



Transforming rail travel

What do passengers want?

February 2022

The Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail sets out a vision for a new railway¹. A new body, Great British Railways (GBR), will bring the whole system under a single, national leadership with a new brand and identity. It will also deliver the decarbonisation objectives set out in the Government's 'Decarbonising Transport: A Better, Greener Britain' plan². The plan describes a new structure and new ways of working designed to bring about a more passenger-focused railway.

This passenger-centric approach is very welcome. Transport Focus has long argued that the needs of passengers must be at the heart of the railway. But what are these needs, what do passengers want now and in the future, and what might encourage non or lapsed users to give rail a go?

This document summarises Transport Focus's research in this area. Some of this research pre-dates Covid but we also have a good deal that looks at attitudes during the pandemic and, crucially, at what passengers want as we emerge from it. This has allowed us to corroborate many pre-Covid findings and to apply them to the future. It is structured around the main stages involved in planning and making a journey, together with some high-level overarching themes. It is designed to give only an overview of our research and its recommendations – it does not go into detail, but there are links to our research for those who want to dig deeper. We are always willing to engage in discussion and debate, to elaborate on our understanding of passenger needs and how they may best be addressed in the future.

Our aim is to help inform the customer proposition for the new railway – what themes and areas should GBR focus on, what should it deliver and how should it deliver these? It will also act as a checklist against which new structures, processes and delivery can be measured.

¹ [Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail](#). DfT. May 2021

² [Decarbonising Transport. A Better, Greener Britain](#). DfT. 2021

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1. Overall Experience

1.1 Current priorities

Transport Focus's research on priorities for improvement³ and passenger satisfaction continually emphasises the importance of an affordable, punctual, reliable, frequent service on which you can get a seat or, at the very least, stand in comfort.

These form the 'core product' that passengers want to see improved. How well the industry delivers these goes a very long way in determining how passengers view the railway. The core product is key in determining passenger satisfaction – punctuality has the biggest impact on overall satisfaction while how the train company dealt with delays has the biggest impact on overall dissatisfaction⁴. Put simply: if you want happier passengers, run their trains on time.

The bulk of Transport Focus's research on passenger priorities was carried out before the coronavirus pandemic, so it is reasonable to ask whether Covid has changed these. More recent research suggests not^{5 6 7}. The core product is just as important now as before and punctuality is still the biggest driver of overall satisfaction⁸, but there is an added emphasis on personal safety⁹ and cleanliness. There is also a much more heightened awareness of personal space (or lack of) on board trains¹⁰.

It is too early to say whether these represent a permanent change in attitudes or whether they will decline as people get used to a new Covid-normal – to some extent this will depend on an individual's general response to Covid. Transport Focus's *Travel during Covid-19 survey*¹¹ and our 'segmentation'¹² reports provide an insight into how divided views remain on Covid, with some passengers 'back to normal', but

³ [Rail Passengers' Priorities for Improvement](#). Transport Focus. 2020

⁴ [National Rail Passenger Survey \(NRPS\)](#). Transport Focus.

⁵ [Rail and bus priorities: Transport User Community](#). Transport Focus. November 2020

⁶ [Returning to rail: What passengers want?](#) Transport Focus July 2021

⁷ Wales and Western CP7 Business Plan. Transport Focus. 2022

⁸ [What drives rail passenger satisfaction?](#) Transport Focus. 2021

⁹ [Perceptions of safety on public transport. Key drivers analysis](#). Transport Focus. January 2020

¹⁰ [Understanding attitudes to social distancing and face coverings on public transport report](#).

Transport Focus. July 2021

¹¹ [Travel during Covid-19](#). [weekly/fortnightly survey of travel behaviour and attitudes]. Transport Focus

¹² [Segmentation analysis breaks the Travel during Covid-19 research into five groups according to key behaviours and attitudes, including future use of public transport]

others, especially non-users, remaining more cautious. It is clear from these that the railway will have to work hard to get some people back on board.

It is also clear that the railway cannot simply revert to pre-Covid structures and processes. The chaotic timetable change in 2018 – which led to the Williams-Shapps review – showed that the old ways were not working. This also extends to human resources – there were too many instances where driver-shortage or a lack specialist resource led to problems for passengers. The new railway must address recruitment and training – ensuring that people with the right skills are available at the right time in the right place.

The railway must maintain an unrelenting focus on getting the basics right – a punctual, reliable, and for the time being at least, a Covid-safe railway.

The railway must also reassure passengers and give them confidence to travel ‘post Covid’. This includes better information on disruption and the ability to see how crowded services may be.

Delivering these priorities requires a sustained programme of investment in skills, training and leadership across the rail sector.

1.2 Future challenges

In 2012 we explored potential social, economic and technological changes that might influence transport priorities in the longer term¹³. Several key themes were identified, some of which are now clearly emerging.

- A growing and older population.
By 2050, it is projected that one in four people in the UK will be aged 65 years and over - an increase from approximately one in five in 2019¹⁴. This will have an impact on the design and accessibility of services.
- An increasingly 24/7 ‘always on’ environment, heavily dependent on the internet.
The internet has fuelled the ability to work, shop and play at all times of the day. Technology is central to this – people will need access to the internet and their files anytime and anywhere – including when on the train. Being able to ‘do something’ when travelling by train is already recognised as one of the benefits of rail travel – it can be productive time rather than dead time¹⁵. For instance, 30 minutes on the train could give you the opportunity to work, or organise your weekend, update your social media status, stream music, or do your weekly shop.

¹³ [The Future of Transport](#). Transport Focus and Go-Ahead. 2012

¹⁴ [Overview of the UK population](#): January 2021. ONS. 2021

¹⁵ [Rail passengers' travel time use in Great Britain](#). UWE Bristol. 2011

This more seamless, 24/7 environment may blur the distinction between weekdays and weekends and require services later into the evening. It will also depend on good and reliable internet connectivity during a journey – something that our research shows can be decidedly patchy at times¹⁶.

- The need for data to be personalised/filtered.
In an age of information and data overload from media and the internet, there is an increasing desire for filtering and customisation and an expectation that the consumer can shape their own experience. If transport continues to mimic trends seen across many other service industries, people will expect it to provide more personalised information – for example, personalised disruption information, prompts on delay repay compensation, and targeted special offers
- Flexible working and redefining the workplace.
How people work is something brought into sharp focus during Covid. Our research suggests that Covid has accelerated a shift towards hybrid working – with an increase in those expecting to work from home two to three days a week¹⁷. Our work suggests that this is a permanent shift in working patterns rather than a temporary reaction to Covid.

In addition to impacting on timetable and capacity requirements, this could also affect fare structures and railway finances. For instance, it requires season tickets that better match this new, hybrid commuting pattern rather than traditional products that catered to the four-five day a week commuter of old. A decline in commuting volumes will also have an impact on industry revenue and mean more reliance on leisure travel to generate income. However, rail must compete with other modes for this business, meaning an even greater emphasis on quality of service. People will not get the train if it is cheaper, more comfortable and more convenient to drive.

- Urban living.
In 2015 over 40 per cent of the total UK population was based in 11 city regions. Population projections from 2015 to 2025 showed city regions having a higher growth rate than the national average. Greater London, Bristol, the West Midlands and Edinburgh city regions all have higher projected population growth rates than the UK average¹⁸.

Rail is ideally suited to moving high volumes of people in and out of city centres. It remains to be seen how Covid may have changed these predictions. Some may have taken advantage of working from home to move

¹⁶ [Keeping connected: passengers' experience of internet connectivity on Great Britain's railways.](#) 2020

¹⁷ [Future rail commuting survey.](#) Transport Focus. 2021

¹⁸ [Trend Deck 2021: Urbanisation.](#) Gov.uk. June 2021

out of urban centres while others may have stayed put but adopted more of a local focus – i.e. the ‘15-minute city’ concept whereby city residents are able to meet most of their needs within a short walk or bicycle ride from their homes rather than having to journey into the centre.¹⁹

- The growth of the single-person lifestyle.
Between 1997 and 2017 the number of people living on their own went up by 16 per cent to 7.7 million, while the UK population increased by only 13 per cent. By 2039, the number of one-person households is projected to rise to 10.7 million²⁰. There is a basic human need for contact, and this won’t disappear simply because people live alone – if anything one of the net effects of the rise of one-person households could be a desire for more socialising and more frequent activities with others. Rail could have a role in enabling this, but only if timetables provide attractive services that go where people want, at the time they want them.
- The search for value
For decades there has been an expectation that the next generation will, in economic terms, have it better than the last. However, it is increasingly being argued that we have reached an end to this assumption, and that today’s children may have a lower quality of life (for example, in terms of cost of housing, pensions, job security, rising social care costs). Clearly this will not affect everyone, but it will impact on a significant proportion of the population for whom value for money will assume even more significance. People may increasingly want to compare costs by different transport modes and look at what they are getting for their money.
- Environmental pressures – carbon reduction and an ever-increasing focus on sustainability.
Rail has an important part to play in the decarbonisation agenda – both in terms of reducing its own carbon footprint and in facilitating significant shifts from road and air to rail. The latter could be a real challenge given our research on existing travel suggests that sustainability is not a key driver of transport decisions – the challenge will be in putting carbon alongside considerations of cost and convenience²¹.

