



Measuring train performance: the passenger view

December 2024

Foreword

This qualitative and quantitative research was carried out by Transport Focus, working in partnership with Network Rail and the Office of Rail and Road (ORR).

The ORR **Periodic Review 2023** included a process to reset train performance measures and trajectories to apply from April 2026. ORR consulted on this in autumn 2024 ‘**CP7 passenger train performance reset: consultation on performance measures for 2026 to 2029**’ and has now reached conclusions about the passenger train performance measures that it will use to hold Network Rail to account. This research has been a key input to ORR’s decisions, alongside views from industry stakeholders and comparisons with punctuality measures used in other countries.

The research explored passengers’ views and aspirations about train performance in general, but the core objective was to understand how they felt punctuality should be defined. And, specifically, to explore passenger opinion about measuring ‘punctual’ as within one minute or within three minutes of scheduled time. We also explored views about how train cancellations should be measured.

A wealth of other insight was gleaned from this work, not least that as well as ‘hard’ measures of train performance, passengers want ‘softer’ elements measured too. For

instance, getting a seat, cleanliness and passenger satisfaction. Alongside this summary, the full research report is published at www.transportfocus.org.uk.

As well as informing the CP7 reset, we expect this research will be invaluable to the rail industry as it looks to improve the passenger experience in the short term and through ongoing wider reform to industry structures.

The three commissioning organisations have different responsibilities and a variety of considerations to reflect in reaching policy conclusions in this area. Links to the relevant documents published on our respective websites are included below for ease of reference.

Natasha Grice
Director,
Transport Focus



Will Godfrey
Director Economics, Finance and
Markets, Office of Rail and Road



Paul McMahon
Director Planning and
Regulation, Network Rail



Transport Focus input to CP7 passenger train performance metrics reset

Network Rail input to CP7 passenger train performance metrics reset, Pages 37-44

The Office of Rail and Road’s conclusions following the consultation

Summary of findings

Punctual – within one minute or within three minutes?

On this point we found that passengers tended to fall into one of two ‘camps’. Those for whom punctual means *precisely* on time, and those willing to accept a little leeway. Almost all passengers (97 per cent) regarded within one minute of scheduled time at all stations as punctual, with nine in 10 (89 per cent) saying that within three minutes was punctual. When asked about the basis for the official measure of train punctuality, seven in 10 (69 per cent) felt within one minute of scheduled time was fair, with 14 per cent saying it was too lenient and 16 per cent that it was too strict. When asked about the official measure being arrival at every station within three minutes of schedule, three quarters (75 per cent) felt it was fair,

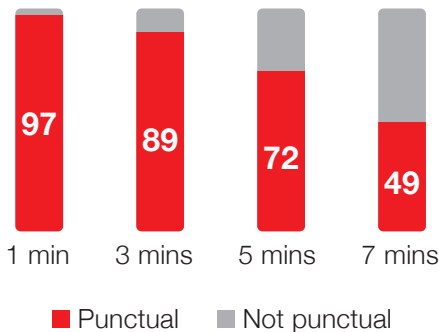
one in five (20 per cent) felt it was too lenient and just one in 20 (five per cent) that it was too strict.

“You pick a certain train because that’s the time you want the train. So you run it to a timetable, and if it’s not run to a timetable, then that defeats the object. Look at Switzerland or Japan. Trains are on time right to the minute, so it can be done.”

