



The passenger experience resulting from the National Air Traffic Services (NATS) outage in August 2023

November 2024

Background

On Monday 28 August 2023, August bank holiday, technical issues with the UK air traffic control computer systems operated by National Air Traffic Services (NATS) led to a large number of delayed and cancelled flights. Passengers were left stranded, and many holidays had to be re-booked or abandoned. As a result, the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) launched an independent review to understand why the incident happened and what could be done to prevent similar incidents in the future.

As an organisation whose role it is to represent the interests of transport users, Transport Focus has extensive experience in understanding the needs of passengers who find themselves caught up in disruption. The CAA's independent review panel asked Transport Focus to speak with those who were impacted by the disruption, and to apply our experience to this specific situation.

At the start of 2024, with the assistance of the independent research agency Define, Transport Focus conducted qualitative research with those impacted by the issues on behalf of the panel. A summary of the findings from this research is provided below and will be included as an appendix to the panel's final report to the CAA.

This report looks to provide a sense of the impact of the incident on the passengers who were affected, how airlines and airports could have improved that experience and how the experience of air passengers compares with disruption on other modes of transport. The full research agency report of the findings is available on the Transport Focus website.

Key findings

The research reveals many insights related to the passenger experience of disruption caused by the issues with UK air traffic control on 28 August 2023, with the key findings being:

- the most important factors which would have made the passenger experience better were effective communication and information; a comfortable airport environment; and greater availability of staff;
- passengers were generally unaware of their rights as consumers in the event of disruption of the sort they experienced; and
- while some passengers received some recompense for the costs they incurred because of the issues, others were left to make their own arrangements and have not yet been reimbursed for expenditure on new flights or additional accommodation.



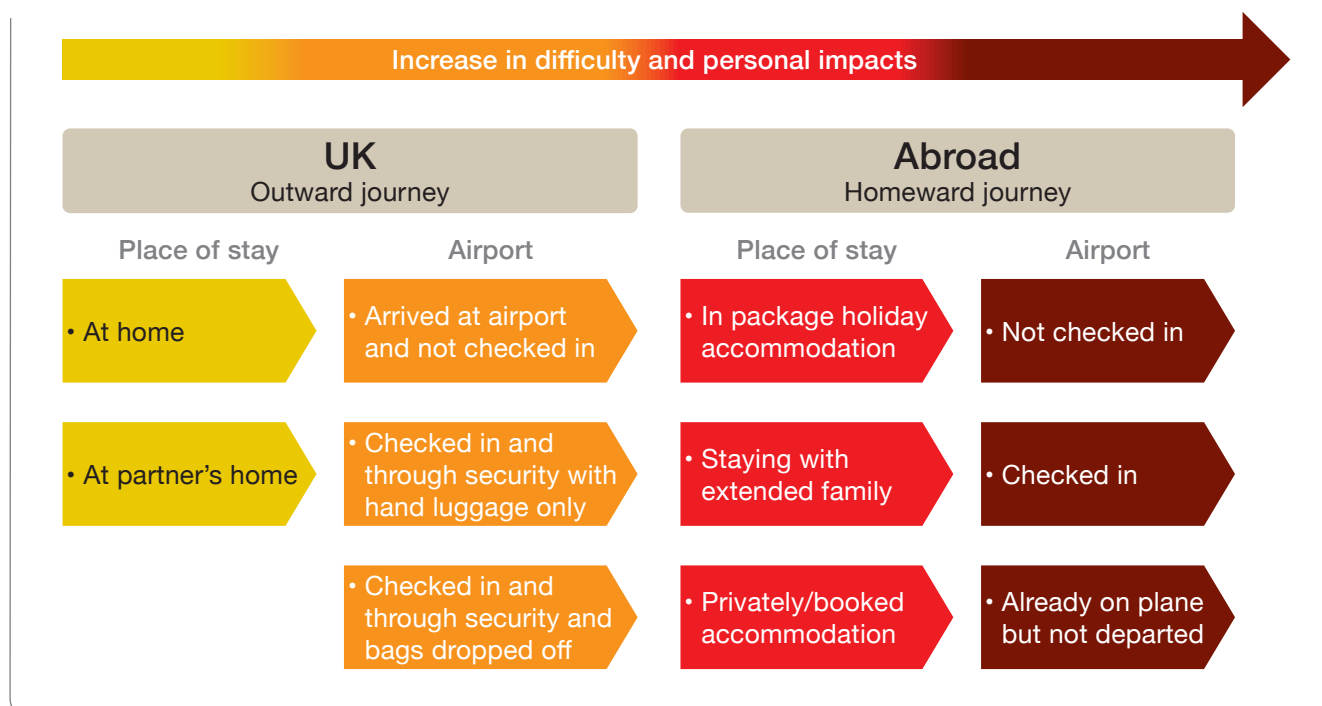
A passenger's specific circumstances are important to their experience