These longer-term issues may be somewhat outside the control of the railway, but they will have an impact on it. It will be important that future plans take these issues into consideration.

1.3 Accessibility

Disabled passengers have seen improvements to the accessibility of rail services over time, and the industry is progressing. However, there are still some very real

¹⁹ [How '15-minute cities' will change the way we socialise](#). BBC. 2021

²⁰ [The cost of living alone](#). ONS. 2019

²¹ [The journey towards sustainable travel](#). Transport Focus. 2021

barriers and problems to overcome²². Clearly there are many practical barriers, such as the physical design and layout of stations and rolling stock. But it is also about confidence as well: will the train run as planned, will the toilet be open, will staff be there to help, what happens if services are disrupted? This applies to all passengers but the consequences of getting it wrong can be much greater for some disabled passengers.

Covid has also had an impact on confidence. Our research shows a gap between the perceptions of disabled people who had travelled and those who had not – with those travelling feeling that rail was much safer than those not travelling²³. To some extent this gap between experience and perception reflects the efforts public transport operators made to help passengers travel with confidence and feel safe. But it also clearly highlights the scale of the challenge facing operators as they try to persuade people to return to public transport in future.

Better accessibility benefits all passengers, but it also opens new markets and income. In 2014/15 the Department for Work and Pensions estimated that disabled people and their families in the UK had an aggregate annual household income of £249 billion²⁴. The campaign group Purple estimates that the transport sector loses up to £42million each month through not being accessible²⁵.

Specific issues will be covered in the sections that follow but there are some overarching aspirations that it is useful to identify at this point.

- **Engagement**
It is imperative that those with a lived experience of disability are consulted and heavily involved in the design of services.
- **Staff training**
Embedding a culture of 'how can we help' rather than 'are we compliant with the regulations'.
- **Awareness**
Improved awareness of disability, especially non-visible disabilities.

1.4 Non-users

One of our submissions to the Williams Rail Review focused on barriers to travel²⁶. It found that two main factors drive modal choice: cost of the journey and convenience. Cost is invariably a comparison between rail fares and the cost of petrol and parking. Convenience can take many forms: for some it is the overall door-to-door journey time that matters, for others it's comfort, the potential to work/relax while travelling or the ability to travel when they want.

²² [Disabled rail passengers research](#). Transport Focus. 2019

²³ [Accessible transport: unlocking a better normal](#). Transport Focus 2021

²⁴ [The spending power of disabled people and their families in 2014/15](#).

²⁵ <https://wearepurple.org.uk/the-purple-pound-infographic/>

²⁶ [Williams Rail Review – Barriers to travel: How to make rail more attractive to infrequent and non-users](#).

Transport Focus. 2019

In theory, improving value for money and the journey experience for users should also make rail more attractive to non-users – a win-win situation. However, it is not always as simple as looking at the actual cost of travel or the actual journey experience. Perceptions also matter – it can sometimes be the perceived cost of travel or the perceived inconvenience of using rail that forms the barrier – and we routinely find that non-users have a less positive view of the industry than those who use it.

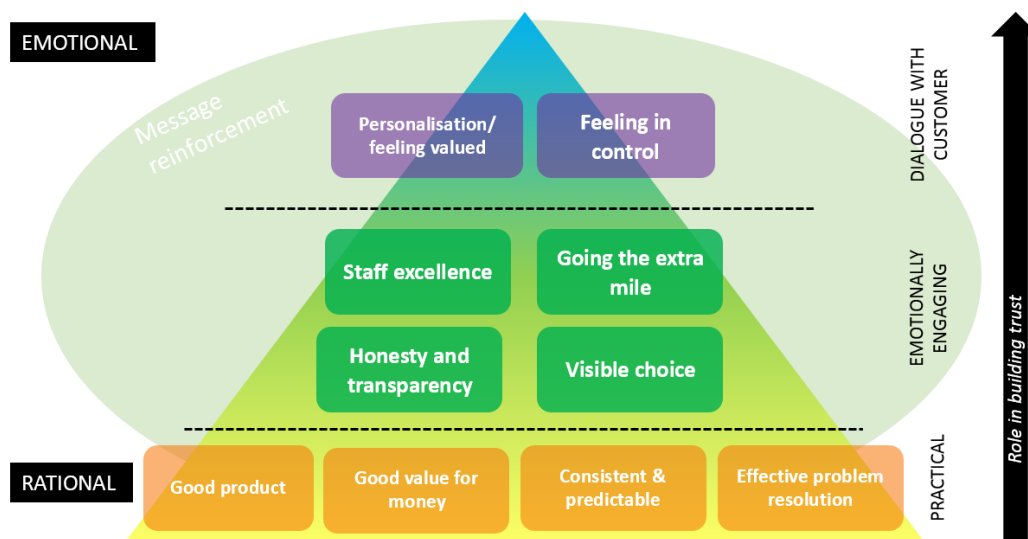
To some extent this perception gap has been exacerbated during the pandemic. Our travel during Covid-19 surveys show that those using services have a better perception of safety than non-users²⁷. Covid has potentially created another barrier to travel alongside costs and convenience.

It is no longer just a case of improving services, it is also a case of communicating these improvements and giving greater reassurance that the experience will be fine.

1.5 Trust

Trust is an issue that appears throughout our research with passengers. It is present in the individual journey segments: when buying tickets ('have I got the best deal?') and in providing information during disruption ('do I believe what you are telling me?'); and it also underpins the overall relationship with passengers²⁸.

Transport Focus first investigated the issue of trust in the rail industry in 2014²⁹. The research showed that the best-performing train companies all had relatively high levels of trust, and low levels of distrust. The report identified a hierarchy of customer needs that underpinned feelings of trust.



²⁷ [Travel during Covid-19](#). Transport Focus.

²⁸ [Williams Rail Review: Trust in train operators: an exploration of issues influencing passenger trust in rail](#). Transport Focus 2019

²⁹ [Passengers' Relationship with the rail industry](#) Transport Focus. 2014

The provision of a dependable, consistent, value for money product is the key building block that underpins everything else. Without this it is hard to form a relationship with passengers – but doing this alone will not be enough. To really unlock the potential requires additional focus on things like honesty and transparency; helpful, visible staff that ‘go the extra mile’; and giving passengers a greater sense of choice and control. It is this combination of rational and more emotive aspects that builds a relationship between the consumer and the ‘brand’.

To build passenger trust GBR should focus on:

- ***doing what it’s supposed to do (getting people where they want to go at the time they expect to get there)***
- ***showing that it cares about customers (having a human sense of treating people well and fairly)***
- ***being seen to have ethics and principles (being a ‘good’ company that has a strong moral compass).***

1.6 Transparency and accountability

It is also important that the railway looks at how something is delivered as well as what is delivered. Passengers want a sense that there is ‘someone’ in charge when it comes to service delivery. They want someone to take overall responsibility for the railway and for this person/body to be accountable for decisions made and the quality of service provided³⁰.

One of the keys to accountability is transparency. Giving rail passengers access to information that matters to them will help them to hold the train company to account and to ask what is being done to improve services in return for the fares they pay. Joint research undertaken by Transport Focus with the Office of Rail and Road (ORR) showed that passengers want punctuality data that is relevant to their journey rather than a company-wide average³¹. Even when they admit it is unlikely they will read it themselves, they see the value in this data being publicly available as it helps keep the operator on its toes. Indeed, the availability of accurate data may help the railway – a particularly bad journey can linger in the memory and distort passengers’ perceptions. Personalised information on things like delays, and compensation entitlements can also help build trust.

The choice of performance metrics, targets and degree of transparency can also influence trust. We strongly endorse the use of the right-time performance measure (on time to within a minute of the scheduled arrival time at every station). Right time better mirrors passengers’ own perceptions of punctuality³². Counting trains as on time when they are late plays badly to passengers, many of whom are already suspicious of statistics from their train company. Right time also has the benefit of being easily understood, and therefore trusted, by passengers. It is also a

³⁰ [The structure of the rail industry. What do passengers think?](#) Transport Focus. 2019.

³¹ [Putting rail information in the public domain.](#) Transport Focus and ORR. May 2011

³² [Train punctuality: the passenger perspective.](#) Transport Focus and ORR. 2015

straightforward concept that rail staff can understand and clearly see how their efforts contribute to delivering it.

The railway must embed a culture of transparency – making information available to users in a shape and form that is relevant to them, and which allows them to hold operators to account.

However, an element of transparency is not enough on its own. Passengers also want a sense that their voice matters and that the person/body in charge is actually listening to them. Passengers should not be the passive recipients, in a 'done to' sense, of major decisions made on their behalf behind closed doors.

Our 'passenger power' report³³ in 2013 argued for a much-increased voice for passengers in franchise replacements. Passengers wanted to be consulted on what services were to be provided and, once this had been completed, a clear statement of what they could expect from the franchisee. They also wanted their voice to count through the life of the franchise – a way that they could voice their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with services in a meaningful way.