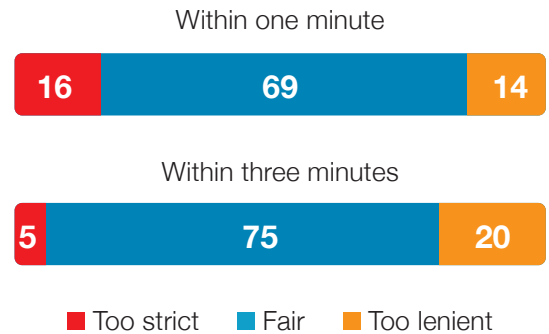
East Midlands, business/commuting, age 40-59

What would you consider to be punctual when traveling by train? (%)

Personal measures of punctuality



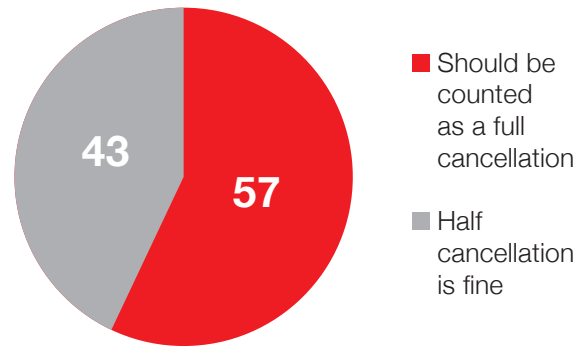
Official measures of punctuality



Cancellations on the day

When asked about cancellations, passengers set a high bar regarding trains that ran only part of their journey (either starting part-way through the schedule, terminating short of the destination or missing out stations where they should have stopped). Approaching six in 10 (57 per cent) felt that any missed stop should count as a full cancellation, with the remainder (43 per cent) comfortable with the current metric whereby one or more missed station would count as a half cancellation in the metric (so long as the train had run more than half of its scheduled journey, otherwise it would count as a full cancellation in any case).

How should partial cancellations be captured? (%)



“If the train I’m getting doesn’t turn up at my station, then that’s a cancellation as far as I’m concerned. I don’t think you should count that as half.”

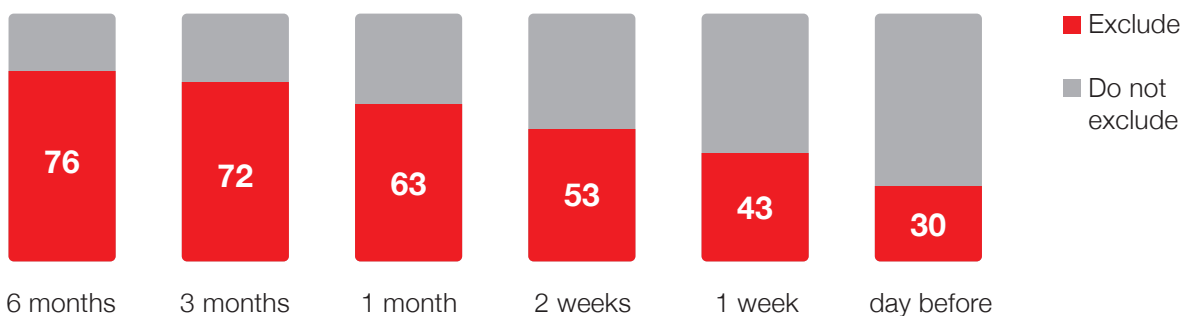
South East, leisure, age 40-59

Pre-cancellations

Another aspect of cancellations was also explored, that is trains taken out of the timetable in advance and which do not count as cancelled in the current metric (so-called P-coded trains). In the qualitative phase of research passengers were uncompromising, some going as far as to argue that if a train was advertised as running at any point, it is a cancellation if it is subsequently taken out of the timetable. When quantified, however, seven in 10 (72 per cent) were comfortable with not counting a train as cancelled

if it is removed from the timetable three months in advance, with almost two thirds (63 per cent) comfortable if it is removed one month in advance. Notably, given the current 22:00-the-day-before methodology, just three in 10 passengers (30 per cent) were comfortable with a train removed from the timetable the day before not counting as cancelled. Four in 10 (43 per cent) were comfortable if it was removed one week before and just over half (53 per cent) if it was removed two weeks before.