Where passengers were when they found out about the air traffic control issues made a big difference to their subsequent experience, and to the options they had available to them to make alternative arrangements. Those who were at home in the UK before travelling to the airport to start their journey tended to be affected less, while those at airports abroad experienced more difficulties.

“What I was happy about was that I was in London and not abroad when it was delayed or cancelled, because at least I knew that if the flight’s cancelled, I could just go home. It’s not like the end of the world, but if I’m stuck in a foreign country, it’s just harder.”

Male, 28, London (Luton to Milan)

Where passengers were when the issues happened made a difference to their options and experience



In line with this, the further passengers were into their journey from the UK, the greater the level of help and support they required. Those passengers whose flights were cancelled after a lengthy wait at the airport tended to be those who were most frustrated by their experience. Passengers who were abroad at the time of the air traffic control issues needed more communication from those they had booked flights and holidays with. This included their options for, and support with, rebooking flights and accommodation. When this type of information was provided it helped to reduce passengers' worries about how they would get home.

“Obviously, we needed somewhere to stay. We were worried that when we were going to check out of the hotel that there would be no room to stay there an extra couple of nights.”

Male and female, 56-58, Hertfordshire (Prague to Heathrow)

Passengers with children had additional concerns relating to the comfort, wellbeing, and safety of their children and they needed additional support – such as being able to access more comfortable

passenger lounges. Similarly, passengers with mental or physical health conditions had other additional needs, such as access to medication.

“I just wanted to get somewhere where I could get in the suitcases to get the medication. The rest of the medication had been put in the suitcases to go home.”

Female, 54, Sheffield, (Rhodes to East Midlands)

“We went upstairs and sat with all our bags in the cafeteria, because I just thought ‘I can’t be standing around with a three-year-old for ages’ – because it’s going to be very quick that she starts to get bored, tired, frustrated.”

Female, 44, Kent (Gatwick to Nice)

Passengers were affected in different ways

The extent to which each passenger involved in the research was affected by the air traffic control issues varied, but in some cases the impact was extensive. The impacts tended to fall into three categories:

- issues related to loss of earnings from employment or to additional costs incurred;
- those which were more practical in nature such as time having been wasted at airports; and
- disruption to other arrangements and more emotional impacts related to the stressful nature of the situation.

Finally, some passengers who had to make their own arrangements for getting back to the UK incurred significant additional costs; they have not all received a refund from airlines who have told them that the disruption was out of their control.

“My husband owns his own business, so he had to be shut for longer which meant a loss of earnings.”

Female, 31, London (Larnaca to Heathrow)

“Our costs were £230, and we got £175. They were very picky under the circumstances...we were delayed about 30 hours...The claim was sent in at the beginning of September and the money came in at the start of November.”

Male, 31, Manchester (Palma to Manchester)

The extent of the financial impact on passengers depended on their location at the time of the disruption, the length of the delay experienced, how much support they received, and what they have subsequently been refunded. Passengers delayed for only a few hours did not incur additional costs and therefore received no refund, while some who had whole holidays or flights cancelled were fully refunded.











Other passengers that we spoke to have received partial reimbursement of additional costs incurred or have been refunded for the cancelled flight but not for the accommodation they had to book as a result.

“The next morning, we got onto the BA site and started putting all the information in. And it actually took 3 months for them to pay out compensation. We eventually got it the end of November. I was actually pulling my hair out and trying to find the right department, because, like everything else, they just put you on hold.”

Male and Female, 56-58, Hertfordshire (Prague to Heathrow)

The disruption caused wide-ranging impacts on passengers

Individuals varied in terms of which and how many impacts they experienced but for some these were extensive

Financial & employment	Practical	Emotional
 Loss of earnings for self-employed passengers	 Time wasted at airports	 Stress – Compounded if time-sensitive things to sort out or if involving others or specific risks
 Additional costs on accommodation, flights, food and drink or lost money spent on accommodation that they couldn't use	 Arrangements for things like childcare and pet care was disrupted	 Anxiety – If feeling vulnerable
 Annual leave – • Additional annual leave had to be taken by some employees • Using up annual leave for a trip that did not happen	 Missing days of holidays	 Anger – Where experiencing a lack of support and / or unable to take control of situation themselves
	 Missed appointments and events	

How could airlines and airports have improved the experience for passengers?

