



What makes for a clean and safe railway?

December 2023

Foreword

We know from our research how important cleanliness and personal security are to passengers. This was confirmed in our 2022 report *Britain's railway – what matters to passengers*. But what exactly is it that passengers are concerned about when rating cleanliness or personal security?

In terms of cleaning, the research singles out toilets as a particular bone of contention, but what else? Is it the floors, the seats, the windows? Is it mud, spills, chewing gum, litter? In terms of personal security is it lighting, being alone, being in a crowded environment, worries about others' behaviour on late night trains?

The Department for Transport (DfT) sets standards for train operators' performance which include cleanliness and factors relating to personal security. It values the data from research such as *Britain's railway – what*

matters to passengers that shows how important these issues are, but what is it specifically that passengers want to see (or, maybe, don't want to see) at stations and on trains? Is the travel environment meeting their expectations and if not, what are the problems they want to see addressed?

Transport Focus has worked with the DfT on a qualitative research programme that seeks to understand what it is about cleanliness and personal security that creates a lasting memory of a passenger's journey. We believe the research reported here will help focus attention on the things that really matter when it comes to cleanliness, maintenance and personal security, leading to a better passenger experience and higher levels of satisfaction.

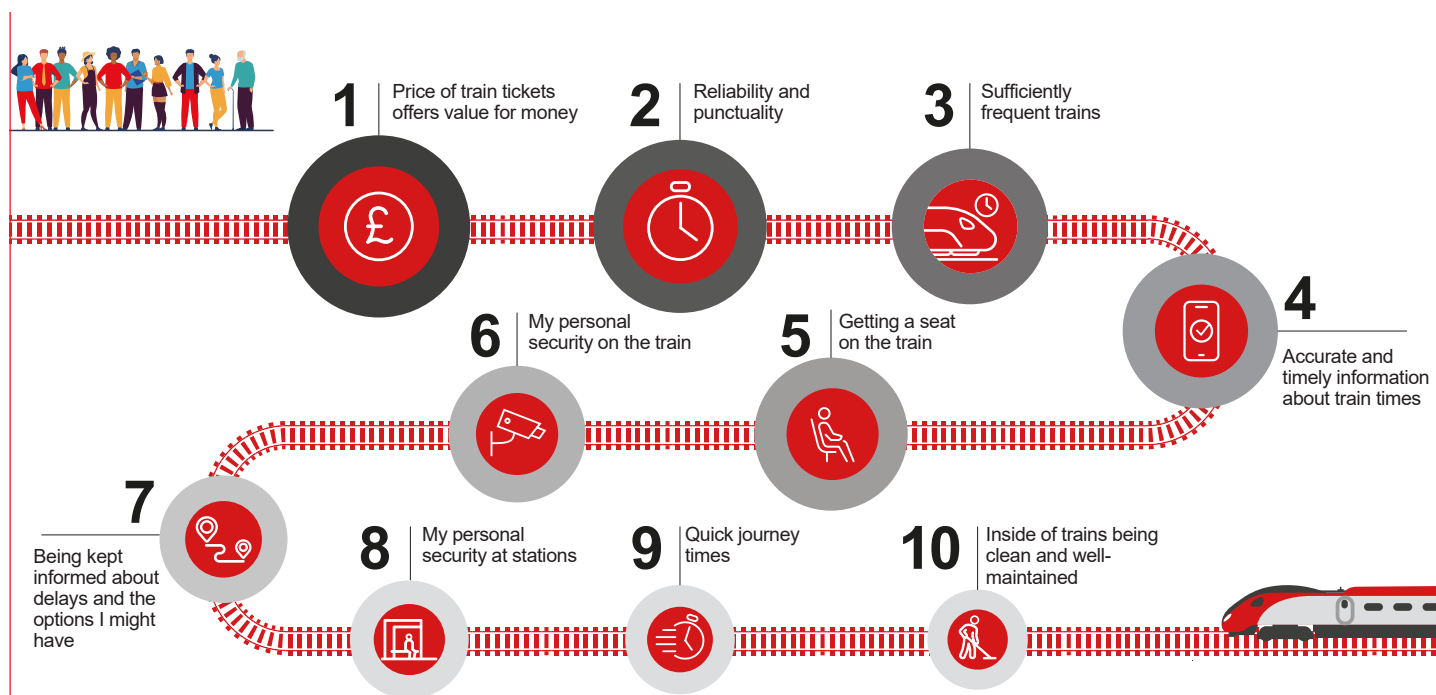
Alex Robertson
Chief executive

The importance of cleanliness and personal safety

In *Britain's railway – what matters to passengers*¹ we asked rail passengers what is important to them when travelling by train. As illustrated in the graphic below, the top three issues are the price of train tickets offering value for money, the combination of reliability

and punctuality, and having sufficiently frequent trains. Out of a total of 25 considerations, 'My personal security on the train' comes in at number six and '...at stations' at number eight. The 'Insides of trains being clean and well maintained' sits in tenth position.