At what point can cancellations be excluded from official statistics? (%)



Trade-offs

The research sought to understand what mattered most to passengers: improved punctuality, avoiding cancellations, fewer days of major disruption or getting a seat more often. Participants were asked to choose which was most important to them. This revealed a notable reluctance to accept compromises, in particular between punctuality and cancellations: the proportion saying fewer delays and fewer cancellations was most important was broadly equal. This indicates that passengers tend to regard success ‘in the round’ and want the railway to deliver punctual trains that aren’t cancelled which provide a seat for them to sit on.

“If you do a train journey occasionally, I think having a delayed train is an annoyance. If you do it every day because you commute every day and you have a delay of X amount of time every day, that’s more than annoying. So for me, it depends on the frequency of when you experience those delays.”

London, leisure, age 40-59

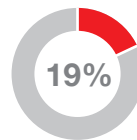
What is the most important objective for train companies to achieve?



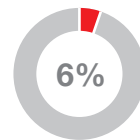
Fewer cancellations



Improved punctuality



Fewer days major disruption

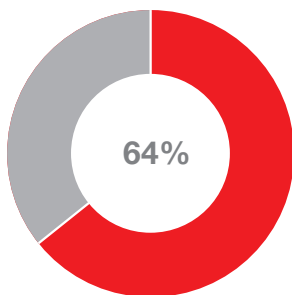


Getting a seat more often

However, when asked to make a binary choice in relation to a long-distance journey, punctuality was seen as more important (64 per cent) than fewer cancellations/widespread disruptions (36 per cent).

These preferences are likely to reflect that an individual passenger tends to experience a delayed train more often than a cancellation, and therefore addressing punctuality is their priority. Notably, leisure passengers were more likely to favour fewer cancellations over improved punctuality, some arguing that while a delay is inconvenient, a cancellation could be a ‘disaster’. Others felt the opposite.

When you are making a long-distance journey, for example London to Manchester, what is more important to you?



More trains departing and arriving on time

Fewer cancellations/widespread disruption

“I chose the second one [fewer cancellations/widespread disruption] purely on the fact that a delay isn’t going to make or break my day. I make my train journeys, you know, with enough time in advance to kind of make room for delays, but a cancellation is different – that can be a bit of a catastrophe.”

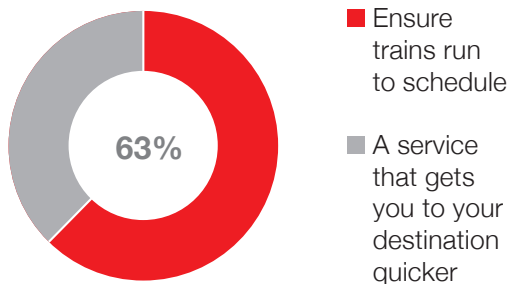
Yorkshire, leisure, age 18-39

"I think more punctuality is more important. You don't want cancellations, of course, but it's delays that are the bigger problem."

East Midlands, leisure, age 18-39

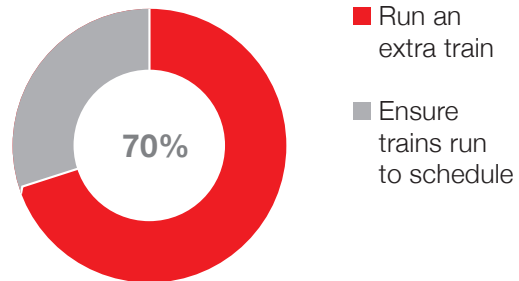
When it comes to trading off speed/journey time and punctuality, almost two thirds (63 per cent) of passengers favoured the latter. However, there was an age element to this. Almost half (45 per cent) of younger respondents opted for speed/journey time, while among older passengers it was just one in six (16 per cent).

It may be possible to reduce journey time, but it could make punctuality less consistent. Which is more important?