Passengers we spoke to identified three key areas where their experience might have been improved:

1. Communication and information

The lack of timely, clear and transparent information was passengers' main issue with the way in which the disruption was handled. Some passengers received information which was useful and reduced the impact of the disruption. But most of those we spoke to had experienced lack of effective communication about what was happening and how they would be disrupted.

For many, where information was provided it was thought to be unclear and lacking transparency, and when trying to contact airlines for information, passengers found that websites and telephone systems were not able to cope with the numbers of people trying to access support.

“It was disappointing that we hadn't been informed. I wouldn't have wasted my time going to the airport and they had my contact details so they could have done. No nothing. It was literally when we got to the airport. And the only telltale sign, which I didn't pick up on at the time, was the masses of people.”

Male and female, 55 and 45, London (Heathrow to Spain)

“The airline, frankly, was impossible to get hold of – once I left the airport and started calling to figure out what happens with the flights, I couldn’t get through for more than 24 hours.”

Female, 44, Kent (Gatwick to Nice)










“For 10 hours we sat in limbo, not sure what was going on. There were 5 or 6 separate delays. We went 4 hours with no update.”

Male, 31, Manchester (Italy to Manchester)

Passengers we spoke to during the research told us that at the time of the disruption they would have found proactive and timely information helpful. Starting from an initial message warning that there may be disruption, they noted that they then needed regular updates via apps, email, text, airport public address systems and information boards.

Passengers highlighted the following as things they wanted clearer, transparent communication about from airports and airlines or holiday providers

- **Initial notification that forewarns that there may be disruption** – to manage expectations, help passengers to prepare for delays, and find out more information before they set off for the airport
- Explanation that there is a technical issue with ATC, that it's **out of their hands, but they are doing everything they can to find a solution and will keep passengers updated as they know more**
- **Communications** sent via various methods to maximise chances of being received and viewed

Delayed	Cancelled
 Length of delay	 Confirmation of cancellation through proactive push communication to prevent people travelling to the airport unnecessarily
 Information about what their options are and what support they are entitled to (could be provided via a leaflet that supports information from other channels)	 Clear information about their options for rescheduling or seeking a refund (with links to relevant websites)
 Regular updates on flight status (even if nothing changes)	 Information about what support / compensation they are entitled to (could be provided online, or via a leaflet distributed at airport, as well as verbally by staff)
 Reason for delay (to help passengers understand the extent of the disruption)	 Reason for cancellation to provide justification
 Follow-up email acknowledging the disruption, apologising for any inconvenience experienced, clarifying what they are entitled to	

Those passengers who had been told that their flights were delayed wanted to then know the likely length of the delay, information about their options at that stage, and what support they were entitled to. Those with cancelled flights wanted clear confirmation of the cancellation through 'push' notifications to their phones or other devices. They wanted to know why their flight had been cancelled, what their options were for rescheduling or seeking a refund, and what support or compensation they might be entitled to.

2. Airport environment

Passengers reported that at the time of the disruption airports felt overcrowded. They also reported an increasingly chaotic atmosphere as people tried to find out what was happening to their flights. They found that there was a lack of comfortable places to sit, and that the situation became tense as people grew angrier and more frustrated.

"We missed our connection flight from Dublin so we had a 2-hour wait there and it was chaotic, it was really busy, and there weren't many places to sit. We couldn't all sit together which was unsettling."

Male and female, 44, South Wales
(Orlando to Heathrow, via Dublin)

"I've never seen anything like it, people just sat in the airport arguing and stressed out."

Female, 37, North East, (Leeds Bradford to Greece)

Passengers who we spoke to during the research felt that the atmosphere at airports could have been improved if more places to sit had been available, and if lounge areas had been opened up for those with additional needs. Passengers noted that during the disruption it was even more important than usual that toilets were kept functioning and regularly cleaned, and that food outlets were available and well stocked; in some cases they felt this did not happen. Some mentioned that as a gesture of goodwill the waiving of car parking charges at airports would have been welcome.

"The queue for the toilets were out the door. Everything was just so busy. You couldn't just go get a drink. It was unbearable really. The toilets weren't clean, people were hanging around in there too."

