



# Improving the passenger experience when rail services are disrupted

February 2023

# Foreword

**T**ransport Focus has worked with Avanti West Coast to seek to understand passengers' experiences when trains are disrupted and to explore ways of improving the passenger experience at such times. Avanti operates train services on the West Coast Main Line out of London Euston to Birmingham, North Wales, Liverpool, Manchester, Glasgow and Edinburgh.

Our research was undertaken across three stages between October 2021 and March 2022. It should be noted that this was before an amended timetable was introduced to address growing performance issues and before the recent industrial action.

It is important that operators listen to their passengers to hear what frustrates them when disruption occurs and learn how they can help people through the uncertainty and concerns that disruption can bring. This applies equally to unplanned disruption when things go wrong, be

it a broken rail, lack of a driver or severe weather, and to planned engineering works where services might be diverted or a rail replacement bus or coach provided.

Accurate information and well managed assistance, together with meaningful communications can turn what might be a negative experience into something more positive. If the operator is seen to have done everything within its power to manage and resolve the situation, this can help minimise the impact of the problem on passengers.

We are pleased to have worked with Avanti West Coast on this research. We look forward to seeing the suggestions for when disruption occurs being implemented on the West Coast Main Line and across the country.

**Sharon Hedges**

Senior stakeholder manager – rail contracts programme



# Introduction

**This research seeks to understand passengers' experiences and expectations both when things go wrong (unplanned disruption) and when engineering works disrupt the normal service (planned disruption).**

Disruption on the railway is inevitable. The railway relies on a complex system of infrastructure and assets which, on top of normal wear and tear, operate within an environment which is at the mercy of unpredictable factors such as the weather, trespass or vandalism. And even scheduled maintenance – however well planned – can disrupt normal service.

The issue for passengers is not that disruption happens; they have come to accept it and are mostly resigned to it. The issue is how disruption is handled and the impact that it has on their journeys, the comfort in which they are able to travel, and the stress, anxiety, frustration - and even anger - they can feel.

The research shows that there is much room for improvement as only around half of passengers say they are satisfied with how any disruption that they have experienced was handled. This report summarises the key findings and suggests ten things train operators can do to help satisfy their passengers when disruption occurs.