Much of this was taken on board. Public consultation and stakeholder events allowed passengers a greater voice in the specification of franchises. Operators had to provide performance reports for passengers – though there was still plenty of room for improvement in this regard³⁴ - and passenger satisfaction targets (using Transport Focus's independent National Rail Passenger Survey, NRPS) were embedded in each franchise³⁵.

It will be important that the new railway continues to give passengers a voice within the Passenger Service Contracts that are replacing franchises:

- ***consult on what services are to be provided, and to what standard***
- ***give a clear statement of any commitments and targets, and then issue regular progress reports against these***
- ***use passenger satisfaction and other passenger-centric measures.***

1.7 Engagement

The culture of engagement has undoubtedly improved in recent years. This needs to continue. Transport Focus research constantly demonstrates the value of involving passengers and the resulting benefits that accrue to the industry. Research on engineering work on the Brighton Main Line upgrade³⁶, Derby resignalling³⁷ and Kings Cross station³⁸ shows that giving passengers timely, accurate information can improve satisfaction levels with the way that planned disruption was managed.

³³ [Giving Passengers a Voice in Rail Services](#). Transport Focus 2013

³⁴ [What passengers want from Customer Reports](#). Transport Focus. 2015

³⁵ [National Rail Passenger Survey](#). Transport Focus

³⁶ [Brighton Main Line Improvement Project – the passenger perspective](#). Transport Focus. September 2019

³⁷ [Derby resignalling works](#). Transport Focus. March 2019

³⁸ [Kings cross station closure](#). Transport Focus. February 2020

Higher awareness of disruption also leads to greater acceptance of the alternatives – passengers can cope better with disruption and bus replacements if they have been able to plan for it.

Other good examples surround the design of new rolling stock. Transport Focus worked with Merseytravel to gather passenger input throughout the entire design process³⁹. The result is a train that better meets the needs of those who will use it.

Engagement should not just be reserved for the big set-piece projects above. The railway needs to better understand its customers so it can communicate more effectively. As well as facilitating better marketing and problem resolution, this could also involve engaging passengers on decisions affecting their services – for instance, contacting passengers who have opted in to ask for feedback on proposed changes to their home station. This could also help improve levels of trust.

There is a clear benefit to involving passengers, and their representatives, in the decision-making process. As well as those examples outlined above, this should also include the 30-year strategic vision, five-year business plans, the specification of rail contracts/concessions as well as station design. We welcome the emphasis in the Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail on improving engagement.

The community rail movement has an important role here. The Community Rail Network's report into social inclusion shows how community rail partnerships can also be catalysts for growth and participation⁴⁰.

The report shows that the benefits being realised through community rail activities are far broader than boosting passenger numbers alone. It helps different groups access rail travel and links people who may otherwise be marginalised or disadvantaged to greater opportunities for employment, education and recreation.

They also promote more affordable access to rail by increasing understanding of ticketing and, in a few cases, work with train operators to directly develop, manage and promote discounted travel schemes. Examples include the Settle-Carlisle Railway's Dales Railcard, offering discounts on the line for local residents, and Devon and Cornwall Rail Partnership's carnet ticket scheme on the Tarka Line, providing more affordable travel for families and part-time workers. Outreach, engaging and educating people about how rail 'works' and how to access the network seems to hold great potential for widening and increasing the customer base.

The railway must embed a culture of engaging passengers on decisions that matter to them – for example, timetables, engineering works, new rolling stock or station upgrades. This is especially important when it comes to accessibility.

³⁹ [New trains for the Merseyrail Network – What passengers want](#). Transport Focus. February 2021

⁴⁰ [Community Rail & Social Inclusion](#). Community Rail Network.. 2018

Planning journeys

Transport Focus's research suggests there are two key aspects to planning journeys: original research (checking routes, fares, options and so on) and checking to see if a pre-planned or a regular journey is running as it should.

Our work suggests that websites and apps are the starting point for many when planning a journey. Passengers want them to give clear information on which they can make an informed decision, use language that they understand and instil confidence (including that they have bought the right ticket)⁴¹.

Rail has traditionally operated on the basis that the timetable is correct 12 weeks before any given date (T-12), with reservations on particular trains – and therefore Advance tickets – available on a 12-week booking horizon. Our most recent research⁴², shows that 12 weeks ahead remains the timeframe passengers would expect the timetable to be correct. For some passengers being able to confirm plans earlier than 12 weeks is desirable and would help rail compete with airlines. In short, the railway needs to restore Informed Traveller T-12 as quickly as practicable while continuing to explore options for earlier than that date.

Irrespective of any decision to sell tickets against an unconfirmed timetable, the Smarter Information Smarter Journeys Programme initiatives in this area must be delivered. The key ones are intended to reduce the number of instances in which passengers buy tickets for trains that are subsequently cancelled or retimed, and if that does occur to let passengers know in advance so they can review their options.

Putting more data into the public domain can also help with journey planning^{43 & 44}. Punctuality and crowding data can help determine choice of train or time of journey amongst those who have flexibility when they travel – it can also help to manage expectations of those who do not have such flexibility. The importance of websites and apps showing how crowded trains are was also something highlighted in research on travel during Covid – where 'space' moved from being a comfort factor to a personal safety factor⁴⁵.

Good journey-planning tools can help to empower consumers and to build trust in the system.

2.1 Non-users

Clarity and ease of use also come through as a key issue when speaking to those who do not use rail, or who do so infrequently. Transport Focus's research^{46 & 47}

⁴¹ [Ticket Retailing Website Usability](#). Transport Focus. 2011

⁴² [Communicating with passengers about engineering works during the pandemic: Research among passengers on the West Coast Main Line and at Bristol](#). Transport Focus. December 2021]

⁴³ [Putting rail information in the public domain](#). Transport Focus. 2011

⁴⁴ [Presenting 'right-time' performance information to rail passengers](#). Transport Focus. 2013

⁴⁵ [Transport User Community – website and crowding information](#). Transport Focus

⁴⁶ [Integrated Transport – perception and reality](#). Transport Focus. 2010

⁴⁷ [Transport Integration in Scotland](#). Transport Focus. 2014

shows that the main barriers to increased rail use are an assumption that the door-to-door journey would take longer, a belief that using rail would cause extra “hassle” compared to using the car, and the perceived cost of the ticket. Non-users tend to over-estimate the negatives – such as journeys that take longer, cost more or are less punctual than they actually are.

Good journey-planning information and transparent reporting of performance can help to challenge negative perceptions among non-users.

2.2 Disruption

Information on planned disruption is another key requirement during the journey planning stage. Passengers need to know if there is engineering work causing extended journey times or bus replacements. Ensuring that passengers know in advance of buying a ticket or are informed far enough out that they can plan around the disruption is key to managing expectations on the day⁴⁸. However, even with better information it remains a fact that bus replacement services are unpopular and can deter people from travelling. Research in 2012 found that most passengers would rather the train was diverted than get a replacement bus – even if it took up to 30 minutes longer than the bus⁴⁹.

Being able to rely on the information provided is also an essential component of trust. Systems that show trains as running when it is known that they will not is a sure-fire way of undermining that trust, especially when passengers are still able to buy tickets for those trains.

Information is also essential during unplanned disruption. Our work on passenger priorities shows that keeping passengers informed when there is disruption is one of the top priorities for improvement. The impact of not doing so can be seen in passenger satisfaction results where managing delays is typically the highest driver of overall dissatisfaction with the journey. While this is perhaps more directed at passengers already at the station or on the train, there is scope for systems to alert passengers before they leave home or work. The emphasis is, again, on empowering passengers.

Different sources of information are accessed or available at various journey stages, each driving a different information experience. Before arriving at the departure station, digital and broadcast media are used most, while at stations it is announcements and displays that are the main sources of information. Staff provide a valuable source of information during disruption.

Passengers want personalised information (‘what does the delay mean to me’) so that they can rearrange meetings, alert family members and so on. Train companies already have contact details of some people who have booked train-specific tickets from websites and apps, so they have the means to get in touch with a personalised

⁴⁸ [Planned rail engineering work – the passenger perspective](#). Transport Focus. 2015

⁴⁹ [Rail passengers’ experiences and priorities during engineering works](#). Transport Focus. 2012

message⁵⁰. There is obvious value in also being able to contact people who have purchased via third-party retailers – a way should be found to link these systems. Social media (Twitter) is also increasingly used by passengers who value the fact that it offers more of a 24/7 facility and, crucially, allows advice to be personalised⁵¹. However it is received, accurate, timely information can help to empower passengers during such times.

The railway must improve the way it provides information during planned and unplanned disruption. The new railway must generate a culture (and implement processes and systems) where providing poor information is seen as simply unacceptable.

The rail industry should make concerted efforts to use replacement buses only as a last resort. Options involving less impact on passengers (such as overnight working, single line working, and diverting around) must be considered first.