Running an extra train, resulting in a higher frequency and greater likelihood of getting a seat, was favoured by seven in 10 (70 per cent) even if this could affect punctuality. This varied by passenger type, with respondents using rural stations showing stronger preference for an extra train (74 per cent) than urban passengers (68 per cent), likely to reflect lower frequencies outside major conurbations. Commuters, however, were less strongly in favour of an extra train, reflecting their general preference for punctuality over other factors.

It may be possible to run an extra train, meaning higher frequency and less crowding, but could mean punctuality suffers. Which is more important?



"I think it's inevitable at peak times - it doesn't matter how many trains you run - I think they're going to be really busy. And to be honest with you, as much as I don't like being packed into a train, I'd rather get somewhere on time. I feel like even arriving 20-30 minutes later than when you're supposed to can really knock off the whole of the rest of your day, especially with things like meetings or what you're doing with your evening perhaps."

North West, leisure, age 18-39

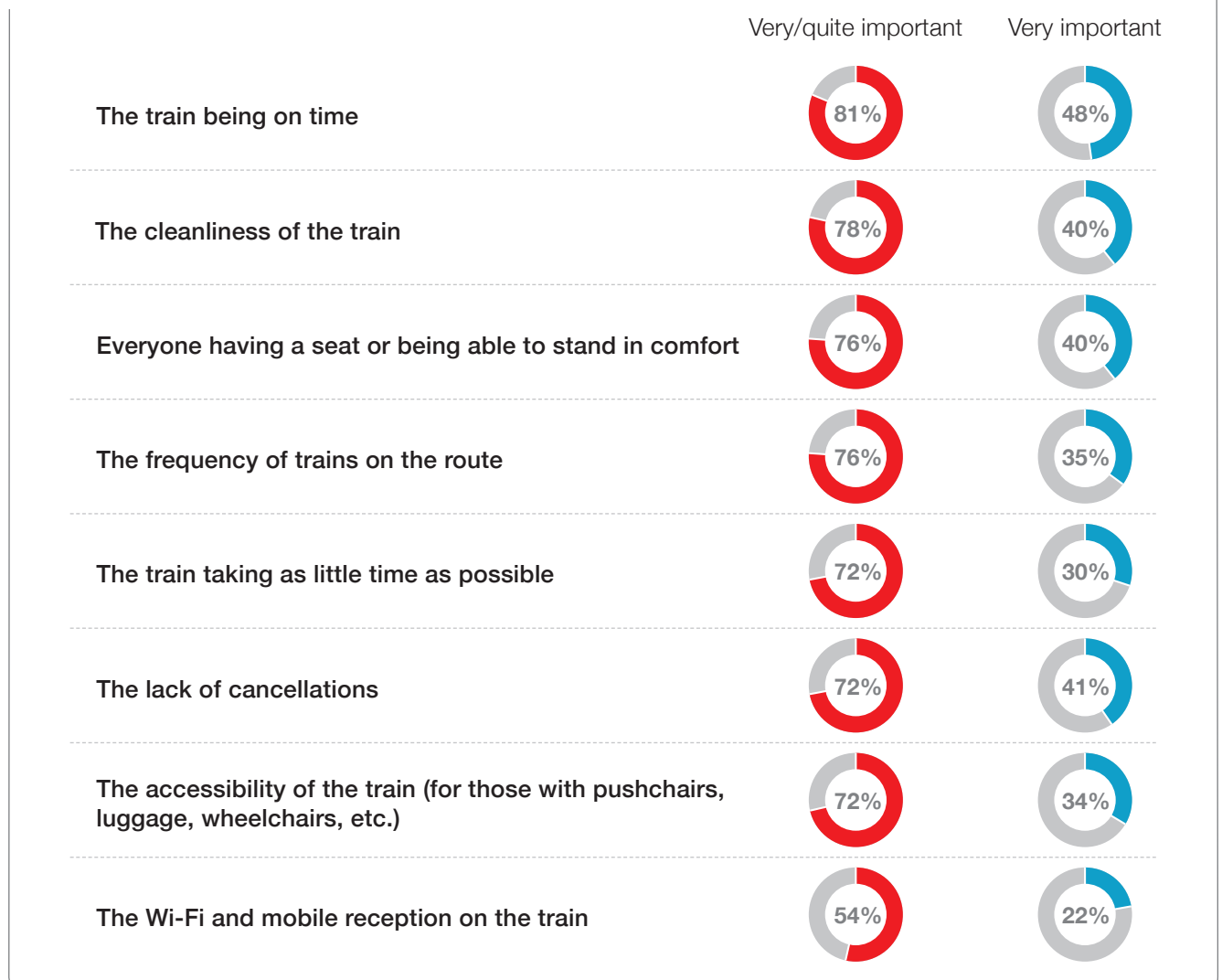
It's not *just* punctuality, cancellations and getting a seat that matter