What matters to rail passengers in Great Britain – the top 10



Icon size in the red circles relates to what matters to rail passengers. The more important, the larger the icon.

How passengers prioritise other areas

- 11th A railway that can cope with adverse weather events e.g. snow, wind, flooding and extreme heat
- 12th Easy to buy the right ticket
- 13th Trains and stations easily accessible by older and disabled people and those with pushchairs, bicycles, luggage etc.
- 14th Good connections with other train services
- 15th Engineering works planned to keep passenger disruption to a minimum
- 16th Comfortable seats on trains
- 17th Good connections with other public transport at stations
- 18th Well-maintained, clean toilets on the train
- 19th An environmentally responsible railway that is reducing its carbon emissions
- 20th Helpful staff at stations
- 21st Stations being clean and well-maintained
- 22nd Helpful staff on trains
- 23rd Reliable Wi-Fi and mobile reception on trains
- 24th Easy to claim compensation when delayed
- 25th Sufficient space on the train for luggage

¹ Please see: <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/publication/britains-railway-what-matters-to-passengers/>

What makes for a clean and safe railway?

Clearly, personal security and cleanliness/upkeep in its various guises, both at stations and on trains, are key elements of the passenger experience. Getting these right contributes to overall passenger satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

At the same time, these are necessarily rather generic categories that encompass a wide range of issues. What exactly is it that creates a sense of personal security – or insecurity? What is it that impacts passengers' views that a train is clean – or dirty? What is it that the railway should be doing to

improve its performance on these metrics? What initiatives will passengers actually notice?

This research set out to unpick what contributes to passengers' perceptions of personal security, cleanliness and upkeep. We began with an evaluation of the cultural codes of cleanliness and personal security. This fed into a programme of focus groups and depth interviews where we talked with passengers about their experiences and expectations and about what might be acceptable and what is clearly not. Further details about our approach are in the appendix.



What makes for a clean and safe railway?

We felt there was work to be done before embarking on original research to explore what it is that forms passengers' perception of cleanliness and personal security on the railway. We undertook a 'semiotic analysis' of what these concepts mean to society today and what 'codes' exist. This is both for public spaces in general, but also specifically in connection with public transport and particularly train travel.

Semiotic analysis

Semiotics is a recognised way of understanding our worlds. Everything we do, our actions and behaviours, is driven by the cultural world in which we live. Culture determines our values, beliefs and drives our decisions. Semiotics seeks to uncover the hidden

mechanics that underpin consumer understanding of culture, ideas and brands. Semiotics is best imagined as a set of lenses through which we can view culture and make sense of it in useful new ways.

By exploring the codes of culture semiotics aims to establish the hidden forces that construct meaning and to identify areas for development that may not have been identified through other means. It pulls out patterns and explains the symbolism that constructs all our lives from the profound to the mundane, the complex to the simple.

The findings of this analysis are available on our website. However, the semiotic work concludes with photographic examples of good and poor cleanliness and personal security along with what is expected in these spaces which we reproduce here:

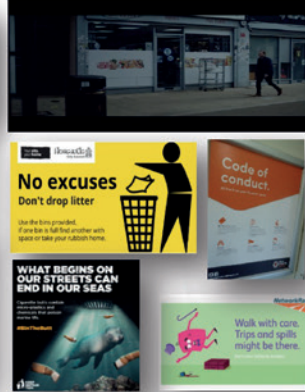
Summary of cleanliness in public spaces

Poor



Inconsiderate, anti-social behaviour (encouraged by poor environments).
Passive aggression.

Expectation



Clear, expected codes of behaviour. Narrative of cause and affect.

Good



Visible action. Simplicity and clarity. Symbiotic care between organisation and community. Openness, light, air, space. Positive human attitude. Positive results driven.

Summary of personal security in public spaces

Poor



Dark fear. Passive aggression. Poorly manned/accessible/lit/managed environments.

Expectation



Expected signs and symbols. Straightforward articulation. Reassurance.

Good



Need for belonging/inclusion. Community action. Human understanding and connection (inc. passive surveillance). Sensorial emotional reassurance.

Much of the significance of the 'codes' that the analysis identified and their implications for public transport is

reflected in the findings of the subsequent focus groups and in the imagery gathered during the research.