2.3 Accessibility and booking assistance

Many disabled passengers report a lack of confidence with journey planning. This reflects the range of potentially significant challenges that can face disabled travellers in unfamiliar situations (such as problems with station accessibility, availability of assistance or availability of seating). To mitigate these challenges, journeys are planned, often meticulously, to ensure that the passenger has enough energy, resources, time and medication to complete them successfully. This can include travelling outside peak hours, booking ahead, ensuring ample time is available for any eventualities (changing trains, getting to and from the station) and use of apps for ‘real time’ and detailed information⁵².

This requires:

- ***websites that are easily navigable, provide clear information and use language that is easily understood***
- ***up-to-date, trusted details about facilities at stations and en route - this is even more relevant with an increasingly ageing population***
- ***staff who have access to the latest information.***

For some disabled passengers boarding a train is not possible without some form of assistance. Passengers have the right to turn up and ask for assistance on the day but at some stations this can result in a longer wait while help arrives. Passengers can also book assistance in advance, using the ‘Passenger Assist’ service.

This service has been available for some time, but awareness is still low⁵³. Transport Focus’s research found that some disabled passengers doubted their entitlement to

⁵⁰ [Passenger information when trains are disrupted](#). Transport Focus. 2014

⁵¹ [Short and Tweet. How passengers want social media during disruption](#). Transport Focus. 2012

⁵² [Disabled rail passengers research](#). Transport Focus. 2019

⁵³ [Research into passenger awareness of assisted travel services](#). ORR. 2017

use it. Those with non-visible disabilities seemed reluctant to use assistance because they felt unjustified in doing so. Others felt guilty about using assistance services, believing that resources should be reserved for 'more deserving' cases.

Assistance services can make a very positive impact on disabled passengers' journey experience and individuals' confidence about travelling by train. Research by the Office of Rail and Road (ORR) showed that over two thirds of people using it would not have been able to travel without it⁵⁴. There were many reports of assistance staff (and indeed, staff more generally) being supportive, helpful and 'going the extra mile.' That said, there were (thankfully rare) examples of passenger assistance failing, leaving disabled passengers in difficult and sometimes distressing circumstances such as being left on the train at a terminus, or not being met at a station.

The ORR research shows a high level of satisfaction with the service. However, passengers with 'learning or concentrating' issues were least satisfied with how well staff assisting them understood their particular needs and staff being knowledgeable and proficient in how to assist them.

The railway must promote awareness of Passenger Assist, especially to those who do not feel entitled to use it. It should also ensure that staff are fully trained in supporting and working with those who have non-visible disabilities - and seek feedback on the delivery of assistance after every booking.

2. Getting a ticket

3.1 Value for money

Transport Focus research shows that better value for money is one of the top priorities for improvement among all rail passengers, whether for commuting, business or leisure travel. This is not all down to price – it is clear from previous research that judgements about value are influenced heavily by train punctuality and the ability to get a seat⁵⁵. But clearly price matters too.

Passenger satisfaction with value for money can vary. The availability of cheaper Advance fares means that good value deals are available on some routes for people able to plan ahead and sacrifice flexibility. The availability of Advance fares on the day of travel can also help in some instances. However, not everyone can trade flexibility for price – some will still need to travel at peak times, and some will still require a 'walk-up' railway rather than nominating a specific train. Such tickets will still need to be affordable (in a way that current long-distance Anytime fares, and some Off-Peak fares, are not).

⁵⁴ [ORR research into passenger experiences of assisted travel](#). ORR. 2017-2021

⁵⁵ [Fares and Ticketing Study - Appendix A - Understanding drivers of satisfaction](#). Transport Focus. 2009

One of the key issues facing the rail industry is the extent to which the commuting market will recover from the coronavirus pandemic. Our research suggests that hybrid working is here to stay – with an increase in those expecting to work from home two to three days a week⁵⁶. Those ‘captive commuters’, who had no real option but to travel, now have more discretion. It already looks, for example, as if a Tuesday-Thursday pattern is emerging with demand being much lower on Mondays and Fridays.

These changing commuting patterns will have an impact on ticketing. People will want to buy new products that match how they want to travel rather than rely on annual season tickets as they used to. The new flexi-season ticket is a positive first step towards this. Our research showed that people value the flexibility that such a ticket offers – indeed, when asked what improvements they would make to it, many passengers ranked additional flexibility slightly higher than increasing the level of discount⁵⁷. Changing patterns may also require a review of peak times and restrictions. For instance, if demand is low on a Friday should peak restrictions be relaxed to generate more business?

A move away from commuting would also place additional importance on the leisure market. However, leisure travel is much more discretionary by nature and people often have a choice of modes - meaning that the railway will have to compete for this business rather than relying on the captive commuter turning up each day. This places a renewed emphasis on providing value for money and on quality of service – if people do not like the service provided, they will choose another mode.

Disabled passengers view value for money in much the same way as non-disabled passengers. However, many are not aware of existing discounts available – either through the Disabled Person’s Railcard, for blind or visually-impaired passengers travelling with a companion, or passengers who stay in their own wheelchair during a journey. Greater awareness of these could help to improve value for money.

Fares and ticketing systems should offer:

- ***affordable flexibility:***
 - ***preserve the walk-up element of rail travel.***
 - ***the ability to trade flexibility for price – but with the caveat that flexibility remains affordable***
 - ***the ability to exchange/change tickets prior to departure at no/minimal cost***
 - ***easy to obtain a refund for an unused ticket (where applicable).***

- ***greater personalisation***
 - ***the ability to buy the right product that matches the way I want to travel***

⁵⁶ [Future rail commuting survey](#). Transport Focus. 2021

⁵⁷ [Flexi season ticket survey](#). Transport Focus. 2021

- ***the ability to 'bundle' other purchases into the transaction if I wish – for example multi-modal elements, food/drink, car parking.***
- ***consumer confidence and trust***
 - ***promote awareness of discounts and offers***
 - ***price promise – coupled with refunds if overpaid***
 - ***if a passenger has a ticket that is not valid for the train they boarded, the sum paid already should count towards the new ticket they need to buy***
 - ***price capping – meaning caps for travel at a fixed amount (for example Oyster/pay as you go in London)***
 - ***good awareness of, and easy to claim, compensation for delays.***

3.2 Fare structure

Many passengers see the current fare structure as complicated and confusing⁵⁸. It is hard to explain, for example, why an off-peak return may be only 10p or £1 more expensive than a single. It is even harder to explain split ticketing - how can a combination of tickets be cheaper than a through ticket? Split ticketing has become the elephant in the room when it comes to trust. Websites and apps have made this increasingly mainstream – people should not need tips and tricks to know they are getting the best deal and should not find themselves paying radically different prices to travel based on where and how they bought their ticket.

Problems with the fare structure can be exacerbated for disabled passengers. For example, those with cognitive or intellectual impairments can find the range of choices particularly difficult to understand and the language of ticketing difficult to penetrate⁵⁹.

A simpler fare structure will help everyone. But simplicity should not be used as an argument to severely limit choice. If the product range is good and/or you can personalise products, then people will be willing to accept some complexity in exchange for more choice and easy ways to buy. The key will be in providing clear information at the point of purchase.

Single-leg pricing is one of the keys to unlocking better value travel for passengers. It is logical, transparent and easy to understand. It does away with the confusion of the 10p or £1 difference between some singles and returns and also enables passengers to pay only for the level of flexibility they need. It allows passengers on longer distance services to mix and match ticket types. For example, in not having to buy a fully flexible Anytime return when they plan to return during the Off-peak, or in combining an Advance fare for the outward leg (when the time of travel is known) with a more flexible ticket for the return.

Research by the Rail Delivery Group (in association with Transport Focus) found an

⁵⁸ [Fares and Ticketing Study](#). Transport Focus. February 2009

⁵⁹ [Disabled rail passengers research](#). Transport Focus. 2019

overwhelming desire for a root and branch reform⁶⁰. There was a real desire for new products that match the way that people want to travel today rather than the mid-1990s when fares regulation was established.

This will require a root and branch assessment of current regulation. Current regulation creates inflexibility – for example in preventing the railway selling otherwise empty seats at discounted prices. This isn't an argument for complete de-regulation, more a case of replacing it with something more fit for purpose.

We recognise the financial pressures facing Government and the railway, but it is important that fares reform is not forgotten. Post-Covid, the railway is going to have to work hard to reassure and attract passengers. It faces challenges in doing this: as the take-up of electric vehicles accelerates, the marginal cost of using a private car will fall dramatically; and many previously captive commuters will now have more flexibility to work from home. A simple, easy and trustworthy fares structure has the capacity to address these and unlock the railway's potential.

