



Smarter Information, Smarter Journeys

– improving passenger
information on the railways

March 2023

Passengers' reaction to customer information on the railways

Background and introduction

Transport Focus has long championed the need to improve passenger information during disruption as it is historically the biggest driver of rail passenger dissatisfaction. Our research *Passenger information when trains are disrupted*¹, published in 2014, led the Rail Delivery Group (RDG) and Network Rail to develop a series of initiatives to improve passenger information during disruption. Progress was monitored by the Office of Rail and Road (ORR).

In 2019 ORR published research assessing how passenger information had progressed and challenged the industry to do better². The industry responded by developing the *Smarter Information, Smarter Journeys* programme (SISJ) – further information is available on the RDG website³. SISJ brings together RDG, Network Rail, train operating companies, Great British Railways Transition Team (GBRTT) the ORR and Transport Focus to work collaboratively to improve the passenger experience.

Since 2019, SISJ has been delivering various initiatives to help provide passengers with the information

they need throughout their journey. Several, such as the customer information pledges⁴, are now in place, while others are nearing completion. The rail industry therefore wanted to understand the areas of information provision it most needed to focus on next. This would help ensure passenger priorities are properly understood and incorporated into subsequent phases of work as these initiatives develop.

Transport Focus and the SISJ programme have worked together to deliver a programme of research to identify what information really matters to passengers – what information they need, when they need it and how they would like to receive it. The research also sought to identify how the information provided can influence passengers' behaviour as well as how passenger needs differ when comparing journeys where trains are running on time with those impacted by unplanned disruption. The overarching aim has been to understand how future investment in passenger information provision should be prioritised.



1 <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/publication/passenger-information-when-trains-are-disrupted/>

2 <https://www.orr.gov.uk/media/17464/download>

3 <https://www.raildeliverygroup.com/uk-rail-industry/travelling-by-rail/sisj.html>

4 <https://www.raildeliverygroup.com/uk-rail-industry/travelling-by-rail/pledges>

The research

Transport Focus commissioned Quadrangle Research to undertake qualitative and quantitative research with passengers. This summary presents the background and context to the research and highlights its key findings. Detailed information can be found in Quadrangle's comprehensive report, available on the Transport Focus website⁵.

Six focus groups, with around six to seven passengers in each, and five telephone depth interviews were conducted with a cross-section of passengers in October and November 2022. The aim was to explore

passengers' experience of and reactions to current information provision, its strengths and weaknesses, and to explore their comprehension of and preferences for a number of propositions being considered for the future.

Those findings were used to refine the propositions which were then tested in an online survey among some 4000 rail passengers which ran between December 2022 and January 2023. Further details about the sample and research methodology are included in Quadrangle's report.

Key findings – passengers' reaction to the proposed customer information initiatives

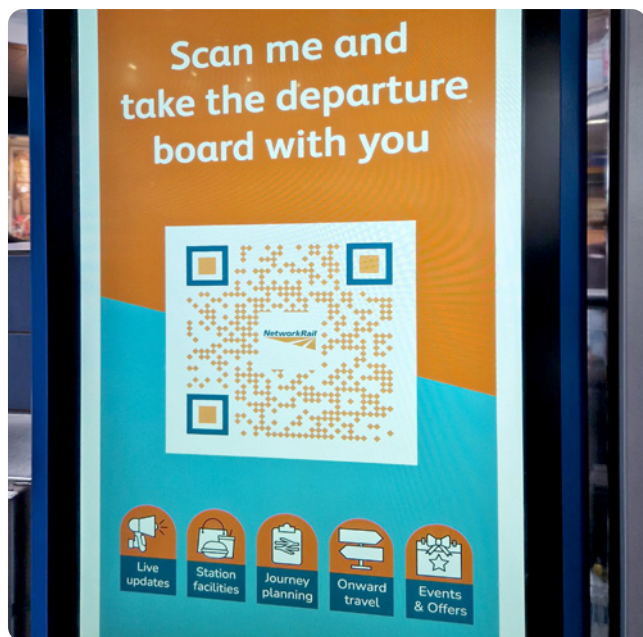
How passengers currently regard customer information on the railway

Passengers tend to feel that information provision on the railway has not kept up with the times and is behind that offered by other transport providers, notably airlines and service businesses generally. While passengers tend to have, and know where to get, the information they need when the railway is operating normally, things are different when services are disrupted – and this is particularly the case if the disruption is unplanned.

Passengers want to feel in control of their journey. When services are running normally, they want to know things like where to change trains, where to stand on a platform to be close to their reserved seat, whether to buy refreshments in advance or on board, what time to arrange for someone to meet them and similar. When things go wrong, they want information to allow them to decide whether to continue with or abandon their journey, and whether they should take an alternative train, route or even mode. This enables passengers to tell others, for example employers, family and friends, about the change to their plans. Ultimately, they may also require details of how to seek a refund or compensation.

