

Fare Evasion and Revenue Protection

- What do passengers think?

January 2025



Foreword

Fare evasion has long been an issue for the railway. The costs are staggering – an estimated minimum of £240 million a year (Some say this is a potentially significant under-estimate).

This lost revenue means that the costs of providing rail services are falling more heavily on fare-paying passengers and tax-payers than would otherwise be the case.



Transport Focus has always argued that the rail industry must do everything possible to collect the income due from passengers. And, at a time of tremendous challenge to the public finances, this has arguably never been more important.

And yet, we also know that this is not a straightforward situation. Our research consistently demonstrates the challenges many people face in purchasing the right ticket for their journey.¹ The fares and ticketing system is widely recognised as complex and confusing. Reform has been on the agenda for many years. However, despite some progress, there is still a long way to go.

There is no doubt there are deliberate and determined fare-evaders, and some opportunists who will skip a fare if the chance is presented to them. However, some people do make a mistake. This could be by inadvertently choosing an incorrect ticket,

forgetting a railcard, or the seat reservation needed to accompany an advance ticket. In some of these circumstances the resulting consequences can seem harsh or unfair.

When we explored passenger views of the penalty fare system, we found many examples of seemingly over-zealous application of the rules.² Our ongoing engagement with passengers continues to provide examples of situations where minor errors are dealt with harshly, even when the situation has not resulted in any financial loss to the rail industry.

Transport Focus is particularly concerned that some people may have more difficulties than others in buying the correct ticket. This could be, for example, because of language barriers, cognitive or physical disabilities, or lack of dexterity on a keyboard or at a ticket vending machine. Overall, we are not convinced that the system is geared up to

¹ [Ticket to ride? - Transport Focus](#) and [Ticket to Ride – an update - Transport Focus](#)

² [Penalty Fares - how passengers are treated when they appeal - Transport Focus](#)



accommodate the varying needs of a diverse travelling public, either at the point of sale or in revenue protection activity on the network.

One of our business plan objectives for this and coming years is to explore how revenue protection might be refined and improved. We want the industry to better capture the revenue rightfully earned. They should also provide mitigations when genuine errors are made, or when individual circumstances should merit a more sympathetic approach.

Transport Focus is now using the findings of this research to engage with the rail industry. In October 2024, we wrote to key industry bodies to highlight our concerns about aspects of revenue protection practices. We have proposed initiatives that will help achieve an environment in which passengers can travel with confidence. We have already met with the Rail Fraud Forum and have shared this and other research with the Office of Rail and Road as they conduct their review of revenue

protection practices for the Secretary of State for Transport.

Our goal is to achieve improved outcomes for passengers. For the industry, improving processes and avoiding high profile cases that seem to be unjustly handled will also improve public perceptions of rail. We aim to support the industry in the most effective means of collecting fares and reducing evasion, whilst always treating passengers fairly and in accordance with the correct procedures.

We look forward to reporting on progress in this area.

Natasha Grice

Director - Rail



Introduction

The Fare Evasion and Revenue Protection research detailed in the following pages was undertaken with funding from the Department for Transport (DfT). Together, we wanted to understand passenger attitudes towards and experiences of fare evasion and their views on the railway's approach to revenue protection.

We used a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods to enable us to explore the subject in detail.

Our focus groups included a range of perspectives from passengers of different ages, in various locations and with varied reasons for and frequency of travel. We conducted interviews with disabled people to make sure we heard from passengers whose experiences of the railway are impacted by different circumstances.

We also included a series of interviews with self-declared fare evaders to learn more about what can drive these behaviours and how their perspectives and experiences differ.

Finally, we surveyed over 1600 people about their views on fare evasion and revenue protection when using the railway. This provided statistics that have been used to support the qualitative findings which are the key focus of the report.