Transport Focus would like to see a new fare structure that offers:

- ***an easier to understand structure***
 - ***remove anomalies/ inconsistencies: for example two singles may or may not be more expensive than a return***
 - ***provide relevant information at all points of purchase (station, ticket vending machine, web, app) – such that people know what they are buying (price, validities, restrictions and seat reservations)***
 - ***resolve 'split ticketing' – the biggest elephant in the room when it comes to consumer confidence and trust.***

- ***a system that can cater to national and local needs (one size does not fit all)***
 - ***a range of national products to ensure some consistency and to generate a sense of 'network' (which is how most passengers still see the railway)***
 - ***local/regional products that meet the needs of that community (such as local authority products, and community rail offers)***
 - ***the ability to use fares to stimulate demand/fill up seats where there is spare capacity and to attract non-users to rail.***

3.3 Retailing

Issues with how tickets are sold can also lower passengers' confidence in having bought the cheapest or best ticket for the journey they are making. For instance, the sheer volume of information presented at times by a ticket vending machine can be overwhelming and difficult to decode⁶¹ and in some instances they will still not offer

⁶⁰ [Easier fares for all](#). RDG. 2019

⁶¹ [Ticket Vending Machine Usability](#). Transport Focus 2010.

passengers the best deal or sell all products⁶². This uncertainty means that passengers can end up buying a more expensive ticket than they need, or worse, landing themselves in trouble with the train company by purchasing a ticket that is not valid for their journey. Passengers must not be penalised because a ticket machine does not sell the ticket they want.

Given these complexities it is natural that many passengers choose to speak to, and make a purchase from, ticket office staff. Staff will usually ask some basic questions such as destination, day and time of travel and, where appropriate, route/operator, and then offer a narrowed-down range of options. In essence the ticket clerk navigates the passenger through the decisionmaking process, instead of passengers having to work things out for themselves.

That is not to say, however, that such staff should always be based in a ticket office – it is the presence of someone who can help when needed that is important⁶³. The proportion of sales from ticket offices is undoubtedly declining as more people shift to digital sources but until fares and ticketing is made much simpler there are still many people who will continue to rely on staff to help them.

Ticket machines can be particularly challenging for some disabled passengers. They are not always accessible for wheelchair users, those with dexterity impairments, dyslexia, learning disabilities, and vision impairments. Given the above, many disabled passengers prefer to use the ticket office or book online⁶⁴. Passengers using the Passenger Assist app should also be able to book tickets when arranging their journey – at present this is not possible, it can be done only over the phone or in person.

Transparent and fair ticket retailing is not just a ‘nice to have’ aspiration - there is a legal side to this too. Consumer law dictates that retailers should provide enough information for the consumer to make an informed decision on what to buy. This includes information about permitted routes and validity restrictions.

Digital or smart ticketing is often seen as being quicker and easier to use and, through the use of price capping/best fare guarantees, as potentially saving money⁶⁵. One of its key benefits, however, is in the way it could allow for new, tailored products to be introduced – for instance, the new flexi-season tickets introduced recently. Equally, technology offers additional fulfilment opportunities whether this be via an app, mobile phone or contactless smart/bank card⁶⁶.

⁶² [Improving ticket vending machines at stations](#) – letter and presentation to Claire Perry, transport minister. Transport Focus. December 2014

⁶³ Passenger views on rail ticket retailing. Transport Focus. 2022

⁶⁴ [Disabled rail passengers research](#). Transport Focus. 2019

⁶⁵ [Smart ticketing in the north: what do passengers think?](#) Transport Focus. 2016

⁶⁶ [Smart ticketing - contactless payment for rail](#). Transport Focus. 2014

Digital and pay as you go ticketing is attractive to many but not everyone has access to a smartphone or has a bank account that allows contactless/digital payment. If rail is to remain inclusive it will still need to provide a safety net for such customers.

Transport Focus would like to see an improved retailing system that makes it easy to buy:

- ***choice of outlets: how I want, when I want***
- ***broad consistency of retail terms and conditions across purchase methods***
- ***expansion of digital channels and pay as you go/contactless ticketing – but with the caveat that a safety net remains for those who cannot/will not move to digital.***

3. Getting to the station

In general, when passengers decide what mode of transport to take, they are swayed by three key factors: how convenient will the journey be, how much will it cost and how long will it take. This applies to the whole door-to-door journey rather than just the rail element. Improving access to stations could therefore help increase rail usage and provide additional revenue.

At some stations the solution may be better walking or cycling provision, at others it may be bus connections or car parking. For this reason, Transport Focus supports the concept of Station Travel Plans that identify bespoke needs at each station.

A one-size-fits-all approach will not work – the new railway should maintain the Station Travel Plan concept (or something similar) which assesses the needs of passengers (and potential users) at individual stations.

4.1 Active travel

Walking and cycling to the station has obvious benefits for the environment as well as personal health.

It will be important that stations offer secure cycle parking facilities – and potentially at some point charging facilities for e-bikes. Tie-ins with businesses hiring and/or maintaining bikes also has potential in some locations. The Williams-Shapps review was also clear in wanting it to be easier to take bikes on trains, outside peak commuting hours.

The railway will also have to consider how e-scooters, already prevalent on parts of the network, are properly managed.

Active travel will also require a focus on personal security – not just at the station but on the approaches to stations. For example, working with local authorities to ensure that main walking routes are accessible and well-lit or in providing safe cycle routes.

The railway must think further beyond the boundary of the train company lease area or Network Rail land ownership.

The railway must continue to work with other bodies to promote better access to stations – for example, with local authorities on things like secure active travel routes to stations.

4.2 Bus

There is scope for tying rail and bus timetables into tighter, more mutually supportive arrangements. There is clearly a limit to what the railway can achieve on its own but it should encourage as far as possible improved co-ordination of bus and rail timetables. The advent of the new national bus strategy⁶⁷, designed to improve the interface between local authorities and bus companies, should help with this in England.

The existing PlusBus scheme provides a degree of rail-bus ticket integration. Our research in 2015 showed that those who used it were satisfied with it but that there were relatively low levels of awareness in general⁶⁸. The railway should work with Traveline, the new custodian of PlusBus, to develop the product. In particular, help push forward current plans for a digital ticket that can be bought online and shown to the bus driver – addressing one of the historic problems that PlusBus cannot be purchased on the bus.

The railway should improve the way it markets through journeys to scheduled bus services that appear in rail retailing systems. Improvements are needed to the way bus times are updated, including for seasonal service changes, and in some locations making the transfer from station to bus as seamless as possible.

Other aspects include interchange facilities at stations. For instance, are bus stops provided and are they situated in the optimum position, are the walking routes from the bus stop to the railway station clearly signed, do they offer level access, and is the link secure and well lit?

The railway must continue to work on bus/rail integration improvements, such as:

- ***working with bus companies or local authorities so buses stop at a train station if they pass it, or to alter routes slightly to ensure buses pass railway stations***
- ***working with bus companies or local authorities to alter existing schedules to help buses meet certain morning and evening peak hour trains (potentially including some guaranteed connections)***
- ***displaying bus information at rail stations and train information at certain bus stops/stations***
- ***combined rail/bus tickets***

⁶⁷ [Bus Back Better](#). DfT. March 2021

⁶⁸ [PlusBus user research report](#). Transport Focus. 2015

- **creation of bus links to complement the network. This could be either linking one railway to another or forming a ‘virtual branch line’.**

4.3 Car parking

For many rail passengers driving to the station remains the most viable and practical means of accessing the railway. Bus services may end too early in the evening or not be provided at weekends or fears over personal security or bad weather may inhibit active travel. For these reasons, car parking facilities at stations remain important. Going forward, station car parks can also provide options for enhanced electric charging facilities.

Our research⁶⁹ suggests that:

- a lack of car parking space could actually suppress overall demand for rail.
- if passengers couldn’t park at their station some would drive to the next station or drive all the way to the destination - the net effect being to increase car use. Some would also travel earlier in order to get a space – which then further adds to congestion on board the train by virtue of getting people to travel at busier periods when they don’t need to.

Station Travel Plans will need to consider car parking capacity. This should include where parking provision needs boosting and where under-utilised capacity could be better used for things like enhanced cycle facilities. They should also look at the provision of adequate drop off/pick up facilities at stations.

Cost of parking is also an issue for passengers⁷⁰. Parking is clearly another source of income for the railway, but it is important to ensure that it does not make the total journey cost so high as to deter travel. There is scope for ‘bundling’ ticket and car parking prices - and in doing so offering a discount to rail users which is not available to non-rail users parking for other reasons. This might help to preserve capacity for rail users.

Car parking can also play a valuable role for disabled rail passengers. The provision of blue-badge spaces close to station entrances can help to make rail more accessible.

The railway should engage with the Office for Zero Emissions Vehicles to assess the extent to which passengers are likely to demand the facility to charge an electric vehicle while parked at a railway station. This could be particularly advantageous for those who cannot charge their vehicle at home.

It is right for the railway to facilitate and encourage people to get to the station sustainably, but there is still a valuable role for station car parks. Otherwise, some people will simply drive the whole way. It will be important that the railway assesses needs on a station-by-station basis.

⁶⁹ [Getting to the station](#). Transport Focus. 2007

⁷⁰ [Parking at the station](#). Transport Focus. 2010

4.4 Park and ride

In 2020 Transport Focus explored user and non-user views about how park and ride schemes could help to reduce the number of car journeys on the motorways and 'A' roads managed by National Highways – the strategic road network (SRN)⁷¹.

