



Extreme heat, July 2022: the passenger experience

August 2022

Context

On Monday 18 and Tuesday 19 July, Britain experienced its highest ever recorded temperature. A red weather warning was in place for much of England on both dates, and it was unusually hot in Scotland and Wales as well.

A reduced timetable was implemented by many train companies, with passengers encouraged to travel only if necessary, and in some cases not to travel. On Tuesday – the peak of the heat – the East Coast Main Line was closed entirely south of York/Leeds, and no trains ran on a number of other routes. During Tuesday, among other disruptions, services on the routes from the north and midlands into London Euston and St Pancras International stations were suspended. Infrastructure damage, including as a result of fires next to the railway, also caused significant service disruption on Wednesday 20 July. As a result, Network Rail has established a resilience taskforce to which Transport Focus chief executive Anthony Smith has been appointed.

This short report summarises the feedback received from passengers, including members of our Transport User Panel, and observations by Transport Focus before, during and after the two days of record-breaking temperatures. It focuses largely on the immediate passenger issues, rather than the broader question of the resilience of Britain's railway to extreme weather.

Summary

It is important to acknowledge that the temperatures on 18 and 19 July were, literally, unprecedented for Britain and railway infrastructure was subjected to temperatures beyond those it was designed for. As a result, and because of external impacts, some passengers faced significant disruption and a poor journey experience. But it is also important to recognise that many had uneventful, even pleasant journeys.

“The train I had booked from Kings Cross to Newcastle was full, and the station staff would not allow me to board. I had to wait until 1pm for the next train. The train was dangerously full, with large cases in the aisles preventing anyone from getting in or out of the carriage. If I had known before boarding that my journey was going to take over 6 hours instead of 3, I would never have boarded the train ... I decided to abort my journey, and left the train at Peterborough. I had to cancel my accommodation, and because I had no travel insurance, lost all this money.” London to Newcastle passenger

“Unfortunately, the trains were running late, which I obviously understood. However, on arriving at Rochester, the train sat there, with no updates provided on board. I then heard the platform tannoy say that there were no trains from Rochester to Strood. The only choice was a 15 minutes walk from Rochester station to Strood station in the hottest part of the day (36 degrees +).” Passenger from Rainham (Kent) to Maidstone West

“It was very good. The journey only took 45 minutes longer as there was a reduced speed in force after 11am. The coaches were air-conditioned and therefore quite pleasant. Well done to all concerned.” Passenger from Bridgend to Weybridge

“There were minor pre-planned changes to the timetable/speed restrictions and minor delays to leaving on the return journey. But overall it was fairly straightforward. The trains were air-conditioned and staff at London Victoria were handing out free bottles of water on Monday.” Haywards Heath to London passenger – Monday and Tuesday

Reviewing the feedback received, five points stand out.

- Working from home helps, but a lot of people cannot heed ‘do not travel’ advice. Those who cannot work from home, for example hospital staff, and those attending appointments that cannot be easily changed, including at hospitals and clinics. Suspension of train services causes them significant problems.
- In hot weather, some people will head to the beach irrespective of the railway’s advice not to travel.
- The railway still has a long way to go towards its goal of providing passengers with accurate, timely information – whether in advance or during travel.
- The significant fleet renewal in recent years, introducing trains with powerful air-conditioning, made a huge difference for passengers. But where air-conditioning wasn’t working properly, or passengers travelled on older trains reliant only on opening windows, the experience was markedly less good.
- On some routes, the service provided on Wednesday 20 July was poor because of infrastructure damage occurring on Monday and Tuesday.

Not everyone can heed ‘do not travel’ advice

It is important to recognise that, even with a Met Office red weather warning, some people still need to travel. As well as those with jobs requiring their physical presence, such as within the NHS, many people have long-arranged

appointments, in particular medical and dental, which they need to keep. Unlike other types of extreme weather, on this occasion some were travelling specifically *because* of the high temperature – to work in an air-conditioned office rather than swelter at home.

Feedback from somebody who needed to travel for medical reasons (and had an essentially successful journey):

“I had to travel to Colchester on Tuesday for pre-booked medical tests The journey took longer than normal as trains were running at reduced speed because of the excessive heat The A/C system in the new trains on these lines was a god send. Considering how travel by train was predicted to be very difficult on both Monday and Tuesday, I was able to travel in comfortable conditions.” Passenger from Chelmsford to Colchester Town

People who could not get where they needed to go were clearly frustrated that, in their eyes, the railway let them down:

“Majority of Transpennine Express trains cancelled making it extremely difficult to get to and from work. Totally unnecessary to cancel so many trains especially early morning when staff working in a healthcare environment have to get to work. (selfish).”