Some 80 per cent of passengers we spoke to are satisfied with the information provided when trains are running normally (33 per cent were 'very satisfied'). Satisfaction with the information provided drops to 38 per cent when trains are disrupted and more than half are dissatisfied (25 per cent 'fairly' and nine per cent 'very dissatisfied').

Unsurprisingly, it is hard to impress passengers with the information provided when things go wrong – passengers would far rather their journey was not disrupted in the first place. However, the way disruption is handled and the quality of the information provided can make a frustrating situation more tolerable.



⁵ <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/publication/smarter-information-smarter-journeys-improving-passenger-information-on-the-railways/>

Communication channels

Passengers expect the railway to use all the channels available to it to communicate with them. In this day and age digital and mobile communications are seen as essential. Although there is still a clear acknowledgement of the need for more traditional communications for those either unfamiliar with technology, or unable or unwilling to use electronic devices. Nevertheless, there is a sense that the railway is not making the most of current technology.



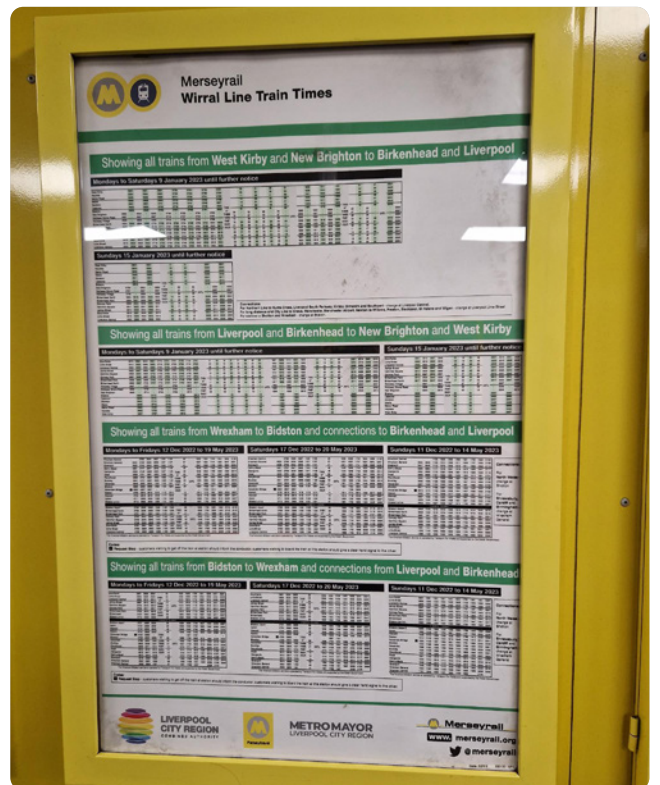
Almost eight out of 10 passengers (79 per cent) say they are 'comfortable using technology (for example smartphone, tablet) to get information when travelling by train'. On the other hand, 70 per cent say they 'want to be able to speak to a member of staff at the station...' and 67 per cent say 'that they want to be able to speak to a member of staff on the train to get journey information'.

Passengers feel that there is no excuse for railway staff not to have the same information that is available through public channels. Indeed, many passengers expect staff to have better and more up to date information than is publicly available. Even where passengers have an alternative source of information, such as an operator's website, when disruption occurs staff are often sought out for reassurance that the information is up to date and to check that they have understood it correctly. When staff do not have the desired information this can lead to frustration among passengers as they do not understand why this is the



case or why seemingly contradictory messages might be given as a situation changes.

Passengers most commonly report using Trainline to plan their journeys followed by train company websites/apps and National Rail Enquiries. The TfL Go app is widely used in London.



Testing the Smarter Information, Smarter Journeys propositions

The SISJ programme has developed some 20 propositions for providing additional or better passenger information. These were tested in the quantitative stage where passengers were asked to rate the importance of these initiatives for them when making a journey.