One of the barriers identified was a lack of awareness of such schemes and the benefits they could bring, especially if it offers a faster overall journey time. In some instances a rail-based park and ride will give a faster end-to-end journey than a bus/coach-based scheme and so has potential to be an attractive alternative to driving all the way.

The railway should explore the potential for park and ride options with National Highways and work with the organisation to review the adequacy of signage from the SRN to railways stations close to the road network.

4. At the station/on the platform

Transport Focus expects stations to be welcoming and convenient, providing an inclusive, safe gateway to the railway and to the town/place of destination.

5.1 Facilities

It is difficult to generalise passenger attitudes to stations as facilities and upkeep can differ from location to location, and passengers can have different needs according to the type of journey they are making. But there are some common themes that consistently appear in our research.

The provision of accurate and timely information at stations was the highest station-based priority for improvement in our 2020 research. However, we also asked passengers an additional, more detailed, set of questions about station facilities. That revealed a pragmatic approach from passengers with the emphasis on improving basic station amenities: toilets, seating and shelter on platforms⁷².

Bespoke research at major stations revealed similar issues. At Euston station the provision of information during times of disruption, real-time information about train times/ platforms and toilet facilities were the top three priorities for improvement⁷³. At Glasgow Queen Street it was seating/waiting areas and toilets⁷⁴; and for Edinburgh Waverley it was platform information and information during disruption⁷⁵.

There is a passenger dividend from improvement work. In 2013 we published research looking at how station improvements boosted passenger satisfaction⁷⁶. It

⁷¹ [Park and ride for Highway's England's roads: a solution to congestion?](#) Transport Focus. 2020

⁷² [Rail passengers' priorities for improvement](#). 2020 [Station priorities slide 111 onwards of Agency Report]

⁷³ [Improving Euston Station](#). Transport Focus. 2011

⁷⁴ [Glasgow Queen Street Station Redevelopment](#). Transport Focus. 2015

⁷⁵ [Edinburgh Waverley Station Improvements](#). Transport Focus. 2014

⁷⁶ [National Station Improvement Programme](#). Transport Focus and Network Rail. 2012

focused on several medium-sized stations and demonstrated that improvements give a clear boost to passenger satisfaction, especially when the improvements are centred on passengers' key areas of concern. A separate analysis of passenger satisfaction scores for major stations also showed an uplift in satisfaction scores after major upgrade work⁷⁷.

Passenger research tends to highlight the importance of basic station amenities: toilets, seating and shelter on platforms. The new railway must set out how it intends to address these.

5.2 Information and wayfinding

Customer Information Systems (CIS) at stations play an important part in keeping people informed. Our work shows that CIS screens generally perform well in meeting passengers' needs because they provide confirmation of departure time, platform number, destination and calling points and act as a focal point for passengers entering a station⁷⁸.

Passengers also welcomed what is seen as a broadly 'standard' approach to CIS design across the network – it being something that provided a degree of reassurance/continuity when in an unfamiliar station. Many passengers also like the summary boards/fastest train information at busy stations. Passengers like the clarity provided by newer white on black screen designs and would welcome their rollout as investment continues to replace and improve current provision.

Announcements are also important. However, it remains crucial that the information is accurate and consistent with the display boards. Staff need to have effective tools to ensure they have the most accurate information and can advise passengers who frequently look to them for reassurance⁷⁹.

Wayfinding at stations is also important. It is important to have good signage denoting toilets and other facilities and for easily navigable routes to platforms.

Information becomes particularly important during disruption. Passengers want accurate, timely information about delays. There is a strong need to know what is happening, how long the delay will be, what the problem is, and what alternatives there might be, so that passengers can make other plans if necessary. Information needs to be (literally) up-to-the-minute, as lack of information contributes to stress and a sense of powerlessness.

Accurate timely information about trains in general and specifically about delays is one of passengers' top priorities.

⁷⁷ [Improving stations: improving passenger satisfaction](#). Transport Focus. 2016

⁷⁸ Passenger Information Screens and railway stations. Transport Focus. [2014](#) and [2021](#)

⁷⁹ [Passenger information when trains are disrupted](#). Transport Focus. 2014

5.3 Personal security

Most passengers tell us they are broadly satisfied with their personal security at the station – of those that weren't, the main cause was the antisocial behaviour of other passengers. This ranged from people putting feet on seats or playing music loudly to drunken/rowdy behaviour⁸⁰. Covid has now added a new focus to perceptions of personal safety.

Much has been done by the railway to improve personal security at stations. Good lighting, CCTV, clear sightlines, help points and a well-maintained environment can all help. But passengers still value a visible staff presence across the network⁸¹. The latter provides reassurance, helping enhance passenger perceptions of personal security and acting as a deterrent to crime and disorder.

The railway must continue its focus on improving personal security. As well as a traditional focus on addressing antisocial behaviour it must also factor in elements of Covid safety.

5.4 Accessibility

Many disabled passengers anticipate problems at railway stations, even if things do not often go wrong. Navigating through stations (particularly large, major stations) can be difficult and can involve expending considerable emotional and physical energy. Without the necessary aids, assistance and guidance, some passengers can get lost, exhausted and confused⁸².

The gap between the train and the platform (platform train interface) is another 'pain point', especially for passengers with reduced mobility. The industry must work to achieve level-boarding across the network to allow disabled passengers greater independence to travel.

The solution relies on a combination of infrastructure improvements and changes to rolling stock procurement policy. For example, as seen with Merseyrail's upgrade of platforms and rolling stock, and with Greater Anglia's new rolling stock which has a retractable step to bridge the gap between train and platform. At core Thameslink stations, platform humps have been installed at fixed train locations to provide level boarding for passengers with reduced mobility. It will also be essential to review the step-gap when introducing any new rolling stock or as part of any cascade of existing stock onto a route.

In July 2021 the Government announced an audit of all train stations as part of its National Disability Strategy. The findings will form a new public database so people can plan their journeys and navigate stations with a higher degree of certainty. This will include information on the size of the gap between platform and train. Having created this, it will be imperative that the information is kept up to date. One of the

⁸⁰ [Passenger perceptions of personal security on the railway](#). Transport Focus. 2016

⁸¹ [Passenger perceptions of personal security on the railway](#). Transport Focus. 2016

⁸² [Disabled rail passengers research](#). Transport Focus. 2019.

criticisms of the current 'stations made easy'⁸³ database is that it does not always accurately reflect the situation on the ground.

Many disabled passengers often meticulously plan their journeys, arriving at the station early to allow for problems. As a result, they may spend more time in the station than many other passengers. Given this, the availability of amenities including seating, refreshments and accessible toilets become particularly important. The problem can be exacerbated where facilities are locked out of use when the station is unstaffed, meaning they are useless to those who might need them the most.

Disabled passengers need accurate, precise information about the facilities and services available at stations. This must be kept up to date – with any failures (such as toilets being out of order) being loaded into journey planners and other live systems as soon as possible.

5.5 Staffing

In much of our research there is a consistent message coming through about staff at stations: passengers like and value having staff around⁸⁴.

While the proportion of ticket sales made at ticket office windows is declining, it is clear that some passengers still place great value on the guidance and reassurance that staff are able to offer when making a ticket selection. This is a symptom of a complicated and confusing fares and ticketing structure.

Although staff may not be the first port of call for basic information about straightforward delays, passengers do turn to staff when the information screens and recorded announcements prove to be inaccurate or they do not trust what they are seeing, and when more tailored/detailed information is required.

A visible staff presence across the network also helps passengers feel safer⁸⁵. Regardless of their job title, all customer-facing staff should be trained in the skills required to demonstrate through their presence that the railway is a managed environment at all times. Providing reassurance to passengers should be part of the 'day job' for railway staff.

Passengers are not unrealistic about the world in which they live and quite rightly accept that staff cannot be expected to risk their own safety. However, a proactive approach, not just dealing with antisocial behaviour but addressing everyday passenger needs, would have a beneficial impact on passengers' perceptions.

⁸³ [Stations made easy](#) – National Rail Enquiries website

⁸⁴ [Passenger attitudes towards rail staff](#). Transport Focus. 2016

⁸⁵ [Passenger perceptions of personal security on the railway](#). Transport Focus. 2016

Like many other industries the railway is constantly being challenged to look at how it can be more efficient and make best use of its resources – with one of its biggest resources being its staff.

We recognise that the rail industry is considering how it uses front-line staff in future, but any changes to staff deployment must reflect the needs of the end user.

5. On the train/the journey

The actual journey is central to the overall passenger experience.

6.1 Punctuality, reliability and timetables

Passengers rely on the railway to get to work, for business and for leisure purposes and when it goes wrong it can be very frustrating. As such they see a punctual service as the key success criterion for their journey and a vital prerequisite for building trust between passengers and the railway.

The choice of performance metrics, targets and degree of transparency can all influence trust. We strongly endorse the use of the right-time performance measure (on time to within a minute of the scheduled arrival time at every station rather than the Public Performance – PPM – measure which allows a threshold before trains are considered late).