“Cross Country gave notice they would cancel all trains from Leicester to Ely the day before which would effectively leave me stranded. Fortunately my lift to the station was able to make a very considerable diversion to drop me at Peterborough instead where I was able to pick up a train to Ely provided by Greater Anglia. It was deeply frustrating that Cross Country cancelled all trains on that route on Monday when other operators took a more pragmatic decision to run some services in the morning ahead of the heatwave.”

Narborough to Ely passenger

It is stating the obvious that the railway exists to allow people to travel. While each individual decision not to run trains may have been rational, the railway must guard against drifting into thinking that it is a painless option to ask passengers to stay away when things are operationally tough. Not everybody can. And a fair-weather only railway cannot be the backbone of Britain’s transport system that it aspires to be.

Information – lessons to learn

While noting that providing accurate, timely information in a fast-moving situation is never easy, that does not alter the frustration, even anger experienced by passengers when the railway doesn't manage it.

"I attempted to travel from Bletchley to London Euston. At Hemel Hempstead our train terminated - initially due to an obstruction on the track. The lack of information was disgusting - I sat there for two hours - trying to rely on a website that was useless and displaying wrong info. I then had to make my own way using a bus to Watford High Street - then another to Stanmore. My whole journey took 5 and a half hours. London North Western management were non-existent. No staff available." Passenger from Bletchley to Stanmore

"My usual train was cancelled, in fact TFW [Transport for Wales] cancelled all of the trains for both Monday and Tuesday early on Monday morning. I had checked National Rail Enquiries at 6am before leaving the house and all was as normal, however when I arrived at Chester station it, and all other TFW services, were cancelled. Fortunately Northern's Chester to Leeds service was still running and did so throughout Monday and Tuesday so I was able to get to work, and most importantly, get home again."

"I checked on National Rail app on my phone and it said that my train was running. When I got to Victoria Station there were no Medway trains running. I eventually managed to get a slow train to Orpington and then had to get a bus to home. There was no air-conditioning on train and everybody was melting."

"Trains were delayed by a minimum of 1 hour or cancelled at very last minute even though South Eastern knew they had not left their departure point 1 hour and 45 min before. Screens showed on-time giving false hope."

Transport Focus observations about information

Refund and redress arrangements

Given that extreme heat on Monday 18 and Tuesday 19 July had been forecast well in advance, with at least a strong possibility that 'do not travel' or similar messaging would be required, the industry was slow to communicate the refund and redress arrangements to passengers.

The railway should reflect on four points.

- Did discussions about extending refund arrangements beyond the strict letter of the various terms and conditions, including with Government given the financial implications, start early enough?

- Once a decision about refund and redress arrangements had been made, was the mechanism to inform individual train companies, so they could update passenger-facing information, sufficiently robust?
- In advance of the industry completing 'work package one' of its Smarter Information Smarter Journeys programme, was there sufficient engagement with independent ticket retailers to ensure that passengers who had already bought tickets were aware of the situation?
- Were sufficient checks undertaken to ensure information was correct in the public domain – so passengers could make informed decisions about what they did on Monday and Tuesday?

As it was, Transport Focus ended up contacting a number of train companies during the course of Monday to let them know that their website did not reflect the position the industry had agreed with Government – and which was showing correctly on National Rail Enquiries.

East Coast Main Line closure, Tuesday 19 July

Network Rail announced on Sunday 17 July that the East Coast Main Line would be closed from Leeds/York southwards from 12.00 until 20.00 on Tuesday 19 July when temperatures were expected to peak. Irrespective of the rights and wrongs of the decision, it is good practice to give passengers as much warning as possible to allow them to think about what they do instead. However, the passenger communication around the decision left room for confusion and doubt. For instance:

- The announcement referred specifically to Kings Cross, causing doubt as to whether Thameslink services from the East Coast Main Line were or weren't going to run
- It referred to a skeleton service on Tuesday morning, but in the end the timetable contained no trains from Kings Cross in the morning either. Staff at Kings Cross station on Tuesday morning had to redirect passengers to St. Pancras and Euston.
- There is reference to the East Coast corridor. Some passengers would have understood, but is the phrase meaningful to the many infrequent or first-time users of this particular route?
- The announcement could have been more explicit about the situation for those travelling north of York. Advice for passengers travelling from, say, Newcastle to Edinburgh would have been helpful.
- The industry could have explained more clearly why the East Coast needed to close, but the Midland and West Coast main lines did not.

See appendix for additional observations.

Air-conditioning – must or luxury?

When first introduced, air-conditioning on trains was probably regarded as an added value, customer service feature. But 18 and 19 July showed that it may have become more than that – for some, being the difference between the heat being physically tolerable and not.

“I used London Overground on Monday morning between Blackhorse Road and Barking Riverside. All went smoothly, with lovely air-conditioned trains.”