Male and female, 55 and 45, London (Heathrow to Spain)

"They could have opened more of these kinds of lounges that they have at airport earlier for people to access more facilities, more childcare facilities, more vulnerable care facilities."

Female, 34, London, (Heathrow to Mumbai)

"People were having to pay for car park pick up and drop off charges, they should have waived those. Bristol Airport made a killing."

Female, 65, Newport (Bristol to Zante)



3. Availability of staff

Passengers told us that during the disruption staff at the airports appeared to be handling the situation as best they could, but nevertheless presence of more staff would have helped. Where staff were absent passengers were critical because they felt they were left unsupported.

Passengers also said that they would have appreciated staff being more transparent about what they did or didn't know. They felt it was vital that staff demonstrate empathy towards passengers given the situation they found themselves in. Passengers wanted staff to provide clear information, or be honest if they didn't know what was happening, to help them feel supported.

“Every 15-20 minutes, the staff would come and give us an update. Often that update was, there is no update. But I think we all knew that they were closer to what was going on and any information coming through, was gonna get there.”

Male, 55, Cardiff, Business Traveler, (Palma -Bristol)

“People clearly knew there was chaos – even just some announcements to maybe say ‘we understand’ or even if you don't have all the information let people do a tannoy or at least have your app properly updated.”

Female, 44, Kent (Gatwick-Nice)



Passenger awareness of refund and reimbursement rights

The research particularly found that at the time of the disruption those impacted had very little knowledge of their rights as consumers. Moreover, even four months later when Transport Focus spoke with those whose journeys had been affected, passengers still didn't know what sort

of recompense they might be entitled to, or how to claim this. As mentioned, while some passengers received full or partial refunds, others in similar situations have been unable to recover significant sums of money spent on new flights or alternative accommodation.

Passenger experience of disruption on other modes of transport

Transport Focus has a wealth of knowledge about the impact of service disruption on those using different modes of transport. The experiences of air passengers caught up in last summer's problems have numerous parallels with those of other transport users, and in particular rail passengers.

We know that rail passengers want train companies to:

- treat them with respect – use sincere messaging and provide good, accurate explanations about delays and disruption;
- recognise their plight – understand the human impact of the change to their intended journey;
- help passengers avoid the problem in the first place – timely information to head people off at the pass wherever possible;
- get them home (rising to the challenge “you got me into this, now get me out of it”); and
- act joined up – a coherent response across different parts of the industry.

Communication and information

Information provision plays a significant part in addressing or exacerbating passenger frustrations in a rail context. This has been echoed in what air passengers have told us. Rail passengers say that information must be:

- clear
- accurate
- timely
- useful.



Transport Focus has consistently highlighted these areas as a result of our research with passengers into disruption management including: *Passenger Information when trains are disrupted 2014* and *Delays and Disruption – Rail passengers have their say 2010*.

There are some obvious parallels in the rail industry with what airline passengers told us in respect of their experiences on the 2023 August bank holiday. In particular, those passengers who didn't find out about the disruption until reaching the airport, and those who felt abandoned by the companies they had booked with. Some passengers received only an email stating that their flight had been cancelled, without any further help or advice.

Following major disruption in 2018, the Office of Rail and Road (ORR) – the rail regulator – challenged the industry to provide better passenger information. In response, the industry developed the **Smarter Information Smarter Journeys programme**. This is designed to help provide passengers ‘with all the information they want, when, and how they want it’. The programme sees collaboration between operators, facility managers, and infrastructure providers, to identify and improve passenger information.

Furthermore, train operators, in partnership with Network Rail and the Rail Delivery Group, have agreed a set of **information pledges** outlining what good looks like, and what passengers can expect before, during and after their journey by train. These are used by the ORR to assess whether operators are fulfilling the passenger information obligations that form part of their operator's license. There is a page dedicated to the information pledges on each train operator's website, setting out what information passengers can reasonably expect when traveling. For example, **Southern's customer information pledges page** and **information leaflet**.

In terms of service disruption, the underlying intent of the pledges is to provide disrupted passengers with clear information on what the problem is, how it might impact their journey and give advice on the options available to them. Emphasis is placed on this information being easy to understand and jargon-free, consistent across different channels, factual (with a commitment to being open with passengers if there isn't yet any useful information to pass on) and concise.