‘Right time’ better mirrors passengers’ own perceptions of punctuality⁸⁶. Counting trains as on time when they are late plays badly to passengers, many of whom are already suspicious of statistics from their train company. ‘Right time’ also has the benefit of being easily understood, and therefore trusted, by passengers – it can be much harder for more complicated calculations involving average passenger lateness to gain passengers’ trust.

Passenger-centric targets can generate passenger-centric behaviours, so it will be important that ‘right time’ becomes the building block for industry systems and that regulatory regimes incentivise operators to minimise all delays.

This is another area where personalisation of data is relevant - ***making ‘my train’ performance information available (directly from the industry itself rather than third-party websites) should also help build trust.***

There is always a difficult balance between punctuality and things like capacity, and frequency – there is inevitably a trade-off between these factors. Our 2015 research shows that passengers want a robust, dependable timetable so they arrive on time at their destination⁸⁷. It appears that passengers (particularly commuters) are more

⁸⁶ [Train punctuality: the passenger perspective](#). Transport Focus and ORR. 2015

⁸⁷ Ibid

interested in arriving punctually than in shaving a few minutes off a journey – though there was appetite for reduced journey time on very long-distance trips. The research also showed that passengers tended to favour punctuality over efforts to insert extra trains in the timetable. There were again exceptions to this – passengers on routes with a low frequency wanted more trains to run, as did commuters who struggled just to get on the train never mind getting a seat.

This shows just how difficult it is to balance the needs of all passengers when planning a timetable. However, it is important that the end result is realistic - ***passengers do not want a ‘fudge’ where the timetable just about works on paper, but rarely if ever in practice.***

Timetable changes almost always involve trade-offs, difficult choices and, regrettably, winners and losers. Often improving the service for some passengers can mean unwelcome changes for others. People often build their daily life around the timetable, the time they leave home, whether they can get to work on time, or get home in time to pick up children. Therefore, it’s very important that the railway consults with passengers and understands the impact their proposed changes could have on their customers. Because the timetable becomes integral to people’s lives, it should remain stable and – notwithstanding emergency situations – be changed as infrequently as possible and only at set times of the year.

We expect the railway to consult passengers and the local community on timetable changes and demonstrate how it has considered passenger feedback.

6.2 Managing disruption

It is important that the railway minimises delays through good operational planning and management. This includes building greater resilience to weather-related events, better rolling stock reliability and in reducing instances of staff shortage (for example driver training or rest day working).

However, even with the best of efforts passengers understand that delays will still happen on the railway. The key to managing this is the ability to provide personalised, accurate and timely information⁸⁸. This requires on board screens, staff announcements and, if the information is to be pushed direct to passengers’ mobile phones, the provision of good Wi-Fi or phone reception.

Our research shows a very clear link between passengers’ overall view of disruption handling and the information they received. The speed with which information is provided and the amount of it, together with the frequency of updates and ability for passengers to find out more, all show as areas particularly in need of improvement. There has been a considerable effort to improve passenger information during disruption but there is still more that needs to be done. Deficiencies in passenger

⁸⁸ [Passenger information when trains are disrupted](#). Transport Focus. 2014

information at times of disruption seem to persist in a way that would not be tolerated if they concerned operational or safety failures. Our challenge to GBR is to change this culture.

The railway must make providing accurate, timely information on disruption a core function. It must measure its performance and drive continuous improvement.

This challenge is not just limited to unplanned disruption. While passengers understand the need for engineering work, they do not like it – especially when it involves a bus replacement service. However, Transport Focus research on engineering work at Reading/Bath⁸⁹, at Waterloo⁹⁰ at Derby⁹¹ and at Kings Cross station⁹² consistently shows that giving passengers timely, accurate information can improve satisfaction levels with the way that planned disruption was managed.

Higher awareness of disruption also leads to greater acceptance of the alternatives – passengers can cope better with disruption and bus replacements if they have been able to plan for it. There is a passenger dividend from doing this – in the form of higher satisfaction. ***The railway must embed a consultative and proactive approach to planning major engineering disruption.***

6.3 Staff

Our research shows that passengers value the presence of a member of staff on board trains⁹³. This includes providing information and giving passengers a sense that there is someone they can turn to for help. The important thing is that staff are proactive and are seen by passengers.

Where services are Driver Only Operation it is important that alternative means of providing information and reassurance are provided.

As with stations, the passenger benefits arising from a visible staff presence on board trains must be factored into future decisions on resourcing.

6.4 Accessibility

While cancelled and delayed trains are of great inconvenience to all passengers, they can have an even bigger impact for disabled passengers. It can mean that timeframes for medication are missed, that booked assistance does not arrive as planned, and creates additional stress and anxiety, especially for those with learning or cognitive disabilities.

⁸⁹ [Planned rail engineering work – the passenger perspective](#). Transport Focus. 2015

⁹⁰ [Railway engineering work: Putting passengers at the heart of the London Waterloo upgrade](#). Transport Focus. 2018

⁹¹ [Derby resignalling works](#). Transport Focus. 2018

⁹² [Kings cross station closure](#). Transport Focus. February 2020

⁹³ [Passenger attitudes towards rail staff](#). Transport Focus. 2016

Passengers with disabilities can also face other issues⁹⁴ on board the train.

- Seating.

Priority seating is important for many passengers – those with mobility impairments may not be able to stand up for any length of time, while some passengers with anxiety conditions require a seat to keep calm.

However, there are questions about who gets precedence for priority seating since not just disabled people, but those with small children, pregnant women and the elderly also have a claim. There is also the problem of there being no enforcement of priority seating with reports of some disabled passengers facing a hostile response when asking other people to give up the seat – especially when the individual has a non-visible disability. Labelling on (or near) the seats that reminds people that not all disabilities are visible will help.

Although the vast majority of journeys are uneventful, a single antisocial incident can be very distressing and can strongly deter disabled passengers from using the railway. For example, during Covid some passengers who were exempt from wearing face coverings told us they felt judged for not wearing one. This led some to change their own behaviour by wearing a mask in order to avoid conflict with other passengers or being made to feel uncomfortable⁹⁵.

Transport Focus supports the continuation, and expansion, of priority seat card schemes. These help passengers demonstrate that they have a specific need for a seat. These need to be backed up by publicity both on stations, and on trains in priority seating areas. Indeed, given the transition to GBR and the move towards national branding there is scope for one card/scheme for the whole network, removing the need for multiple cards/applications for the end users.

Whilst not everyone likes the idea that they have to ‘label themselves’ in order to receive greater consideration from staff and other passengers, making such cards available (on a purely voluntary basis) could provide confidence and reassurance to many.

- Allocation of space.

Space in a carriage is important for many passengers that use mobility aids (such as a wheelchair), have a guide dog, need to be supported by a handle or partition, or become anxious in crowded places. However, in a similar fashion to the competition for priority seating there is some dispute over the use of space on the train. For example, luggage, bikes or other passengers occupying wheelchair spaces.

⁹⁴ [Disabled rail passengers research](#). Transport Focus. 2019

⁹⁵ [Accessible transport: unlocking a better normal](#). Transport Focus. July 2021

Operators should be encouraged to improve the clarity of information provided to passengers as to who has priority in dedicated areas and to manage such spaces (for example, keep wheelchair spaces free from luggage).

- Onboard facilities
There can be additional challenges for disabled passengers in using toilets and getting refreshments on trains that can cause discomfort on the journey.

For some the availability of an accessible toilet during the journey is essential. Where toilets or catering is out of service it is important to inform passengers before boarding.

6.5 Rolling stock

The design of the train(s) will clearly also have an impact on the passenger experience. Transport Focus has a raft of work looking at what passengers want from new trains^{96 97 98}.

Specific needs will differ according to the characteristics of the route being served. The key to determining what is important is to involve passengers. Our work with Merseytravel has undoubtedly resulted in trains that better fit the needs of the passengers who will use them and has generated positive responses – along with good media coverage - as they enter service.

There is scope for building more flexibility and agility into design – for instance, the ability to easily take out some seats and add more luggage racks in response to passenger requirements or in response to changing demand (such as a growth in leisure travel and a decline in commuting travel 'post-Covid').

Engagement is especially important when it comes to accessible design. Existing regulations and guidance have significantly improved the accessibility of trains over the last 20 years, but there is scope to look beyond minimum standards. Designers and manufacturers should work with disabled passengers to understand what would enhance their journey experience.

Wheelchair users, for example, would value a choice over the direction they face when seated within the wheelchair space, improved demarcation of the space itself and better information provision directly adjacent to the wheelchair space. Best practice guidance could be more ambitious in capturing examples of what is already possible in respect of onboard facilities such as Passenger Information Systems.

⁹⁶ [Thameslink Rolling Stock Qualitative Research](#). Transport Focus. 2008

⁹⁷ [New trains for the Merseyrail Network – What passengers want](#). Transport Focus and Merseyrail. 2014

⁹⁸ [Designing the future - rolling stock design](#). Transport Focus and Transport Scotland. 2011

The key is to seek input throughout the design and build process rather than at fixed points where decisions have already been made and/or are irreversible.

It will be essential that the railway embeds a culture of meaningful consultation and involvement when procuring rolling stock or before a major refurbishment.

