



‘Do not travel’

– what does it mean
to rail passengers?

August 2023

Foreword

Transport Focus has long championed the need to improve information during disruption on the railways.

Historically this has been the biggest driver of passenger dissatisfaction. We were therefore keen to work with the rail industry to research passengers' practical and emotional responses, when 'do not travel' advice is issued. How are those words interpreted? How do they make passengers feel? Do they achieve their objective? How could the information be improved? This report summarises what passengers told us.

Generally, passengers felt that the 'do not travel' messages shown in the research contained the information they needed. But it is crucial to note that many struggled with the whole notion that the railway runs trains but tells people not to use them.

Reactions range from baffling (not how a normal business would behave), to frustrating (being told not to use a train that is in fact

running) and irritating (a sense that the railway has no right to tell people, in effect, to stay at home). The industry must never lose sight of the fact it exists for people to travel and telling them not to do so must be an absolute last resort.

The research has generated valuable insight into how those three simple words 'do not travel' are received and provides pointers for improving communications during the severest disruption. In particular the railway should reflect on two important findings. First, that passengers want rail companies to give them the facts about what is happening, and they will decide whether to travel. And second, how important the right language is in achieving the outcomes the industry wants.

We look forward to helping the rail industry build these findings into its approach to managing severe disruption in future.

Anthony Smith
Chief executive

Background

Severe weather disruption on 31 October 2021, affecting travel to and from the COP26 climate summit in Glasgow, highlighted problems with how the rail industry communicates that passengers should avoid using the railway for a temporary period.

The rail industry through its Smarter Information Smarter Journeys programme coordinated an incident review taking feedback from Transport Focus, the Office of Rail and Road and those train companies impacted by disruption. The review identified a lack of consistency in the way operators used 'do not travel' messages, that conflicting advice had been given about ticket acceptance and that other advice could have been much clearer.

A working group was established to look at communication principles and messaging best practice for use during severe service disruption. Transport Focus, whose research shows the importance to passengers of good information during disruption, contributed to the group's work by delivering and co-funding research to better understand passengers' views.

Research objectives

The overarching objective of this research was to understand the most appropriate way to communicate with rail passengers at times of severe disruption. This included:

- testing what passengers understood existing 'do not travel' messages to mean
- whether they provide the right information for passengers to make informed decisions about their journey
- testing reaction to a range of potential improvements to existing 'do not travel' messaging, shown in the form of message templates developed by the industry
- exploring passenger behaviours and attitudes to travelling at times of severe disruption.
- obtaining feedback on example messages in terms of content, language used, tone and impact on passenger behaviour
- understanding if passengers' assessment of and reaction to 'do not travel' messages varies according to the stage of their journey.



Key findings

Passengers feel that the standard messaging is largely clear

Passengers feel that 'do not travel' messages currently used by train companies largely contain the information they expect to see or hear. While passengers did not feel that the language used in these messages was unclear,

they nevertheless thought there was room for improvement. They were particularly confused by terms such as 'ticket easement'. Overall, there is a clear need for messages to be in plain English.

Saying 'do not travel' when trains are still running is problematic

Passengers tended to assume that when a 'do not travel' message is issued there are no trains running. This creates confusion and frustration when the messages go on to explain there is

'major disruption'. It suggests, often accurately, that disrupted trains are still running, causing many to attempt to travel and question why they are being told not to.

Some will always try to make a journey in the face of disruption

Those who say they would still attempt to make their journey at times of major disruption tend to feel that their journey is not 'deferrable'. Also, some passengers draw on past experience of completing a train journey despite 'do not travel' advice. If train companies want

to encourage this latter group to defer their journey, they need to provide more information on the nature of the disruption. This means placing more emphasis in the messaging on likely travelling conditions and possible consequences.

The information passengers require varies depending on a range of factors

Overall, when faced with messaging about severe disruption on the rail network, passengers are more likely to defer their journey the earlier they are into it. Those who are at home or still relatively close to home, are more likely than others to consider deferring their travel. Appropriate messaging,

signposting and information provided in the right tone and at the right time, can make a significant difference to a passenger's decision about whether to travel - and can also impact a passenger's experience and their perception of the railway.



Findings in detail

Key factors determining a passenger's immediate reaction to a 'do not travel' message

Being told that you should not make a journey because of disruption is clearly a frustrating experience.