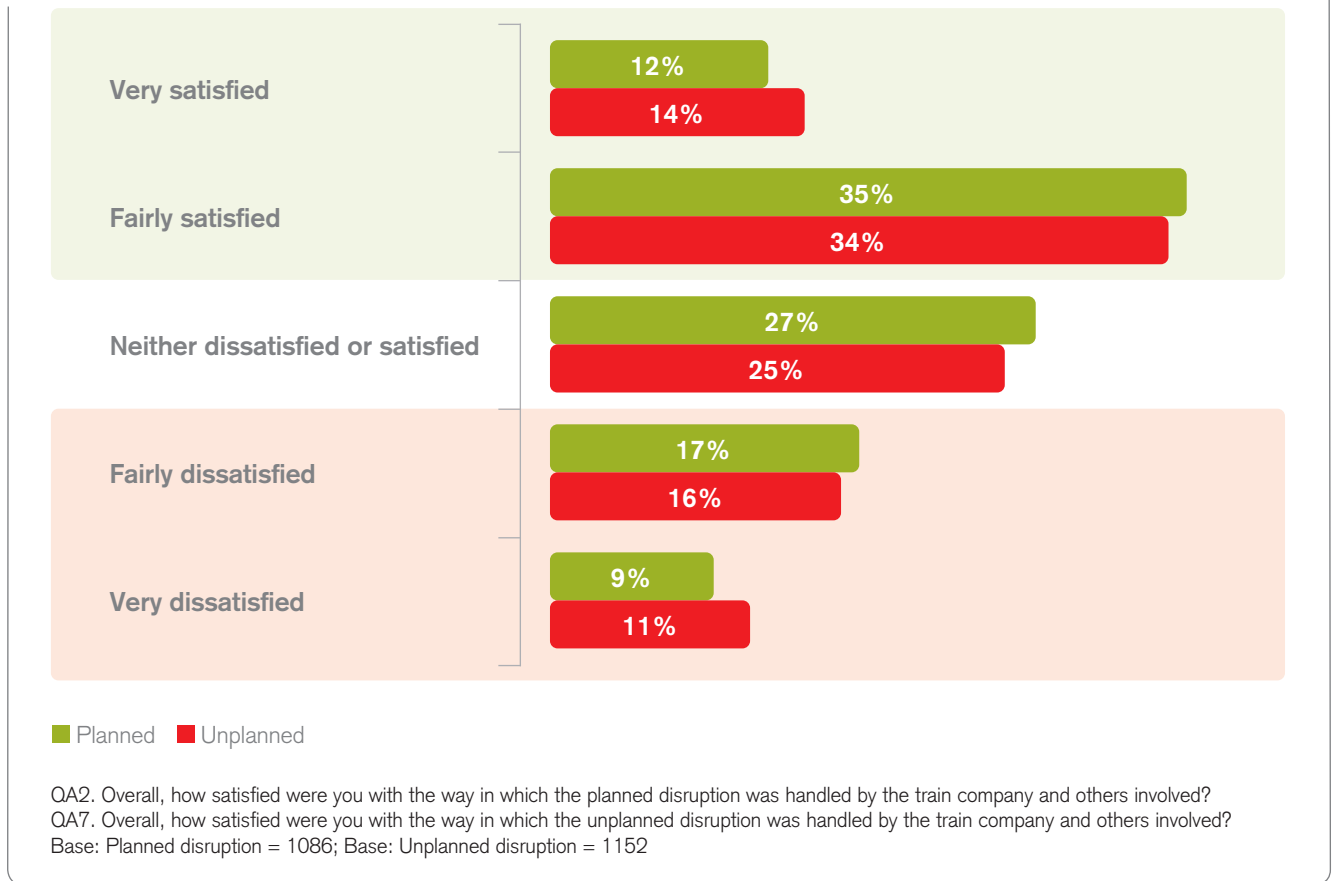


# Key findings

## Passengers want to be treated as individuals

Although most people enjoy train travel, our research shows that only around half of passengers are satisfied with how disruption is handled, and around a quarter say they are dissatisfied. This is consistent for both planned and unplanned disruption, although the effects on passengers – and the recommended solutions – are different.

### Satisfaction with how disruption is handled



Passengers are more likely to be satisfied when they feel that they are treated as individuals and that their needs are considered. In practical terms, they want to be empowered to make informed decisions about how to complete their journeys and they want the measures that are put in place to mitigate the disruption to be empathetic and considerate. Passengers are less likely to be tolerant of disruptions that they see as being under the control of the railway, such

as staff shortages or signal failures, compared to those that are nobody's 'fault', such as adverse weather or landslips. Passengers are also not interested in the underlying complexity of rail operations and just expect the railway to solve the problem. Passengers don't always know or care whether the problem relates to the train operating company or Network Rail and typically expect the train company to take responsibility.

*"If it is something that they have no control over then I will feel sympathetic towards them because it is not their fault. Whereas, if they don't have enough train drivers then it is their fault, and I would be more irate."*

Younger leisure passenger

Other service providers have set a high bar for passengers' expectations, which can sometimes be unrealistic, especially when it comes to management of digital information about disruptions. The complexity of rail operations doesn't currently permit the type of complete visibility of train whereabouts and alternative travel options that passengers have come to expect through using parcel tracking or airline apps, for example.

### **Disruption is particularly distressing for leisure travellers**

The research shows little difference in how business travellers, commuters and leisure travellers react to railway disruption. The primary difference, especially since Covid-19, is that business travellers and commuters are more likely to abandon their journeys, as working from home is now accepted. Whereas travel for leisure is seen as precious and often long-anticipated. Covid-19 has also meant that passengers are less tolerant of crowded trains – another reason to abandon a journey.

Disruption is particularly distressing – and potentially costly – for leisure travellers who are at risk of missing a time-specific event such as a theatre performance or a holiday, wedding or weekend away.

*"There was advice not to travel if you don't have to, but when you make plans several weeks in advance it is not really that simple... I think I could travel the next day for free, but obviously for me that's no use. When you have already spent so much on hotels or whatever, it is not worth not going, you just lose too much money."*

Younger leisure passenger

### **And vulnerable people need additional support**

Disabled and other vulnerable passengers need additional support, especially during unplanned disruption. The research sample included elderly people, people with physical disabilities, mental health issues and both cognitive and sensory disabilities. Overall, regardless of whether they are travelling for business, leisure or commuting, vulnerable passengers tend to plan a lot more in advance and can be much more seriously affected by disruption than other passengers. For example, a person with a physical disability may have planned a step-free journey but, due to disruption, has to change trains at a station without lifts.