Key findings and recommendations

Taking our knowledge of just how important an element of the rail journey experience cleanliness and personal safety are, and building on the outputs of the semiotic analysis, we conducted a number of focus groups and individual depth interviews to take a 'deep dive' into what it is about cleanliness, upkeep and personal security that matters most to passengers. Below, we summarise the key findings on specific topics and make a number of recommendations as to how the railway should address these points.

Cleanliness

Cleanliness matters not only for appearance's sake but also for hygiene reasons and because passengers don't want dirt or germs to transfer to themselves or their clothes. Cleanliness encompasses several aspects as detailed below. There is also a sense that a clean and well-maintained environment is safer, in part because cleaning implies a staff presence. It can also encourage people to 'do their bit' to use bins and keep the surroundings looking presentable.

Litter

Litter is unsightly at the best of times; passengers will remove 'dry' litter from tables and seats if they need to, but would rather passengers took it with them or that it was cleared by staff. They appreciate staff coming through a train during its journey and collecting rubbish. Litter can also be a safety hazard, particularly 'wet' litter that may present a tripping or slipping risk.

Recommendation

How the railway handles litter is important for the passenger experience. Passengers expect litter to be removed (and tables cleaned where necessary) after a train arrives at its destination and before passengers board for the return journey. Litter collections during the journey are seen to help keep the train clean and tidy but many passengers will abandon unwanted items as they disembark the train.

Passengers can be remarkably forgiving if at the end of a long journey, or just the end of the day, there is a build-up of rubbish, but they don't expect it still to be there first thing the next day as the train re-enters service.

Recommendation

Failure to clean an early morning train of the litter from its last journey the previous night is seen as unacceptable.

Hygiene

Cleanliness also relates to hygiene. This research was conducted after Covid restrictions had been lifted and there was, perhaps surprisingly, little mention of Covid per se. Passengers were more inclined to consider diseases as a whole, with flu and colds being of just as much concern.

While perhaps tolerating discarded newspapers and packaging, passengers are less accepting of things like food scraps, coffee dregs, spills and discarded chewing gum with the potential to soil clothes as well as tables and seats. Such litter is viewed as unhygienic, as is the smell of urine, whether that be in direct relation to toilets on trains and at stations, or an unpleasant smell when other locations such as subways have perhaps been used inappropriately.

Recommendation

The railway might wish to consider messaging that asks passengers to take their litter with them and/or to dispose of it in a bin as they disembark or, assuming there is adequate provision, on the platform at their destination.

Passengers can be frustrated at the apparent absence of litter bins both on trains and at stations. The capacity of bins is also a concern, with many often overflowing and/or not emptied frequently enough. Bins can encourage passengers to be tidy and to dispose of their rubbish in an appropriate manner. A lack of bins or bins that are overflowing does not help passengers to 'do the right thing'. Rubbish spilling

from a bin can also become a safety hazard causing trips and falls. In an ideal world, passengers would like to see more segregated bins with recycling and landfill waste having different compartments.

Recommendation

The railway should seek to ensure adequate provision of litter bins at stations and on trains, and potentially improve signposting as to where they are. It should also ensure they are emptied regularly. Segregated bins for recycling and landfill waste would impress some passengers.

Toilets

Toilets are also a focus for criticism both on trains and at the majority of stations (larger city centre stations may fare better) to the extent that many passengers claim they would rather 'hold it' than use such facilities. Offensive smells from toilets are taken as a sign of poor cleanliness and upkeep.

Recommendation

The railway should recognise the importance passengers place on the cleaning and upkeep of toilet facilities. While they are unlikely ever to attract passengers to the railway, well presented, clean-smelling toilets can create a good impression and counteract the expectation of poor-quality facilities. A record of when the facility was last inspected and cleaned is common in other public spaces and may be worthy of greater adoption on the railway.

Floors and windows

Passengers acknowledge that it can be challenging to keep station and train floors clean during bad weather, but they still expect the railway to make more of an effort to mop up rain water and mud than just putting out 'Danger – slippery floor' cones. In the main, passengers feel that reasonable measures are taken to grit platforms and walkways during ice or snow. Not a great deal was said about the cleanliness of train windows other than by leisure passengers wanting to look at the view and admire the scenery.

Recommendation

The railway's cleaning and maintenance regimes need to take account of the British weather. Passengers on scenic routes in particular will appreciate clean windows that allow them to take in the view.

Upkeep of train and station

Upkeep generally relates to keeping what is there on a train or at a station in good condition. Passengers accept that trains will show their age over time, although they also acknowledge that periodic refurbishment can extend the life of rolling stock in particular. The condition of seats can be a key indicator of how well a train is being maintained. Worn upholstery is not of itself a serious concern so long as it looks clean, but torn seats, missing headrests/cushions and ingrained chewing gum will cause passengers to seek a better seat.