However, a person's reaction to this situation, and their propensity to try and make the journey by train anyway is dependent upon a range of factors, three being key.

- 1 **A passenger's stage of planning or making a journey when they receive the 'do not travel' message.** If they are at home, they are more able and therefore more likely to re-plan the journey or cancel it altogether. Conversely if someone has already left home or is at their destination and needs to return home, they are less able and less likely to defer a trip.

"If I was journey planning and I knew what the situation was, I wouldn't go to a station, I would save some my money or wait for the next day. But if I've already gone, and I'm on the train or trapped somewhere then it would make me angry, but I suppose you just have to go along with it."

Leisure traveller

- 2 **The degree to which a person has access to alternative ways of making their journey influences how they react to receiving a 'do not travel' message.** In this context, access to alternatives includes being able to make the journey by a different rail route or by a different mode of transport altogether.



"Because I don't drive things can get complicated with delays. I'd have to google it, plan ahead, call a taxi. It depends where you are but the bus would take too long. It's not a guarantee that you'll get there."

Leisure traveller

- 3 **How 'essential' or 'deferrable' a person considers their journey can considerably influence their reaction to a 'do not travel' message.** As explained later whether a journey is being made for work, or for leisure is important, but within those two purpose definitions there is a spectrum of attitudes towards the importance of reaching an intended destination.

Additional factors determining reaction to a 'do not travel' message

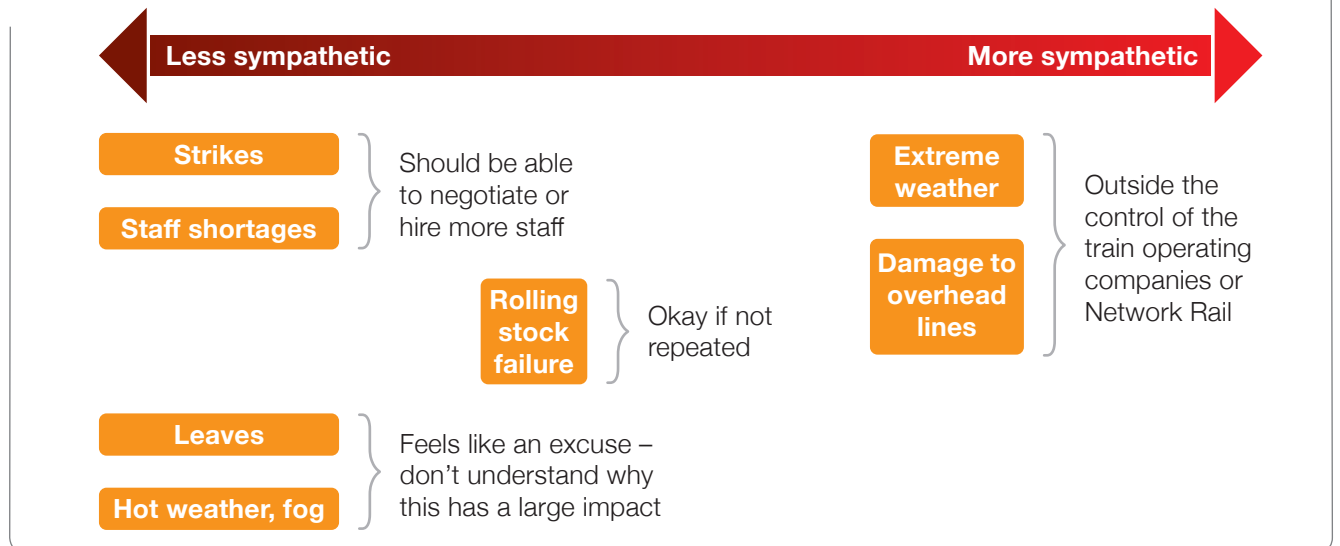
General attitude towards the railway

While immediate concerns have an impact on how people respond to a 'do not travel' message, a passenger's reaction is also influenced by their general attitude to the railway. That can be related to their recent or overall experience of using trains.

For instance, some passengers have become used to having to re-plan journeys following cancellations resulting from sustained periods of staff shortages. These experiences lead passengers to be more cynical about the advice they are given by a train operator.

The level of experience using trains influences the degree of sympathy people have towards rail companies when different reasons for disruption are communicated in a 'do not travel' message. When disruption is caused by reasons that appear to be outside the control of the rail company, such as extreme weather some sympathy is elicited. However, disruption caused by factors interpreted as being within the train company's control, such as a lack of staff is unlikely to be considered favourably by passengers.