*"Forward planning is really important. I know from my background as a mental health nurse, small changes to routine can have catastrophic effects. It can create anxiety and cause people to internalise things and blame themselves. People need to have time to plan changes when it comes to disruption."*

Older, Sensory disability

*"A passenger on the platform was visually impaired and he couldn't hear what was being said on the tannoy, so he couldn't hear, he couldn't see, and he was asking people around him if they could help. In the end me and a friend helped him get to the right platform."*

Older leisure passenger

**Communication is everything**

During both planned and unplanned disruption, communication with passengers is key to satisfaction. Passengers want to be equipped with the information to make decisions on what to do during disruption. Ideally, they are looking for three things:

- clarity – ‘what is happening’ and, especially, ‘what are my options?’
- transparency – ‘be honest with me, help manage my expectations’
- empathy – ‘understand the impact that this is having on my plans’.

*“Be honest. You can make your own informed decisions usually based on worst case scenario... ‘Is there a chance this train will be cancelled yes or no?’ Then I will base my decision on what I am going to do, who I am going to see. If it is likely to run, how long might the delay be? 7 hours? 5 hours? – you narrow things down so you can make your decision.”*

Older leisure passenger

*“In Crewe station the Tannoy is awful and you can struggle to understand what they are saying, or they will rattle through it quite quickly, and you have to go on the internet to find out a little bit more.”*

Older leisure passenger

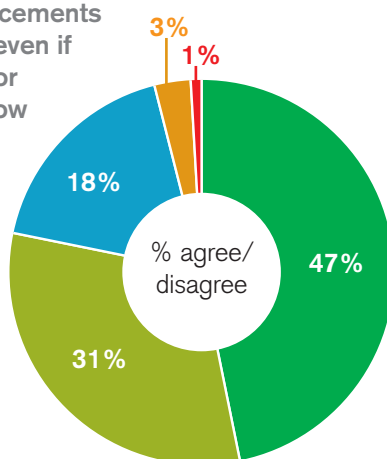
*“If we are given information that is believable and you feel that the people passing on the information have faith in it ... then we would wait for the next train.... I would rather wait an hour or an hour and a half in the stations, rather than traipse home and have to do the same thing later the same day or the following day.”*

Older leisure passenger, reduced mobility

The research shows passengers want more openness and transparency from train operators; empathy levels could be improved too.

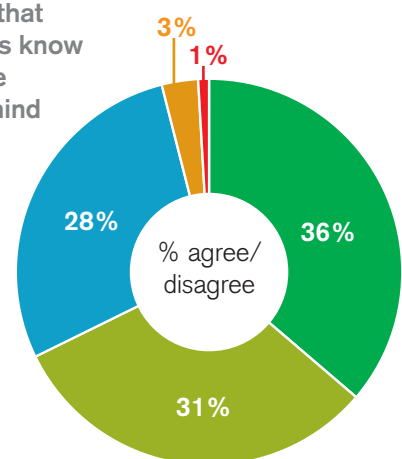
**Passengers agree that train companies could be more open – and there is room to improve empathy too**

Regular announcements are still helpful even if the train operator doesn't know how long the delay will last



- Strongly agree (9-10)
- Agree (7-8)
- Neutral (4-6)
- Disagree (2-3)
- Strongly disagree (0-1)

Important that passengers know the precise details behind causes of disruption



QD2\_5. Still on the subject of rail disruption, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? - When the train operator doesn't know how long the delay will last – regular announcements on when the next update will be is still very helpful. QD2\_9. Still on the subject of rail disruption, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? - It is important for passengers to know the precise details behind the causes of disruption

Base: Total = 1409





## Planned disruption requires a rational, practical response

When there is planned disruption, passengers need information to help them make a new plan and they expect the information to be timely, accurate and transparent.

Passengers want – but do not always get – the following:

- advanced warning – the earlier the better
- good clear communications through multiple channels such as email, text, the website and posters and announcements at stations. Social media can be effective but won't reach all customers
- suggestions for alternative routes
- a replacement bus/coach service, where appropriate
- replacement journeys to be timely, fast and comfortable
- the disruption to be over as quickly as possible
- overall good customer service – the feeling that the service provider was 'doing their best'.