Punctual services and a lack of cancellations are critical issues, yet they tend to be regarded by passengers as 'hygiene factors' within the overall journey experience. While punctuality is essential, passengers define success in more comprehensive terms, also placing priority on factors such as cleanliness, Wi-Fi/mobile phone reception and air conditioning. Concerns about personal safety, particularly related to antisocial behaviour, also matter to some. Many passengers feel that, given what they are paying for their ticket, they are entitled to a punctual, reliable service as well as good customer experience.

Views about most aspects of journey experience do not vary significantly by passenger type. However, younger respondents placed greater emphasis on

Wi-Fi/mobile phone reception (57 per cent) than older respondents (47 per cent), and everyone having a seat or being able to stand comfortably was more important to older passengers (91 per cent). Passengers with specific needs had similar priorities to others regarding punctuality and cancellations, but comfort factors like seating, air conditioning, and access to toilets and refreshments was more important for some, especially those with stamina or mobility challenges. Avoiding major disruption can be particularly important to passengers with additional needs because necessarily meticulous planning is thrown into disarray, while major disruption is also more problematic for those who are digitally disadvantaged given that online sources are the 'go to' for real-time updates.

How important are the following aspects of train performance?



“I’ve been on several journeys where there’s like loads of people standing up in the aisles so obviously someone’s overbooked. I don’t think that’s a successful train journey, not getting a seat. Being on time, yes that definitely, and getting there on time and no delays along the journey. But again, having a seat, good Wi-Fi connection.”

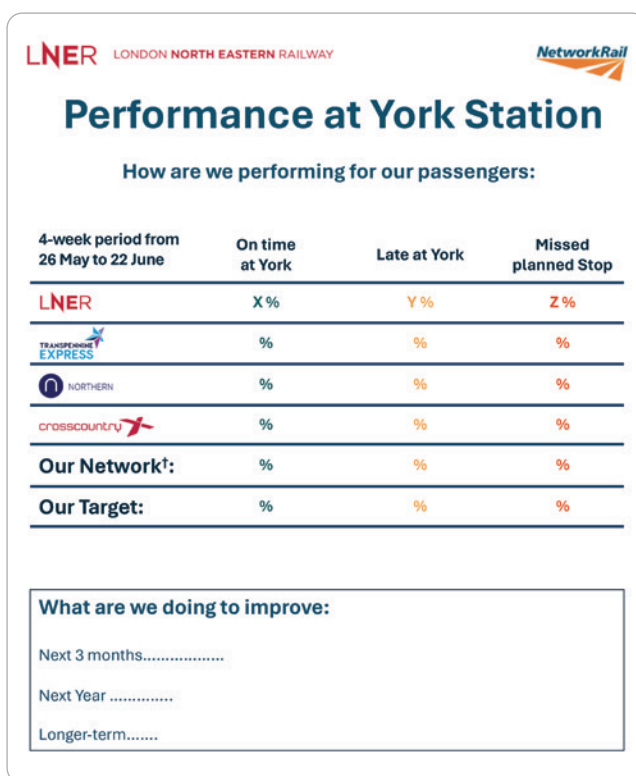
Yorkshire and Humber, commuter/business, age 55+