Train passengers are naturally more sympathetic to some reasons for disruption than to others



Issues that are seen as preventable but are a repeated occurrence generate the greatest annoyance. Others, such as disruption caused by leaves on the line, hot weather, and fog cause frustration. They are seen as excuses, particularly by those who use trains regularly, driven by lack of understanding of why these things cause disruption.

Overall, infrequent leisure and occasional business travellers are slightly more sympathetic than frequent users of rail. For frequent passengers, hearing reasons repeatedly over many journeys adds to cynicism and distrust of rail companies. The impact on trust over time means that these passengers tend to need more information before they will accept advice that they shouldn't attempt to make their journey.

Distrust of and cynicism towards rail companies adds to the feeling that the railway should not be saying 'do not travel' if a service of some sort is being provided. For many this is driven by the view that rail

companies simply don't have the right to tell people how to act, unless there is a material risk to personal safety.

"It only makes sense if it's legislated. You're saying, you can't go into work or whatever it is you're going to. ...It's not their job to do that, so to categorically say 'do not travel', it's got to be a safety issue or a government issue, where they say not to travel, like in lockdown."

Commuter

Passengers in different situations with differing attitudes interpret 'do not travel' messages in a range of ways and rail companies need to be careful with the language they use. At a basic level there is a strong assumption among passengers that 'do not travel' means (or should mean) no trains are running at all. But others, particularly when the message includes reference to 'significant disruption', interpret the same message to mean that there are trains running but you should not use them. This raises a significant question among passengers: why would a train company run trains but tell people not to use them?

Journey purpose and individual circumstances

The purpose of the journey a passenger is making, or plans to make, has some impact on their response to a 'do not travel' message. However, the individual circumstances of the passenger and their motivation for making a journey is a more important factor in determining if they will attempt to travel.

Those who are making journeys to or from work are more likely than others to try to make their journey regardless of disruption. However, if someone is faced with 'do not travel' advice and can work from home they are likely to do so. Many cannot do their job from home or do not have permission to make that decision. They will be more likely to travel despite encouragement not to.

"If I saw a Do Not Travel, my priority is to see when the next train actually will be then deciding your plans around that. I'd talk to work, see if they'd let me work from home... it's more flexible now for me."

Commuter

Passengers travelling for leisure reasons will be guided by the type and nature of journey when deciding whether to travel. They may defer trips to see friends but consider travel to something that cannot be rearranged such as a sporting event, or to see a favourite band as essential and so will attempt to travel anyway.

Those travelling for business reasons (whether work-related or personal) will decide whether to attempt to travel depending on the nature of the reason for the journey. Work-related business travel will be deferred if the meeting can be re-arranged or undertaken on Zoom or Teams. Travel for hospital appointments, for example is more likely to be attempted given the probable delay if you ask to re-schedule an appointment.

Whether passengers would defer their journey on receipt of a Do Not Travel message is down to personal circumstance

Less likely to defer

Those with non-deferrable journeys

Family responsibilities – need to get back home

More experienced train travellers – likely to think they will get through

More cynical about being told what to do – unless no trains running

More likely to defer

Those with the most deferrable journeys

Those able to work from home

Family responsibilities – don't want to leave home and not get back

Those with less experience of train travel – will take messages on trust

Compared with other passengers, those with a disability are more likely to accept ‘do not travel’ advice. The reason for travelling is still relevant, but these passengers want to avoid the consequences of disruption, particularly if it exacerbates the effects of their disability. For example, wheelchair users might want to avoid having to use a replacement bus, overcrowded trains or risk last-minute platform changes.

However, passengers who have already booked assistance with their journey need early contact from their train operator to confirm whether their journey is or isn’t still possible, and if assistance will still be provided. Those with additional needs particularly

want to understand the likely travelling experience in order to make an informed decision about whether or not to make the journey.

“You had to give a lot more notice for someone like me. Somebody’s got to get you on the train at one end and off at the other. And then you need to find the disabled space (if it’s free).”

Disabled traveller (wheelchair user)

Passenger’s views about ‘do not travel’ messaging

Top of mind view

The research indicates that different journey scenarios and attitudes to rail, create different needs when it comes to ‘do not travel’ messages. It also indicates that matching the content and tone of the message to the needs of the passenger is crucial in helping that person decide their next steps.