*"Could not travel until hours after my booked journey which was a direct train to Liverpool. Stood all the way to Crewe then had to wait for the slow train to Lime Street, arriving five hours late, then not compensated by Avanti, online forms only, NO phone numbers available, very poor customer service."*

Male, 68, leisure

*"It cost me £700 in wages per day for a two-week contract because they gave it to someone else as I couldn't arrive on time."*

Male, 33, commuter

*"Don't use social media – not everyone uses it, even on public pages Facebook makes it impossible to see replies or numerous posts without a login ID. Also, for rural areas many people do not have mobile signal or fast broadband. Add all this together and for some, the updates are useless. There has to be an understanding of all customers."*

Female, 55, business

*"They should have not accepted bookings on trains that they knew were never going to run."*

Female, 65, business

### Unplanned disruption requires empathy

Unplanned disruption can make passengers feel out of control and, as such, requires an empathetic response that treats them as individuals and recognises how stressed and upset they may be feeling. Even if the situation is unclear, passengers would much rather hear that the train operator is not sure how long the delay will last, but that is being worked on, than be left in the dark.

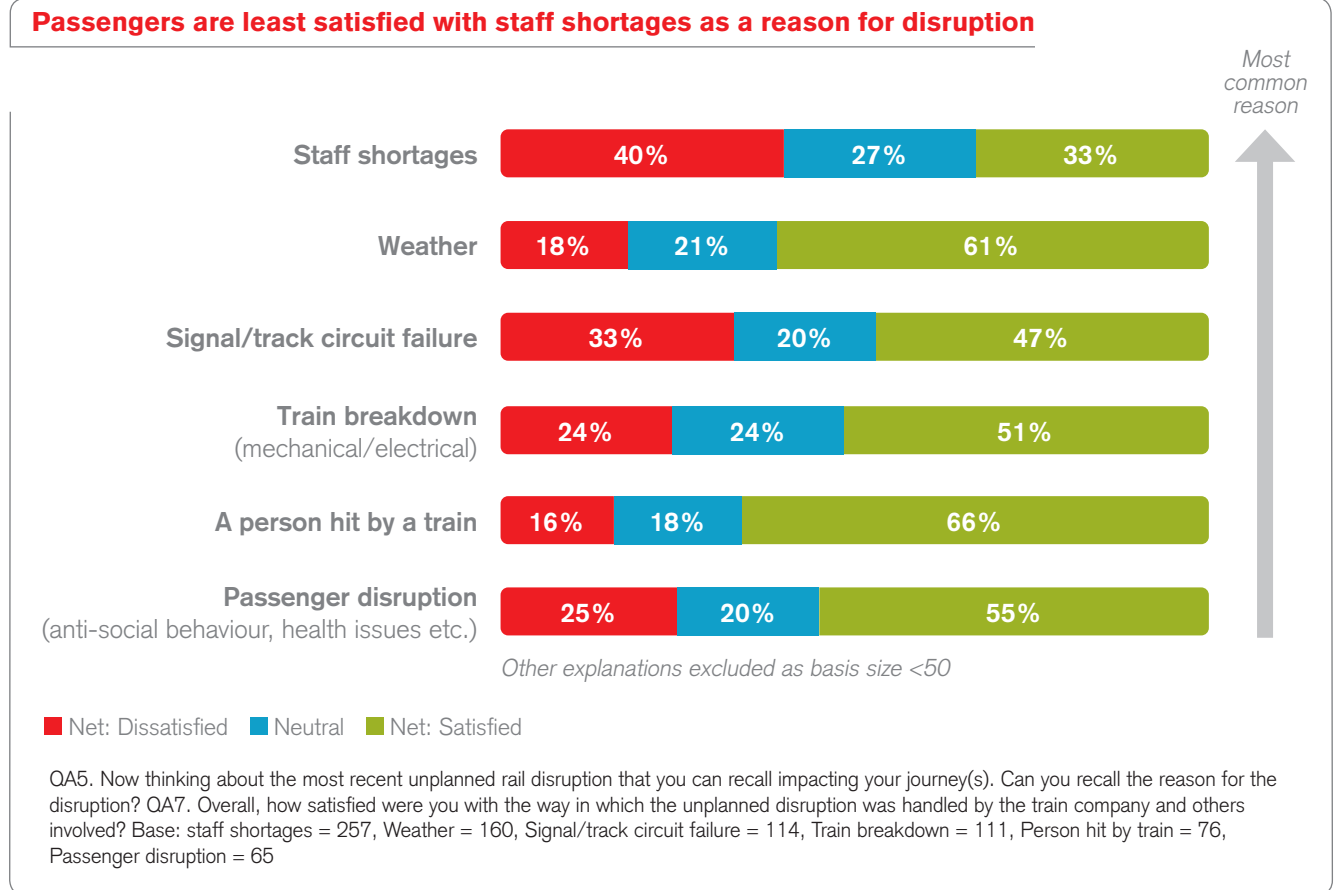
Passengers want – but do not always get - the following:

- minimal delay or change to their journey
- regular communications with accurate updates responding to issues that occur ‘in the moment’ – too much communication is better than too little
- communications through multiple channels such as texts, station announcements and digital displays
- supportive, knowledgeable and empathetic staff on the ground
- overall good customer service – the feeling that the service provider was ‘doing their best’
- compensation, promptly provided
- a little ‘extra’ such as a bottle of water in hot weather or a drinks voucher
- a comfortable environment in which to wait or continue their journey.