Recommendation

The railway should endeavour to see that seats are cleaned regularly (or the seat replaced) and that torn seat coverings and missing headrests are replaced at the earliest opportunity. Many passengers think more should be done to enforce the 'keep feet off seats' message.

Maintenance of mechanical aspects of trains is not generally mentioned as a concern although engine noise and exhaust fumes may lead some to question whether the mechanics have been properly maintained and indeed even whether the train is safe to run.

Personal safety

Personal safety is of particular concern to women and girls and especially so at night, although some men share this concern particularly after sporting events. Many men acknowledge this concern to the extent that some indicate a willingness to intervene if others' behaviour gives cause for concern, while others can feel uncomfortable if they are the only other person near a lone female. Large groups can be intimidating especially sports fans and/or if they have been drinking alcohol.

On the whole there is acceptance of people 'having a good time' so long as this doesn't get out of hand. While 'loud' groups may be annoying on a busy train, there is a sense of safety in numbers whereas they can be intimidating if there are few or no other passengers about. A police presence on match days or after major events such as concerts is generally reassuring.

'Visibility' plays a clear role in terms of making passengers feel safe. This covers both seeing and being aware of potential threats in advance, as well as being visible to others, both passengers and staff, who may be a source of assistance should it be required. Good lighting can reduce the existence of 'dark corners' where somebody might hide and large windows to waiting rooms and shelters can provide reassurance that you can be seen by others.

Closed circuit television (CCTV) can be reassuring but is not necessarily top of mind nor are passengers always aware of its presence. CCTV footage is seen as valuable after an incident has occurred but passengers are not sure that the cameras would prompt an immediate response while the incident is ongoing. They do not know if CCTV is constantly monitored or

simply recording video footage. And some question whether the cameras are even working, particularly if the station environment is run down and neglected. The same concern goes for station help points. Although they are clearly a valuable source of potential help, passengers wonder where that 'help' is located and whether it can provide timely support if something does go wrong.

Recommendation

The railway should consider giving more prominence to the existence of CCTV at stations and on trains – particularly where it is actively monitored (including, in future, where control teams can monitor on-train systems).

So, are we asking the right question?

It appears there are few *positive* indicators of a clean and safe railway. Passengers find it far easier to describe what makes for an *unclean* and *unsafe* environment at stations and on trains. It may be far easier for the railway to think in terms of addressing the *negative* indicators.

Removing litter and graffiti immediately improves the appearance of an area and addresses a major contributor to uncleanliness. Ensuring there are (regularly emptied) litter bins is then a positive action to encourage passengers to take care of their environment. Puddles, spills and uneven surfaces are both safety hazards and also indicators of neglect and can create the impression that a station is run down. Good lighting can help to counteract this while also eliminating dark spots where a threat might lurk. While passengers value shelter from the elements, ensuring they can still see – and be seen by – others reduces concerns around personal security.

CCTV and help points have the potential to make a valuable contribution to personal security. But even if passengers are aware of their existence, they still have concerns as to whether the technology is working and whether anyone is monitoring the systems. The presence of other passengers and, where provided, railway staff, is enormously reassuring. And after large public gatherings such as sporting events or concerts, a police presence is also welcome.

Not every line can have the latest rolling stock or a

rebuilt station. Passengers accept that some trains – and stations – will be older than others. Old is, of itself, not a negative, so long as things are well maintained and kept clean. For some stations, their 'heritage' can be part of their charm. But the sounds made by older trains, and the exhaust fumes and smell they generate can be a detractor.

Passengers have low expectations of railway toilets, be that at a station or on a train. Some will swear never to use them, but for most they are a necessary facility. Cleanliness – seen as the absence of dirt, litter, spills and smells – is of utmost concern, primarily out of hygiene considerations – and more so than for other parts of a station or train. But not having toilets at stations can lead to impromptu use of dark corners and alleyways with unpleasantness and smell as a result.

A clean, well-maintained railway providing a safe journey environment is a basic passenger expectation. The railway should not expect massive thanks for getting these basics right on a day-to-day basis. However, renovating a run-down station, an occasional fresh coat of paint or brightening up the surroundings, perhaps with some plants, murals or pictures of local highlights, may help with overall satisfaction and propensity to travel. What is clear is that failing to address these factors can contribute to a negative experience and have a detrimental impact on passenger satisfaction and likelihood of choosing to take the train.