As part of this research passengers were asked to recall their thoughts and feelings when they had heard ‘do not travel’ messages in the past. Most passengers remember being given a message that was ‘formal’ in tone, and then having little clarity about what they should do next.

Because the messaging lacked detail about the disruption, passengers reported that they then needed to do their own research to decide how they should act. To find the information they needed, passengers searched local news channels and used train company websites or apps.

Some mentioned that if they could not access these sources they had spoken to other passengers. When looking for additional information, passengers say their key needs are to understand what is happening, how long the disruption is expected to last and what their alternative travel options might be.

Passengers indicated that if they receive a ‘do not travel’ message while still at home they are likely to spend more time checking whether it is possible to make their journey than if they are on the way to the station. Passengers already on the train tend to be more invested in completing their journey and so their

information needs are different. These passengers, while reporting that they may look online for additional information, say that they are much more reliant on announcements on the train or at stations. They say they can’t always rely on having the signal, or battery life, required to go online to find the information that they need.

“I ended up using my Trainline app to try and work out what trains were actually coming.”

Leisure traveller

“I always expect to hear the information over a tannoy or something, at a station or on a train, on the boards.”

Occasional business traveller

Considered view, after reviewing mocked-up messages

During the research passengers were asked to consider mocked-up versions of the type of messages used during severe disruption.

In general passengers felt that the language used in this messaging is clear and concise, and it provides most of the information that they would expect to see. Passengers said that the messaging would be more helpful if it was received before they started their journey as opposed to during it. Passengers noted that if they saw the message before the return leg of

a journey then could be helpful. Although because they still need to get it home they would want to know about alternative ways to travel.

In terms of improvements to this version of the message, passengers suggested that it would be good to see it include information about alternative routes to complete their journey, greater detail on how to obtain financial compensation for the inconvenience, and clarity on which trains are running or not across the wider rail network.

The Met Office have issued amber and red weather warnings for gale force winds today because of Storm Eunice.

We are advising passengers NOT TO Travel today and to travel instead on Saturday 19 February.

Why might my train be affected by high winds?

High winds present the risk of debris being blown onto the tracks. Debris, such as trees, can block lines until they can be safely removed and in some cases, debris can cause damage to overhead wires and lineside equipment.

Check before you travel:

You can check your journey using the National Rail Enquiries real-time Journey Planner. Journeys affected by real-time disruptions will carry a yellow warning triangle where you can click to find more information.

Twitter:

If you would like to follow this incident on Twitter, please use #StormEunice

Compensation:

You may be entitled to compensation if you experience a delay in completing your journey today. Please keep your train ticket and make a note of your journey, as both will be required to support any claim.

“I think in terms of the information that’s there, it is quite good. It’s giving you the reason, giving you the time it’s going to be resolved by, and it’s told you the areas that are disrupted. So what’s there is good, it just needs a bit more information.”

Commuter

DO NOT TRAVEL with Avanti West Coast TODAY (21/09/2022)

There is major disruption due to heavy snow.

We expect this incident to be resolved by 19:00

Other versions of the messages used by train companies are well received by passengers who think that the language is clear and informative. The reason for the disruption given in these messages is seen as credible and the tone of the message is perceived as authoritative. However some say that they expect an apology to be added to acknowledge the inconvenience and poor experience.

Passengers appreciated that these versions of 'do not travel' messages included an estimate of when the situation would be resolved. Ideally it should be more definite than 'we expect that' so they could plan their next steps more accurately.

For some, use of the train company name in the message raised questions about whether their whole network was disrupted – which they thought would be rare. Passengers tend not to know all the routes operated by a train company and this raises questions about alternative routes that would be available. If the disruption has prevented the operation of the whole network, then passengers think that it would be clearer to say that there are no trains running. A message which says 'do not travel' at the same time as indicating that some trains are running can be confusing.

Suggestions for improving 'do not travel' messaging

Make the reason for disruption clear

Passengers feel that the types of 'do not travel' message currently used are generally helpful and provide them with the information they need to determine how they should act when there is severe disruption.

However, the research indicated there are areas for improvement. Particularly the messaging needs to work better to resolve the confusion/frustration that some passengers feel when they are being told not to use trains that are in fact running.