Overall, our research confirms that revenue protection is a complex topic. There is

generally agreement that fare evasion is wrong, but what exactly it constitutes and whether it can ever be justified is seen as more nuanced. Passengers feel there are a range of actions that should be considered to address the problems for both passengers and the rail industry.

The conclusions form a basis for future action. We will be working with the DfT and the rail industry to plan how these can be employed to address these challenges in the future.



Research Findings

Researching fares and buying tickets

The first part of the research focused on passengers' experiences of researching and buying fares. Passengers had differing experiences dependent on their journey purpose and regularity of travel.

For longer journeys there was a general feeling that the system is complicated, and that it is hard for passengers to feel confident getting best value, or even the right ticket.

Many passengers struggled to understand the logic underpinning the price of fares and are generally not well informed about the types of tickets available. Overall, 56 per cent of passengers surveyed agree that it is easy to find the right ticket, while 45 per cent agree that it is easy to find the best value ticket.

"One thing that I sometimes find a bit confusing is the off-peak and on-peak times because they can change. One day I'll do the exact same route and go home at the same time and it's off-peak and then the next day it's on-peak – so then I've got the wrong ticket."

Frequent, Shorter, West Midlands, 50+



Research Findings



We spoke to people who may experience additional difficulties, including those who are digitally excluded and passengers with specific needs. Many in these groups prefer to buy tickets from a staffed ticket office rather than online. Or, where they have purchased online, they like the reassurance of a printed ticket.

Some passengers fear they are missing out on better value fares due to the challenges of buying tickets. This is particularly true for those who prefer to buy their tickets from a ticket office. They often buy their tickets on the day of travel, but worry they are unlikely to be getting the best value possible.

“I think for me as someone who has a disability, it’s too complicated. The information is just like way overloading.”

Disability, Longer, Infrequent, London

“I wouldn’t use the ticket machines. I would always want to buy from a person. I’m old school. I think the machines are too complicated and I always worry about getting the wrong ticket.”

Digitally excluded, Shorter, Infrequent, East Anglia

“I’ve tried to use the ticket machine at my local station. I had friends visiting from abroad and we’ve gone into my local station to buy a ticket and you got this machine and you’re thinking, ‘What do I buy?’ You worry about what if you get it wrong there’s no one around to help you.”

Digitally excluded, Shorter, Infrequent, London

Passengers' attitudes to fare evasion and revenue protection

Fare paying passengers tend not to see mistakes in which there is no revenue loss for the railway as fare evasion.

"I think getting on the wrong train is incredibly easy to do, depending what station you're at and whether there's multiple things going through and for somebody to be fined because they've made a mistake and then on appeal for it not to be allowed. I personally think that's incredibly harsh."

East Anglia, Shorter, Infrequent, 31 - 50

Passengers generally agree that fare evasion is characterised by a deliberate intention to avoid buying a ticket, or deliberately and knowingly buying the wrong ticket. There was strong consensus that this is wrong.

Initially there was agreement with the railway definition of liability and passengers expect people to take personal responsibility for having the right ticket. However, there are some concerns around this definition of liability which applies to those who inadvertently travel without a ticket. This was viewed to risk 'honest mistakes' being treated overly harshly.

Overall fare paying passengers see deliberate fare evasion as wrong and meriting punishments. However, there is a spectrum of opinion on the seriousness of fare evasion with opportunistic dodging of a small fare viewed differently to sustained, planned fraud. Figure 1, below, showcases the variety of views on fare evasion.