“Leeds to London was subject to speed restrictions and took an hour longer than normal. The AC just about kept the journey comfortable.”

“I travelled from Surbiton to Fratton as I needed to get home for an appointment, I left at 7.30 am and had a very easy journey. The train carriages were air con so it was very pleasant.”

“Yesterday carriage had no air-conditioning working, Guard had all windows open”

“No air-conditioning on the train it was horrendous. Trains delayed and congestion made the journey much slower.”

The railway should reflect on three points.

- Given the consequences for passengers when it fails, does the industry attach sufficient weight to keeping air-conditioning systems functioning properly?
- Is the replacement rate for older trains without air-conditioning sufficient given the potential for more frequent extreme heat in coming years?
- Given a probably 30 years plus economic life, are the standards to which new trains are built sufficiently future proofed in terms of extreme heat? Including effectiveness in higher outside temperatures; sustainability in the event of loss of external power; and adequacy of airflow inside the train when stationary without the system functioning.

Don't forget the aftermath

On some routes passengers had a torrid time on Wednesday 20 July, after temperatures had dropped. This was partly because of ongoing service disruption related to infrastructure damage over the two previous days, and partly because up to three days' worth of passengers were trying to board Wednesday's trains.

One passenger said:

“Unaffected by heat. However Wednesday on EMR from St Pancras was an absolute DISASTER. Waiting hours and hours for a train to Sheffield and still not departed.” London to Sheffield passenger

Queues inside and outside Glasgow Central station to board Wednesday’s trains to London Euston were well documented, as in this [article from the Daily Record](#).

The railway should reflect on two points:

- whether passengers were given sufficient warning of the likelihood of extensive disruption on Wednesday 20 July, given that by late afternoon on Tuesday the list of sites requiring repair would have been extensive
- whether the policy of full refund or travel two days either side of a problem bunches passengers onto trains that are already heavily reserved, when some passengers would have the option to defer for longer.

Appendix

Examples of information that we believe could have been clearer.

In referring specifically to Kings Cross, the Network Rail press notice left doubt as to whether Thameslink services to/from the East Coast Main Line were going to run. And it referred to a skeleton service on Tuesday morning, but this was not provided.

The screenshot shows the Network Rail website with a navigation bar at the top containing links for 'Who we are', 'Running the railway', 'Putting passengers first', 'Communities', and 'Industry & commercial'. Below the navigation bar is a breadcrumb trail: 'Home > Media centre > National & regional news > No services on routes from London King's Cross to the north on Tuesday afternoon'. The main content area features the date 'Sunday 17 Jul 2022' and the headline 'No services on routes from London King's Cross to the north on Tuesday afternoon'. Underneath the headline is the text 'Region & Route: National'. The main body of the notice states: 'Network Rail will close the East Coast Main Line (ECML) for all locations between London King's Cross and York and Leeds due to the extreme weather expected on Tuesday 19 July. Passengers are being warned not to travel.' It further explains that the closure will be in place from 12:00 until 20:00 with a skeleton service running in the morning, and that this decision is due to record temperatures and a national emergency. It also notes that many train companies will not run any services and others will be very limited, and that passengers are being asked to re-plan their journey. Finally, it mentions that conditions on other routes will be closely monitored and that additional response staff will be out on the network.

This banner message on the LNER website (10.05 on Tuesday 19 July) seems to understate the situation given that the south of the East Coast Main Line would be formally closed from noon. It was more a question of you *cannot* travel, than 'please do not travel'.

The screenshot shows the LNER website with a navigation bar at the top containing links for 'Buy tickets', 'Customer services', and 'Sign in / Register'. Below the navigation bar is a menu with links for 'Travel information', 'Tickets & savings', 'First Class', 'Our trains', 'Where we go', 'Help', and 'Business'. The main content area features a banner message with the heading 'Important message' and a close button. The message states: 'Following the severe disruption on Monday 18th July, due to damage to the overhead wires between Newcastle and Berwick and the forecasted severe weather warning. Please do not travel today, Tuesday 19 July. Please visit Travel Alerts for more info.' Below the message is a button for 'Latest Travel Advice'. At the bottom of the banner is a warning icon and the text 'Do not travel - Check to see if your journey is affected.' and a button for 'Service updates'. Below the banner is a section titled 'OUR STATIONS' with the text 'We call at more than 50 stations along our network. Here you'll find a guide to each and every one.' and a button for 'Buy tickets >' with a search input field labeled 'From' and a location pin icon.



Transport Focus is the operating name of
the Passengers' Council

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Albany House
94-98 Petty France
London
SW1H 9EA

www.transportfocus.org.uk
info@transportfocus.org.uk