The research showed the reason a train company gives for disruption can have a significant impact on how someone will act. There are some situations where passengers don't fully understand why the reason given has caused such severe disruption. In these situations passengers can begin to distrust the messages and attempt to travel anyway.

Passengers said that the more train companies openly explain the rationale for issuing a 'do not travel' message, the more likely they are to accept the advice. The reasons given for the disruption can be less effective if they are seen as precautionary. For example 'forecast of heavy snow' rather than a response to something that has or is happening. Typically, passengers believe that forecasts can be wrong and messaging of this type introduces doubt that there will actually be a problem.

"I get it... 'do not travel' but I need more information than what they are offering, I find a bit confusing if they don't tell us why. Are the trains running or not? Is it safe to even get on them if we have to?"

Leisure traveller

Appeal to passengers' sense of social responsibility

When thinking about the apparent contradiction between being told not to use trains and the fact a service is available, passengers tend not to consider that a limited service may have been kept running for those making genuinely essential journeys. Messages that are explicit about this may help to reduce this confusion, increase the likelihood of people not trying to make journeys that could be deferred, and encourage people to feel they are acting helpfully by deferring their journey.

Similarly, the 'do not travel' messaging currently used by train companies does not explain that making a journey which could be deferred may have negative effects on others. For example using up limited

capacity on a skeleton service so space is not available for somebody making a genuinely essential journey. Communicating this in the right way to invoke a sense of social responsibility could help to discourage some from making journeys when there is severe disruption, making a 'do not travel' message more effective.

There is a preference among passengers to be told only to travel 'if essential' rather than 'if necessary'. They feel that the term 'essential' has a serious tone and offers slightly less room for choice or flexibility than 'necessary'. This demonstrates that the nuances of language used in 'do not travel' messaging are of key importance in determining the way in which passengers will act.

Tell passengers what their experience is likely to be/what the consequences could be

"Please think carefully before travelling due to overcrowding', 'if your journey is not essential maybe consider using an alternative form of travel for your own comfort', something like that, just to make it a bit more customer focused."

Occasional business traveller

The research indicated that by outlining the potential consequences of attempting to make a journey when there is severe disruption, or by communicating what the experience is likely to be if they do, train companies can reinforce messages about the impact of disruption and encourage more passengers not to travel. The potential to become stranded for instance, is not spontaneously considered by passengers. Making it clear that a train company cannot guarantee you will get to your destination by train or any other means, or if you set off and can't 'get through' it may not be possible to get back to where you started, could act as a deterrent to some.

Clear messaging that, if people decide to travel at times of disruption they are likely to have an uncomfortable experience can work to deter some people from making deferrable journeys. In particular, passengers indicated they would be more likely not to travel if overcrowding is probable, the possibility of severe delay or becoming stranded because trains are too full to carry everyone, was communicated. Passengers say that adding a message that indicates if they attempt to travel it will be 'at their own risk' could be effective if the risks are clear.

Using adjectives such as 'serious', 'severe', or 'major' can emphasise the extent of the disruption and cause people to re-think their need to make a journey. For some, saying that travel by train is not 'recommended' or 'advised' softens the tone given that the final decision about whether to attempt to travel is up to them.

"I think the wording is really good to sort of strong words like severely and significant, okay, it's like, letting you know that there is going to be like, it's going to be a lot of drama."