Communicating how well the railway is doing

The research sought passengers’ views on an idea then being considered by the Department for Transport, subsequently **announced** by the then Secretary of State on 11 November 2024, to increase transparency about train performance. Passengers welcomed any effort to communicate punctuality and cancellations information more transparently, while most acknowledged that they are unlikely to actively seek out the information. Positive feedback was received about a mock-up of how station-specific performance information might look. Passengers were keen to see long-term trends as well as an individual four-week period, and felt the information should be disseminated through various channels, including websites and social media, as well as at stations. Some advocated inclusion of customer experience metrics, such as crowding and passenger satisfaction, while others preferred the focus on ‘hard’ data. Importantly, passengers sought reassurance that performance targets were meaningful, suggesting it should be clear who monitors performance and oversees any associated incentives and penalties.

“I think it gives accountability to each company because I’m sure Crosscountry would rather be better than Northern. So if they know the general public is going to be able to see that they haven’t done as well as everyone else, it could have an impact.”

West Midlands, leisure, age 60+



Mocked up ‘poster’ showing how station specific performance information might be displayed

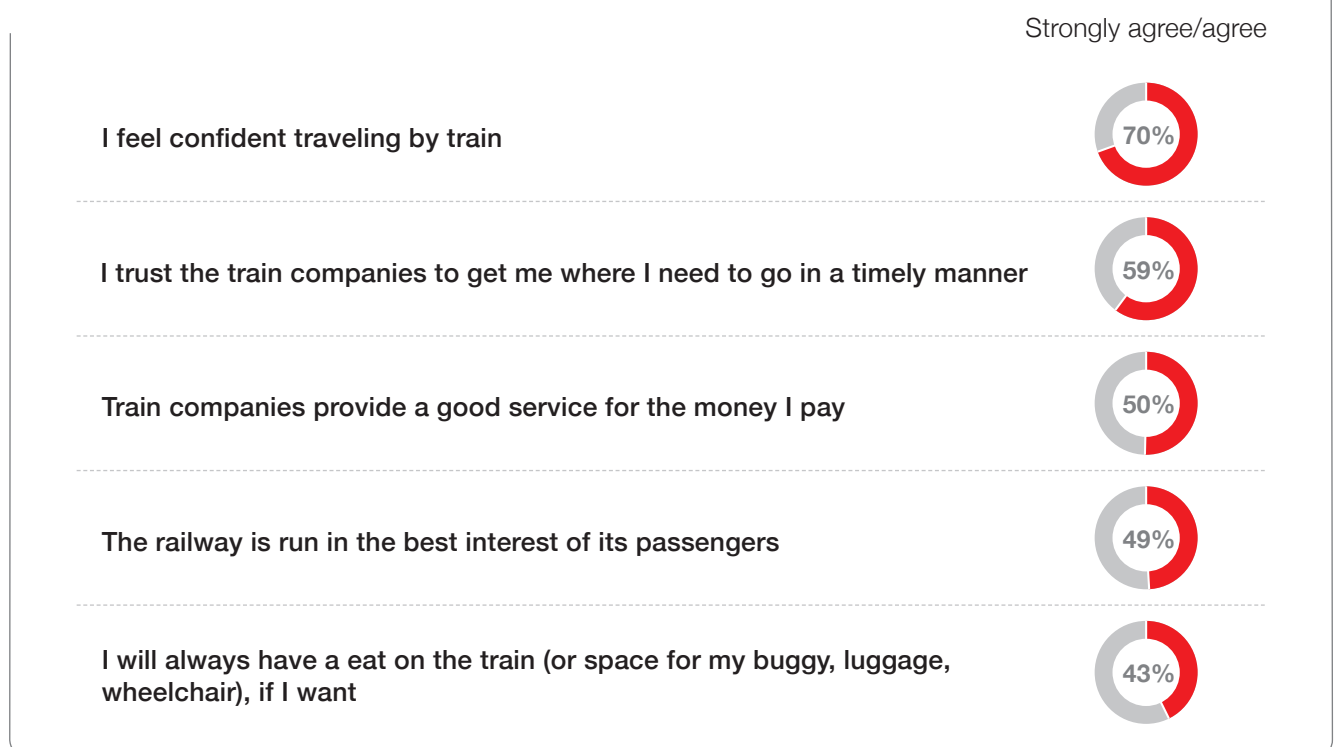
“I would look at something like this. I wouldn’t go and do research, but if this was displayed at a station, I would have a look most definitely, especially if it was at your local station. Just to give you an indication, of previous performance. It’s quite easy to digest.”