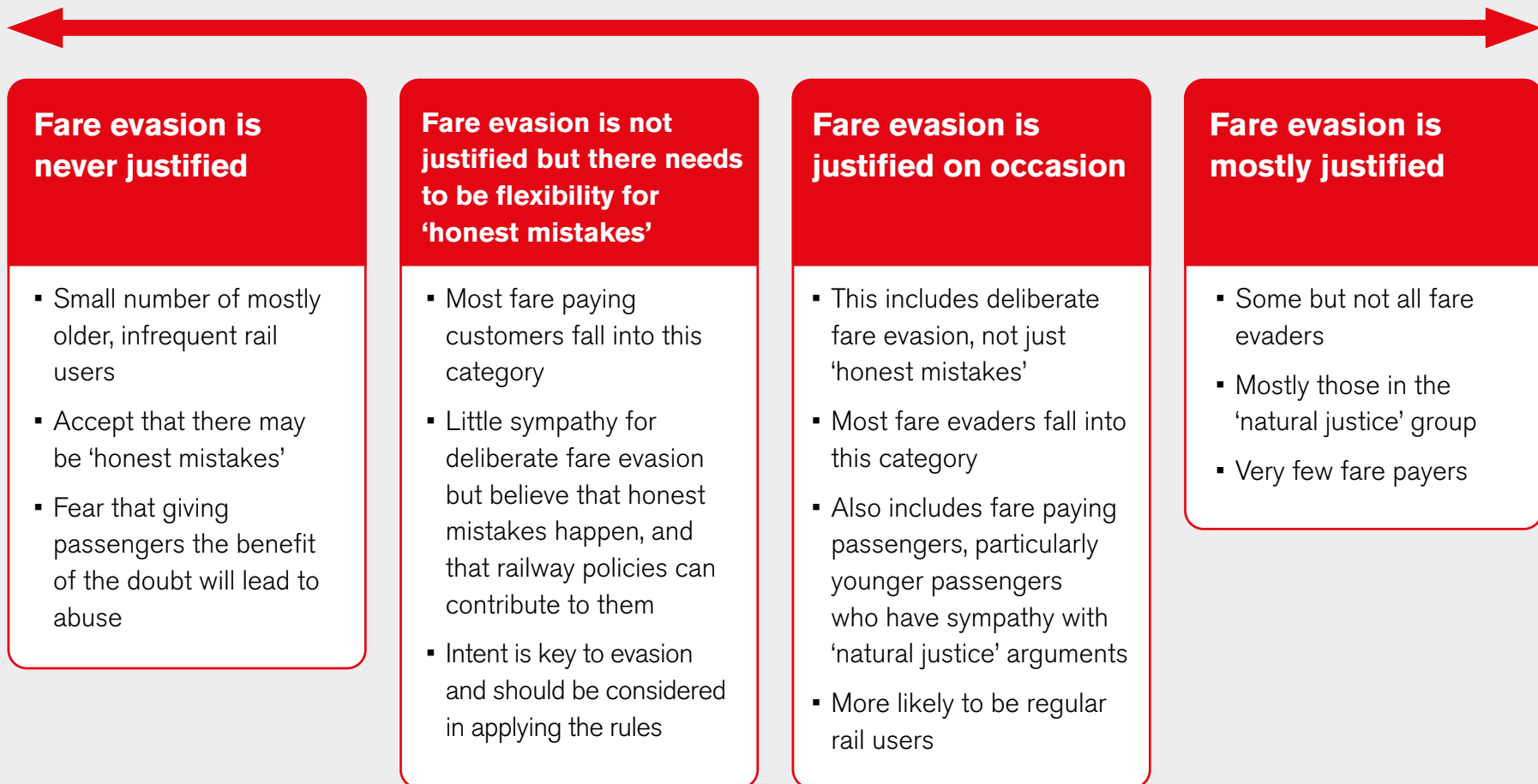
While not justifying deliberate fare evasion, fare paying passengers do also see some

behaviours of the railways as contributing to evasion behaviours. For example very high fares and poor service, and a lack of enforcement or revenue collection.

Fare paying passengers tend not to see mistakes in which there is no revenue loss for the railway as fare evasion. Such instances could include forgetting or losing a railcard, travelling on a train that wasn't the booked service but was priced the same, or lost tickets where there is proof of purchase. While accepting that the passenger is technically at fault, the majority could see no justification for punishment in such cases.

