

Transport Committee Inquiry

Minimum Service Levels for Rail

Submission from Transport Focus

Transport Focus is an independent, statutory consumer watchdog promoting the interests of transport users. Working with transport providers and Governments across England, Scotland and Wales we ensure that the users voice is heard.

Transport Focus's research¹ shows that recent strikes have had an impact on passengers. Of those who used or would have used a train in the last six months, 43 per cent said that their social/ personal life had been negatively affected by the strikes; with 23 per cent saying it had a negative impact on personal finance and 21 per cent on health and wellbeing; 14 per cent said it had a negative effect on their work / ability earn a living.

This is also reflected in attitudes towards train travel. Among those who used or would have used trains in the last six months:

- 67 per cent said that using trains was stressful.
- 75 per cent that uncertainty was making it difficult to plan journeys.
- 65 per cent were simply fed up with all the disruption.

As a result, almost half said that they were avoiding using trains as much as possible – with 28 per cent saying that they will still be reluctant to use trains once things are back to normal.

The Department of Transport has now published its own research on the impact of strikes². It too found that the strikes had an impact on work and leisure, with a relatively small proportion of respondents reporting impacts on access to healthcare or education.

The decision on what constitutes a minimum service level will be key. We are mindful that the Department for Transport has recently issued a public consultation on this and that sets out two broad options on how minimum levels could be set:

- Base minimum service levels on existing timetables.
- Design a priority route map of the rail network upon which minimum levels of service must be provided.

We will be looking at the merits of each as we prepare our response to that consultation. There are some big issues to be addressed in these deliberations – for instance:

¹ [Rail Strikes: impact on passengers](#). Transport Focus. 15 February 2023.

² [Rail strikes: Understanding the impact on passengers – summary findings](#). DfT. 20 February 2023

- Are services to be provided across the whole of the country or just on core mainline routes?
- Will services cover first to last services or just be restricted to core hours – such as 0700-1900?
- Do train companies know enough about their customers to be able to factor in social considerations - e.g. do they know if people are travelling to get to health care or education, the impact on livelihoods, and the proportion of people who have access to other means of travel?

There are, however, some general principles that we think must be taken into account:

- That minimum service levels can be delivered safely. The safety of passengers and staff must continue to be of paramount importance.
- That minimum service levels can be delivered reliably. Passengers need certainty at such times – they need to know in advance what is running so they can make their plans around it. To this end the timetable has to be dependable rather than heroic – i.e. that it promises what can be consistently delivered rather than what might be delivered only on a good day.
- That the industry messaging reflects the level set in the MSL. For example, if the minimum level is designed to provide an ‘essential service only’ then it must be accompanied by advice not to travel and appropriate refund arrangements.
- That passengers get a chance to contribute to the development of their MSL timetable. We believe it is right to involve passengers in the design of timetables, not only is it a demonstration of putting passengers first (a central theme of the Plan for Rail) but it is also the best way of identifying local travel needs.

Transport Focus
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