Commuter

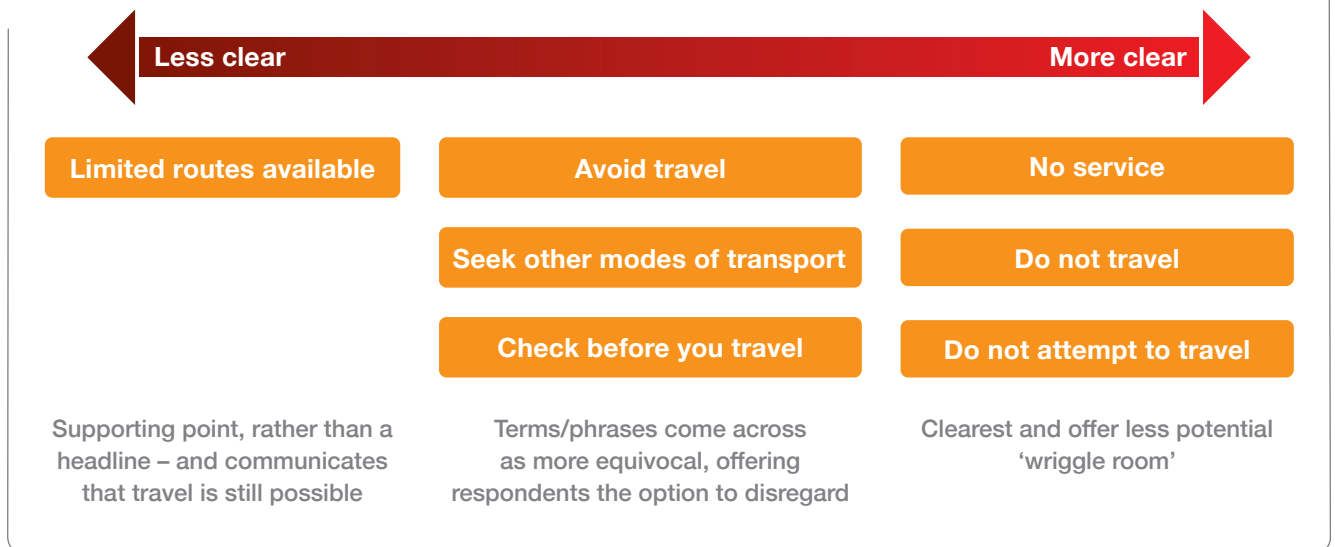
Use of language is of key importance

Overall, the research shows that the exact nature of the language used in a 'do not travel' message is key in determining how a passenger feels they should act during severe disruption. This is partly related to the industry using technical terms or railway phrases that many passengers do not fully understand.

The research found that the terms which work best

do not rely on knowledge of the industry and are closer to a clear instruction than to 'advice'. For instance, saying there are 'limited routes available' is not helpful to passengers as it is vague. This suggests there are still trains running somewhere, while phrases like 'avoid travel' or 'check before you travel' come across as more equivocal and less easy to disregard.

Some of the industry terms which are used in do not travel messaging have clearer meanings to passengers than others



Acceptance and easements

Other industry terms which can cause confusion among passengers relate to ticket validity during severe disruption. Phrases used by train companies relating to ticket 'acceptance' are felt to be reasonably clear, and passengers spontaneously relate this language to ticket 'validity' and which

tickets can be used on alternative rail routes. While this language is understood by passengers, there can be confusion when 'cross industry' ticket acceptance is mentioned, as some assume this means that tickets could be used on all forms of public transport.

"I don't think easements a great word, a lot of people might not know what that means. I think there's definitely a better way of wording it."

Commuter

"I've never heard that word [easements] before. Certainly, it would be really confusing. And I didn't know what it means at all. It just sounds like jargon."

Occasional business traveller

While the idea of ticket ‘acceptance’ is broadly understood, the ticket ‘easement’ is less familiar to passengers. While an ‘easement’ can cover the relaxation of restrictions about where and when a train ticket can be used, passengers are generally unfamiliar with this.

They require an exact explanation of how they can use their ticket. While ticket ‘easement’ is understood if explained to passengers, the word is not regarded positively as it is seen as jargon and is indicative of unclear language sometimes used by train companies.

“The last one is clear, ‘use of tickets on alternative routes’. So if you’re going from say Liverpool to Edinburgh and part of the lines closed you can use an alternative route as long as you’re going from A to B. Doesn’t matter which route you go, it will still be accepted.”

Commuter



How we did this research

In September 2022 Transport Focus commissioned the research agency Define Insight and Strategy to undertake qualitative research to explore rail passengers’ reactions in relation to ‘do not travel’ messaging. In October and November 2022, Define spoke online with more than 100 rail passengers, undertaking several ‘quads’ (groups of four passengers), ‘trios’ (groups of three passengers) and in-depth interviews with individual passengers.

Discussion groups were divided in terms of usual journey purpose, so that they comprised regular commuters, leisure travellers, and those travelling for occasional business reasons. Individual in-depth interviews were undertaken with a series of rail passengers with different forms of disability. In recruiting participants to the research Define also considered where the rail passengers were making journeys so that the research covered northern and southern England, as well as Wales and Scotland.

Journey/passenger type			
Commuter	Leisure traveller	Occasional business traveller	Disabled passengers
8 quads/trios	8 quads/trios	8 quads/trios	10 in-depth interviews

Contact Transport Focus

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