Digital connectivity is also increasingly important when it comes to rolling stock. The University of the West of England, using Transport Focus's rail passenger satisfaction data, showed that passengers were increasingly using technology to get more value out of their journey⁹⁹. Being able to do something while travelling, whether for work or leisure, is one of the acknowledged strengths of rail travel.

Our future of travel research suggests that demand for digital connectivity is only going to increase - not least with hybrid working patterns emphasising the importance of being able to work in a variety of places, including trains and stations, rather than just the office. And yet internet and mobile connectivity at present can be unreliable or patchy¹⁰⁰. In design terms this means ensuring that trains have good, reliable Wi-Fi and mobile phone reception along with power sockets/USB chargers, and allowing for future upgrades as technology advances without requiring extensive rebuilds.

Technology and connectivity can also be used to improve the usefulness of passenger information. For example, being able to provide real-time updates on disruption, being able to show how full a particular train is, or whether toilets have been locked out of service as real-time information in journey planners and other live information sources.

Improved internet and mobile connectivity on trains enhances rail's competitive advantage over other modes of travel and could also be instrumental in delivering the type of real-time information that passengers want.

6.6 Cleaning

Even before Covid-19 our National Rail Passenger Survey showed cleanliness was one of the key drivers of passenger satisfaction with their journey. Maintenance and cleanliness of the inside of the train was rated as sixth highest priority for improvement. Covid has provided an added impetus. Enhancing cleaning regimes – and making this much more visible to passengers – was one way the railway tried to reassure passengers during Covid. Our research suggests that cleaning will remain even more important than it was before the pandemic¹⁰¹.

⁹⁹ [Rail passengers' travel time use in Great Britain](#). Prof. G Lyons, UWE Bristol. 2012 [based on an analysis of NRPS data]

¹⁰⁰ [Keeping connected: passengers' experience of internet connectivity on Great Britain's railways](#). Transport Focus. July 2020

¹⁰¹ [Public transport: a cleaner future?](#) Transport Focus. May 2021

It will be important for the railway to maintain the improved levels of cleaning and to use all available channels to communicate their efforts to both passengers and non-users to build confidence.

6. Arrival/interchange

To some extent the issues with leaving a station mirror those of getting to the station in the first place: cost and convenience again feature strongly.

Passengers need information on local buses (including prices and real-time departures), trams, underground, cycle hire, taxis and any other modes available. They also need clear signposting of where to catch buses or taxis, and maps showing walking routes from the station.

This can be particularly important when passengers are unfamiliar with the destination station and for passengers with disabilities. Signage for pedestrians between stations and the centre of the settlement served, in both directions, is particularly important.

It is also important to identify key passenger flows within the station and then to ensure good physical access/good signage on the main exits.

Connecting onto other trains is another stress point for passengers. In some countries (such as Switzerland) connections are part of railway culture but passengers here very much favour direct services. Direct trains avoid the scenario of having to know which platform you need, manoeuvring heavy suitcases or young children up and down staircases, only to discover that the train is late or that you have missed it altogether¹⁰². Waiting for your connection on a cold, windy platform is not a pleasant or productive use of time. Put simply, passengers do not trust or like connections.

In some instances it will make sense to hold a train. For instance, to ensure that a branch line train does not depart two minutes before a late running mainline service arrives leaving many passengers with an hour's wait; or for the last train at night. ***It could make passengers less distrustful of connections if GBR made it clear in what circumstances it will hold a train to wait for a connection.***

There is also value in announcing/displaying some connectional information on board services. ***Letting passengers know before they get off which platform they want to be heading for can help to relieve some of the stress involved.***

Interchanging can be particularly demanding for passengers with disabilities. Some will travel for longer to avoid interchanges as it is seen as such a potentially stressful

¹⁰² [CrossCountry passenger research](#). Transport Focus. 2018

and difficult process. In particular, the specific needs of some passengers with non-visible disabilities are not always noticed or met by staff and other passengers.

7. Post-travel

Journey experience does not end once a passenger has arrived at their destination. Focusing on aftercare provides an opportunity to build trust and a relationship through a strong customer service ethos and culture.

8.1 Complaint handling

In any business things can go wrong at times and customers will have cause to complain. How that complaint is dealt with can make a real difference to the passenger and their future relationship with the operator.

Passengers want their complaint to be treated seriously whether this be via post, email or in person – it can be very frustrating to receive a generic standard communication that does not answer all the questions asked.

We recommend that GBR/operators should:

- ***empower front-line staff to deal with complaints on the spot, with processes in place to provide goodwill gestures there and then***
- ***make it easy for passengers to get in contact by providing a variety of contact methods and by being proactive when things go wrong***
- ***empower customer service advisors to apply ‘natural justice’ when dealing with poor passenger experiences and allow redress to go beyond the minimum levels of the Passenger Charter or National Rail Conditions of Travel***
- ***ensure a clear and well-communicated escalation process is in place for complaints handling, including referral to the Rail Ombudsman - this should comply with ORR guidance on Complaints Handling Procedures***
- ***ensure that contingency plans are in place to deal with spikes in workload and clear backlogs if they occur.***

GBR will also need to ensure it has provisions for handling complaints when contracts change. It will be important that there is a mechanism for dealing with ‘legacy’ complaints with the outgoing operator.

8.2 Compensation and redress

A good, easy-to-use compensation mechanism can take some of the sting out of delays and help rebuild trust between passengers and the operator.

Our research on compensation shows that many passengers do not claim compensation for delays when they are entitled to do so¹⁰³. The main reasons were that they did not know they were entitled, or how to claim it.

¹⁰³ [Make Delay Pay: improving compensation for rail passengers](#). Transport Focus. 2020

To make it easier to claim we recommend:

- **increasing awareness:**
 - **providing information on compensation when making announcements about delays on board trains and at stations**
 - **raise awareness of Delay Repay, including the minimum qualifying delay length, on the homepage of websites**
 - **every train company should offer Delay Repay 15 to bring consistency to compensation across the network.**
 - **display clear guidance on when you can and cannot claim - cover different scenarios such as travelling with more than one operator and when using a combination of tickets (split tickets). This should be consistent across all train companies.**

- **persuading passengers that claiming is worthwhile:**
 - **consider schemes designed to overcome indifference, such as a wallet function that allows smaller payments to accumulate and be redeemed at a later point, the option to 'swap' compensation for complimentary tickets or for other offers or rewards (such as a free coffee), and the ability to donate compensation directly to charity.**

- **making it easier to claim:**
 - **Implementation of more automation across the country. Using smart-ticketing 'tap-in' data, seat reservations or stored 'usual journeys' to identify when you may have been delayed and prompt (by text or email) to confirm your delay and submit a pre-populated claim form.**
 - **Standardisation and simplification of claim forms. This would provide greater clarity for passengers and help to reduce the volume of rejected claims.**

8.3. Continuous improvement

Learning from mistakes and acting on customer feedback is one of the hallmarks of a good business.

This includes complaints handling – ensuring that the root causes of complaints are addressed, and systemic solutions are put in place. It also means capturing passengers' views on service provision in general. One of the best ways of achieving this is through the use of passenger experience targets/monitoring. Our preference is to use customer satisfaction surveys – the best judge of quality being those who have used the services in question.

It also covers accessibility. There is a particular need to monitor complaints about accessibility and to survey passengers using Passenger Assistance services to see how well it met their needs.

The railway must have in place mechanisms that capture passenger feedback and demonstrate how it uses this information to improve services.

8.4 Lost property

Every year passengers lose a huge number of items on the rail network. Too many passengers never manage to locate their property, even if it has been handed in.

We recommend the establishment of a national lost property system¹⁰⁴. This could be either a national system or the ability to ensure that local schemes can ‘talk’ to other lost property systems. This would allow lost items to be registered with an accurate description including any distinguishing marks, brands or serial numbers. A simple interface would then allow passengers to report lost items, with the system matching descriptions with those found. Passengers would no longer need to first establish at which location their item might have ended up. There also needs to be clarity over any charges for lost property and how these will be set (for example, is it based on the value of the item or its size).

8.5 Ticketless travel process and appeal mechanisms

Transport Focus believes ticketless travel is an important issue and one that needs to be addressed. Passengers who avoid paying for their ticket are in effect being subsidised by the vast majority of fare-paying passengers. However, any revenue protection strategy must provide safeguards for those who make an innocent mistake and whose intention was never to defraud the system¹⁰⁵.

We believe this requires:

- ***clear consistent guidelines explaining when staff should show discretion in the enforcement of penalties***
- ***a commitment not to go straight to any form of criminal prosecution unless operators suspect (or have proof) that there was intent to defraud***
- ***ensuring that passengers charged a penalty have a genuine opportunity to appeal against that decision, via an independent, binding appeals mechanism, before any action is taken (including the addition of administration fees).***

**Transport Focus
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¹⁰⁴ [Lost property](#). Transport Focus. 2015

¹⁰⁵ Ticket to Ride [2012](#) and [2015](#). Transport Focus



Transport Focus is the operating name of
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