Focus research projects on the impact of engineering works.

While these provide a useful benchmark to analyse the results from the more recent WCML/London Euston and Bristol East works (conducted during the pandemic), it is important to note that there are several differences across the projects:

- Passenger type/journey purpose – the London Waterloo and Brighton Main Line projects had a higher proportion of commuters within the sample, reflective of the type of passengers using the affected services
- Face-to-face versus on-line fieldwork – while the WCML/London Euston and Bristol East studies used online interviewing, previous studies had generally used face-to-face interviewing (sometimes supplemented by 'boost' samples generated from train operators' databases)

- Sample composition – this is dependent on the agreed sampling plans, number of specific routes targeted, response rates and the resources available from train company databases
- Timings – while each project involved multiple waves of fieldwork, the timing of these different waves varied and there was no set pattern as to how far ahead of the works the research started nor how much time elapsed between waves
- Changes to Covid regulations – changes occurred to the applicable regulations and guidance during the WCML/London Euston and Bristol East studies. Along with Government messaging, this may have impacted passengers' attitudes.

Further details about each project (including sample sizes and the research agencies' detailed slide decks) are available on our website. Please visit: <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/publications/>

## A summary of the project timings

	Fieldwork dates						
	Wave 0	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 3	Wave 4	Wave 5	Date of works
Bath Spa – 2015	N/A	20/3 - 2/4	5/6 - 18/6	22/7 - 31/7, 4/8 - 14/8	–	N/A	18/7 - 31/8
London Waterloo – 2016/17	N/A	23/11 - 9/12	22/2 - 12/3	19/5 - 4/7	9/8 - 27/8	N/A	5/8 - 28/8
Derby – 2017/18	N/A	29/11 - 14/12	8/2 - 3/3	11/6 - 29/6	13/8 - 13/9	N/A	22/10 - 8/10
Brighton Main Line – 2018/19	23/4 - 27/4	8/5 - 18/5	8/9	29/10 - 22/11	7/1 - 16/1	16/2 - 25/2	20/10 - 28/10, 16/2 - 24/2/19
London King's Cross – 2019	N/A	1/7 - 17/7	24/8 - 26/8	N/A	N/A	N/A	24/8 - 26/8
West Coast Main Line/ London Euston – 2021	N/A	9/2 - 16/2	4/5 - 11/5	N/A	N/A	N/A	2/4 - 31/8
Bristol East – 2021	N/A	16/3 - 24/3	19/4 - 26/4	17/5 - 23/5	N/A	N/A	10/7 - 3/9

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