Stated importance of the propositions when trains are running normally

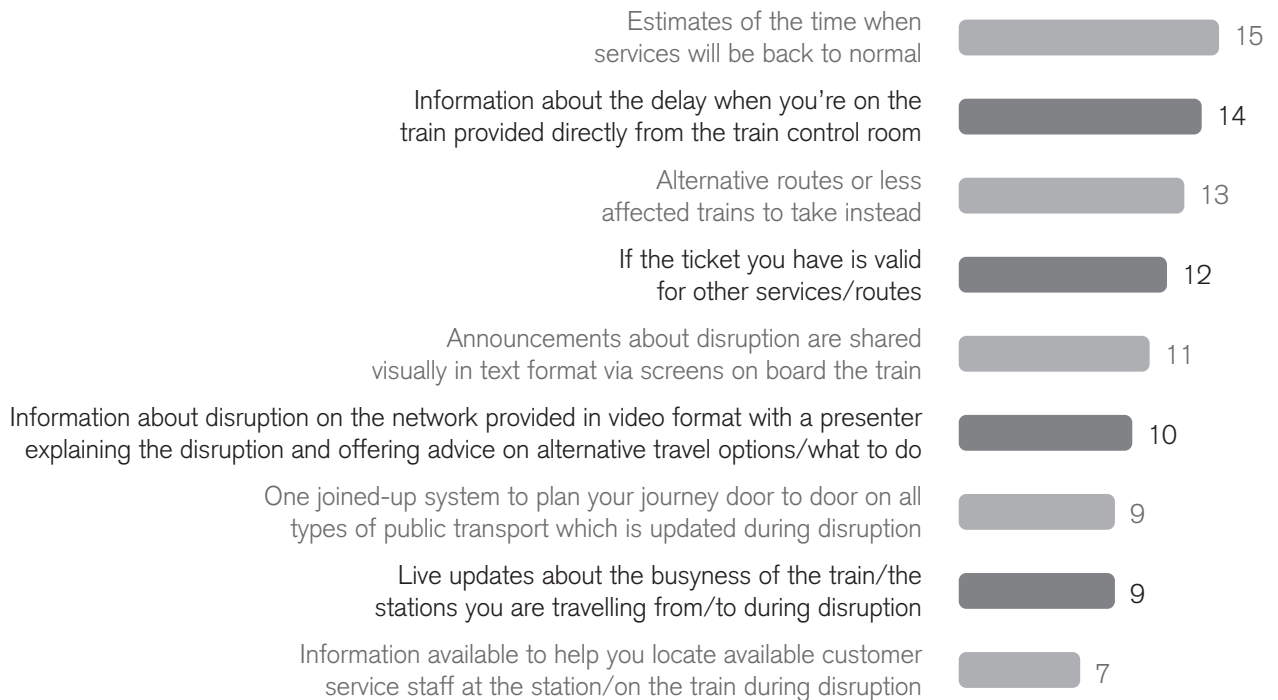


Please think about the train journeys you make where the train is running on time and you reach your destination as expected. Which types of information do you think would be the most important and least important to you when making a train journey?

Base: all passengers (n=4046).

When trains are running normally, passengers say the most valuable propositions are having well informed staff (17 per cent), information about the busyness of trains and stations (14 per cent) and information about onward connections (10 per cent).

Stated importance of the propositions when trains are affected by unplanned disruption



Please think about any train journeys you make when you experience **unplanned disruption**, and the train is **delayed**. Which types of information are the most important and least important to you when making a train journey that is disrupted?

Base: all passengers who have experienced unplanned disruption (n=3290).

But when there is disruption, the most important thing for passengers to know is when services will be back to normal (15 per cent). This is followed by information about the delay being provided directly from the control room to the train (14 per cent), the availability of alternative trains or routes (13 per cent) and whether your ticket will be valid on those alternatives (12 per cent).

On the whole, passengers are satisfied with the different aspects of information provision when trains are running normally. Further improvement through the various initiatives is felt likely to have a positive impact on satisfaction with information provision, even if quite small. The research findings provide a good indication of where to focus efforts to achieve that in the months ahead.

In terms of information when there is disruption, the planned initiatives are seen as likely to have a higher

likelihood of increasing satisfaction with information provision. Disruption information in video format and estimates of the time when services will be back to normal tested particularly well. Other initiatives had a more modest impact on passengers' satisfaction with information provision but nonetheless, if realisable, would enhance their experience.

There is some doubt among passengers as to whether some of this information might already be available. This suggests that better awareness through promotion of things like end-to-end journey planning apps, train loading information and up to date arrival time estimates might also increase satisfaction with the information available to passengers. Knowing what is available should help increase use of these sources.

Conclusions and recommendations

While there is always room for improvement, when trains are running normally passengers are generally happy with the provision of information received from the railway. However there is a view that the railway is not making the most of technology to keep passengers informed nor keeping up with initiatives in other sectors such as airlines and delivery services. It is when things go wrong that information is most needed and is felt to fall short currently. While no amount of information can make up for the inconvenience passengers suffer during disruption, how the railway reacts with helpful information can help passengers to feel they are nevertheless 'in control' of the situation.

The SISJ propositions are generally well received, although passengers are unaware of the cost or varying degrees of difficulty of implementing the propositions. While few of them are felt to be particularly innovative, some – particularly those proposed to improve information

provision during disruption – are likely to lead to an improvement in satisfaction with the information provided. It is clear that the railways should progress these. This research gives a good indication as to which initiatives are likely to be of greatest benefit to passengers and which SISJ should prioritise for delivery.

And, while passengers are looking for the railway to make full use of technology in delivering information, the survey underlines the importance of having access to knowledgeable staff, particularly when trains are disrupted. Staff are also a vital source of information for those passengers unfamiliar with technology and unable or unwilling to use a computer, a smartphone or an electronic terminal at a station.

It is encouraging to see the SISJ programme testing its propositions with passengers. We encourage the rail industry to continue to put passengers' views at the heart of its activities.



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Transport Focus is the operating name of the Passengers' Council