South East, leisure, age 40-59

Context

In interpreting passengers' perspectives on measuring train performance, it is important to be aware of the broader context of their experiences travelling by train. In the research, six in 10 (59 per cent) agreed with the statement "I trust train companies to get me to where I need to go in a timely manner" and half (50 per cent) that "train companies provide a good service for the money I pay".

Attitudes to the rail industry and travelling by train



Among leisure passengers, in particular long-distance travellers, the experience is viewed as generally acceptable and occasionally very good, but with lapses that can have a lasting impact on perceptions. Commuters, simply by virtue of using the railway more often, are likely to be exposed to things going wrong more frequently and are more likely to travel when it is busier, increasing their risk of not getting a seat. Some however acknowledged that things will go wrong from time to time on busy routes.

The picture varies regionally. Those in London and the South East as well as in Scotland were more positive. Elsewhere in England and Wales there was a strong sense that local services were not good, particularly when compared with long-distance trains that pass through their area.

“The more travel I do, the more I realise how terrible the services are in the East Midlands to be honest with you. I mean, they’re fantastic in London. Everything’s clean, everything generally runs a bit better. The services are always working. Getting the train station at Derby, for example, it is awful. And you just can’t wait to get out of there. In London it just feels like you’re getting more value for your money, really.”

East Midlands, leisure, age 18 - 39

When it came to the causes of delays and cancellations, passengers showed little sympathy for the railway when they felt the cause was self-inflicted. For example, to many passengers a shortage of staff is simply evidence of bad planning in employing insufficient people. Most accepted that some delays and cancellations are difficult for the railway to prevent, but even then the bar is high. Passengers showed sympathy regarding truly extreme weather, but expected the railway to cope better with normal severe weather.

The research found widespread lack of understanding about the industry structure, including lack of clarity about who is in charge and who holds train operators and Network Rail to account. Passengers also tend to regard the railway as lacking customer service disciplines that would exist naturally in a competitive market, rarely delighting them and frequently disappointing them while charging what is viewed as a premium price. This all contributes to a degree of cynicism, lack of trust and general unwillingness to give the railway much benefit of the doubt when it comes to performance.

“I’ve never seen anything about service standards or targets. You’d assume that they would have some sort of measures for running on time or complaints or things like that, but I’ve not seen anything myself.”

Yorkshire, leisure, age 40-59, digitally excluded

How we carried out the research

The qualitative phase included 14 two-hour online discussion groups comprising six to eight people each, supplemented with 26 45-minute in-depth interviews, the latter including 14 people with a disability and 12 who were digitally excluded. The

quantitative phase involved 2000 rail passengers throughout Great Britain of different ages completing a questionnaire online. Three in 10 identified as having a disability. The research was conducted in September and October 2024.

Contact Transport Focus

Any enquiries about this research should be addressed to:

Guy Dangerfield

Head of Strategy and Intelligence

Guy.Dangerfield@transportfocus.org.uk

www.transportfocus.org.uk

Transport Focus

7th Floor

Piccadilly Gate

Store Street

Manchester

M1 2WD

Transport Focus is the operating name of the Passengers' Council