Passengers need to decide whether to continue or abandon their journey; the quality, clarity and believability of the disruption information also has an impact on decision making. Other factors include following what other people are doing, assessing whether there will be overcrowding and the likelihood of getting a refund.

As discussed above, passengers are less dissatisfied if they perceive that the unplanned disruption was beyond the control of the railway. Staff shortages is both the most common reason for disruption and the one that causes most dissatisfaction.

### Passengers are least satisfied with staff shortages as a reason for disruption





*"If disruption is to last more than an hour buses should be put on and extra staff should be on the platform advising customers what to do. No good just tweeting delays and expecting people to just wait it out."*

Male, 43, leisure

*"Manage queues, manage access to other train companies. Point out toilets in a five-hour queue, provide guidance on timing; offer coffee (as airlines would), show interest in care of the elderly."*

Male, 64, business

*"A complete lack of information about the delay was exacerbated by staff redirecting passengers to two different platforms before directing us back to the original platform two hours after the scheduled departure time."*

Female, 75, leisure



# Ten things train operators can do to help passengers when disruption occurs

Disruption can be disastrous for passenger satisfaction but well-handled disruption that follows best practice can restore faith. The most important thing that train operators can do in the event of disruption is to consider the perspective of their passengers. There are two main strands to this and, within each, five practical actions that operators can take:

## Empower passengers to be more in control of their journey

### 1 Advanced notice

For planned disruption, ensure that there is as much notice as possible as this will give passengers the chance to make alternative arrangements such as using another route or choosing to travel at another time.

### 2 Multiple communication channels (planned)

Passengers all have their own preferences about how they like to get information. This means using all available communication channels – email, texts, operator website, station announcements and social media – to ensure that the disruption doesn't come as a surprise to any passenger. Passengers with hearing or visual impairments must also be considered.

### 3 Multiple channels (unplanned)

Similarly, people have preferences about how they get information when the disruption is unplanned. In this situation texts, station announcements and digital displays are the best media – as well as staff on the ground – and again, pay particular attention to vulnerable customers.

### 4 Alternative travel

Both planned and unplanned disruption can result in passengers needing to find another way to travel. Providing alternatives such as buses, or giving passengers the information they need to find their own alternatives is crucial to helping them feel empowered.

### 5 Regular updates

Every ten minutes for unplanned delays – too frequent is better than not frequent enough.

## Treat passengers with empathy and openness

### 1 Message tone

All communications – whether emails, texts or station announcements, need to consider not only clarity and accuracy but also tone. Messages need to illustrate genuine concern and be open and transparent; they should be apologetic without that sounding trite. This extends to in-person communications: station staff need to deal with passengers with honesty and care.

### 2 Comfortable conditions

Ensure waiting areas are available (heated or cooled according to the time of year) and that passengers have free access to toilets. This is particularly important for disabled or vulnerable customers.

### 3 Consistent service

High levels of comfort and care should be available at every stage of the journey.

### 4 Compensation

For the loss and inconvenience resulting from unplanned disruption – and it must be swiftly delivered.

### 5 A little extra

Don't underestimate the value of a token gesture, such as free bottles of water or a voucher for a free hot drink, as recognition of the inconvenience caused by disruption. It is a tangible and more consistently recognised illustration of empathy than can be delivered through a message.





## Methodology

This report brings together three phases of research, which were conducted between October 2021 and March 2022:

- an initial qualitative phase in October 2021 consisting of eight on-line focus groups with a selection of commuter, business and leisure passengers and nine depth interviews with disabled passengers
- online interviews in January/February 2022 with 1409 passengers who had travelled to/from stations on the Avanti West Coast network
- a follow-up qualitative stage in March 2022 consisting of four online focus groups and six depth interviews with a mix of Avanti West Coast passengers to explore aspects of the quantitative research in more detail and to get reactions to potential disruption communications.

Full details can be found in the research agency's report.



## Contact Transport Focus

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