Looking after passengers despite disruption

While feedback from rail passengers suggests that experience on the ground is not always perfect, the **National Rail Conditions of Travel** (NRCoT) that apply to travel on Britain's rail network is clear that passengers will not be abandoned in the face of service disruption. Condition 28 says:

“Where disruption prevents you from completing the journey for which your Ticket is valid and is being used, any Train Company will, where it reasonably can, provide you with alternative means of travel to your destination, or if necessary, provide overnight accommodation for you.”

The conditions are often translated into a train company's Passenger's Charter, which can add in additional benefits but not offer less favourable terms than the NRCoT. For example, London North Eastern Railway (LNER) operating between London Kings Cross and Yorkshire, the North East and Scotland says in its Charter:

‘We will arrange alternative transport to get you to your destination if:

- The next connecting train is 60 minutes later than the one you should have caught; and
- Alternative transport will get you there quicker than waiting for the next train.

We will also arrange alternative transport if problems with an LNER service cause you to miss the last connection of the day to your destination.

Where a delay or cancellation of an LNER service makes it impossible to get you to your destination at a reasonable time, either by train or alternative transport, we will:

- Arrange for you to return to where you started your journey, or another appropriate location, and ensure that you can travel again the next day, or
- Provide overnight accommodation and ensure that you can travel the next day.

In these circumstances, if you decide not to travel the following day (i.e. you abandon your journey entirely), we will give you a full refund on the price of your ticket, whether single or return.’

Also, the customer information pledges, referred to above, state:

“Taking care of you - if the last train of the day is cancelled, we won't leave you stranded.”

Passengers' awareness of their rights to refunds and redress

It seems likely that most air passengers are no more familiar with the conditions of travel related to their ticket than most rail passengers. Most will fully investigate their rights only when they have cause to.

The ORR published research in **March 2019** that described how most respondents (84 per cent) were familiar with the terms and conditions of travelling by train. However, it was suggested that familiarity may have been based on a common-sense assumption rather than actually knowing the detail. Furthermore, 34 per cent reported they had never heard of the National Rail Conditions of Travel.

However, there are requirements on train companies to promote passenger rights and remedies available when their travel experience is disrupted, or they arrive late at their destination. Train operators have signed up to consistent approach to reminding passengers of their right to claim ‘delay repay’ compensation when the relevant delay threshold has been reached. This is included in the customer information pledges that all train operators have agreed.

In 2019 Transport Focus launched a **campaign** to raise rail passenger awareness of their rights when it came to delays and ‘delay repay’ compensation. The campaign followed research that found people were not claiming what they were entitled to, often because they were unaware that they could or found it too much hassle.

The campaign made several recommendations to operators to make it easier for people to claim. In November 2023, in partnership with the Department for Transport, we published updated compensation **research**.

This revealed that the proportion of people claiming compensation had gone up from 37 per cent in 2020 to 47 per cent in 2023. Levels of satisfaction with the process had also improved, with 81 per cent satisfied with the speed of receiving compensation and 58 per cent with the train company alerting them they were entitled to compensation.

During recent industrial action on the railway Transport Focus pushed the industry to do all it could to spell out what rights passengers had to a full fee-free refund in the event of service disruption, including cancellations. This resulted in introduction of information quality checks in the lead-up to subsequent strike action. These have helped drive improved clarity and consistency in the information available to passengers who are no longer able to travel because of a strike.

The importance of staff

In all our research with rail passengers, they have told us that they turn to staff for information and reassurance during disruption. This was also the case during the disruption for air passengers last summer. Staff provide the human face of the train operating companies and passengers often place greater trust in the information that they provide. They also have the ability to provide empathy and sincerity in when delivering information, which is harder to convey in electronic, particularly automated communication.



How we did this research

In December 2023 Transport Focus commissioned the independent research agency Define to recruit those who had been impacted by the air traffic control issues of 28 August 2023 and speak with them about their experiences. Few conditions were set for who could be recruited to take part in the research, although all had to have experienced either a cancelled flight or a delay of at least two hours caused by this disruption.

Between 2 and 31 January 2024, Define spoke with 42 people about what had happened to them. Some were travelling together and so were interviewed as a

pair. Overall, 30 separate journeys were covered in the research.

While strict controls were not placed on the overall profile of the types of journeys or people that were included in the research, Define spoke to a range of people making a variety of different journeys. This included those travelling to or from different places and airports, those using different airlines, and those travelling for a range of different reasons. Also included within the research are those who had additional needs, such as travelling with small children or with long-term health conditions.

Contact Transport Focus

Any enquiries about this research should be addressed to:

Toby Cotton

Insight and Evidence Manager

toby.cotton@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