Research method

Transport Focus commissioned the research agency Quadrangle to run this research programme with two distinct elements.

To begin, Quadrangle worked with Ruth Somerfield Semiotics to conduct a semiotic evaluation of the cultural codes of cleanliness and personal security as detailed above and in the accompanying report available here: <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/publication/what-makes-for-a-clean-and-safe-railway/>.

The semiotic analysis fed into the second stage of the research in March 2023 consisting of:

- six focus groups, and
- eight individual depth interviews.

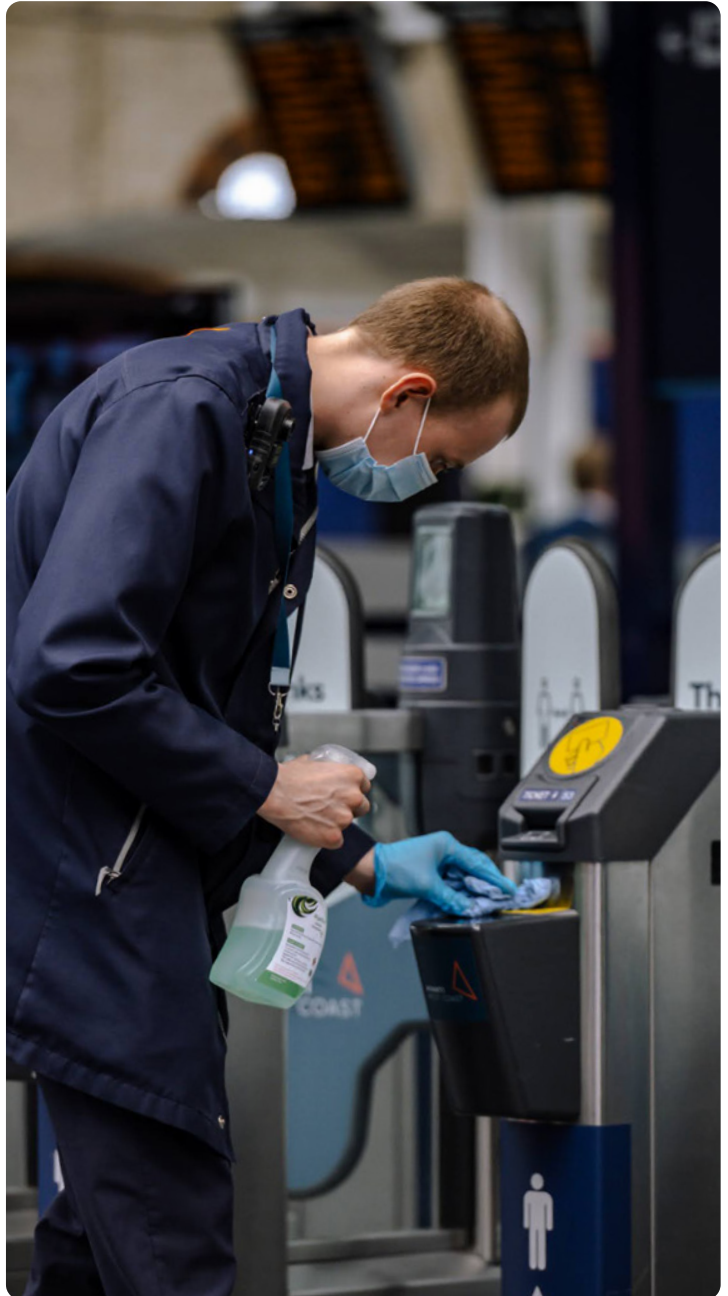
The groups were split by gender, with a view to generating a frank and open discussion around issues of personal security in particular, and were further split by area:

- North and Scotland
- East and South
- Midlands, West and Wales.

Within the groups we had a mix of ages, travel frequency, journey purpose (commuter, business, leisure), size of origin station and disability. The eight depth interviews were with passengers with additional needs and who were unable or unwilling to participate in the groups.

Participants were asked to complete an online diary in advance of attending the groups, noting and photographing examples of good and bad issues experienced when out in public generally and specifically when making a journey by public transport. Areas for exploration in the discussions built on the semiotic analysis.

Quadrangle's and Ruth Somerfield's reports, which form the basis for this summary report, are available on the Transport Focus website here: <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/publication/what-makes-for-a-clean-and-safe-railway/>.



Contact Transport Focus

Any enquiries about this research should be addressed to:

Keith Bailey

Senior insight advisor

Keith.Bailey@transportfocus.org.uk

www.transportfocus.org.uk

Albany House

94-98 Petty France

London

SW1H 9EA

Transport Focus is the operating name of the Passengers' Council