Cases where the railways do incur a loss due to mistakes were seen as a grey area with intent being crucial to whether it was seen as fare evasion or not. While acknowledging that intentional fraud can be a factor in some cases, many felt that the complicated fare systems and organisational structures involving different Train Operating Companies, and seemingly inconsistent rules could be the railways contributing to the problem.

Figure 1 Passengers hold a spectrum of views on fare evasion



The view of fare evaders

Our research included individual interviews with self-identified fare evaders. This sample covered a range of people across age, gender and social classes. Most had started evading opportunistically, or even accidentally, but behaviours were then repeated and became more deliberate due to initial success.

There was general agreement amongst fare evaders that fare evasion was a 'victimless crime', or that the railway deserves it, for a range of reasons. Fare evaders could be broadly divided into three groups.

- **Mercenary thrill seekers**

Regular fare evaders who offer little justification for their behaviour. It can be motivated by saving money or the thrill of getting away with it. Getting caught is seen as worth the risk with money saved from regular fare evasion outweighing any occasional penalty.

- **Opportunists**

A mix of occasional and more frequent fare evaders, largely dependent on situational factors. They generally accept evasion is morally wrong but are reluctant to view it as a crime. In their experience a penalty fare is a calculated risk that favours the evader.

- **'Natural justice' campaigners**

A mix of occasional and more frequent fare evaders. They tend to take a more calculated and planned approach to evasion. They accept that their behaviour is technically a crime but are reluctant to see it as morally wrong. They can see evasion as 'natural justice' due to high fares and poor service, or as 'revenge' for poor treatment by railways, perceived exploitation of passengers, or a political stance on rail structures.



Passengers' experience of fare evasion and revenue protection

Passengers who are regular fare payers also had personal experiences of fare evasion, most of which fell into the grey area of 'honest mistakes'. There are concerns about inconsistent application of rules and disproportionate consequences for inadvertent errors.



Some passengers described their cases as being due to inconsistent application of rules, e.g. whether or not one can buy a ticket on board the train. Others blamed it on confusing terms and conditions or complicated fare systems which meant they had inadvertently bought the wrong ticket. Their experience was somewhat upsetting, even when the staff were seen as handling the situation sympathetically. The passengers felt that while they were technically wrong, the system wasn't fair, and some felt their integrity was unjustly questioned.

Almost all passengers had witnessed fare evasion incidents. The overall view is that staff treat these incidents reasonably and fairly, sometimes in very challenging circumstances. However, there are concerns about inconsistent application of rules and disproportionate consequences for 'honest mistakes'.

The principle of using penalty fares is

"I would say there is a general lack of humanity. They're making it difficult for people to travel. It's difficult to buy tickets and if you genuinely make a mistake, you're penalised for it."

Digitally excluded, Shorter, Infrequent, London

generally accepted by passengers who see a need for both deterrence and punishment of fare evasion. However, there is disagreement on what is a proportionate and effective amount.

For fare evaders the amount of the penalty fare is a less important deterrent than the chance of being caught. The low likelihood of being caught is often a rationale for fare evaders. Fare paying passengers are often also aware of the low probability of evaders being caught and find the perceived lack

Research Findings



of effort from the railways to collect fares dismaying. While they do not excuse fare evasion, many see the lack of security as a temptation for those who evade, and a sign that the railways do not care about tackling the issue. As a result, the lack of staff at stations and on trains is an important issue for many passengers.

"I try and buy my tickets in advance to get a cheaper fare and so I feel like if I had made an honest mistake and then was charged the full fare on that day, I'd be so upset because I've tried to buy the cheapest fare possible in an honest way and then you know that ticket to London could be over £100 on the day."

Longer, Infrequent, Northwest, 18 - 30

Passengers' views on what should be done about fare evasion

Many passengers see more rigorous revenue protection measures and potentially tougher penalties as ways to tackle fare evasion. However, there were also a number of measures they felt the railways could take to reduce fare evasion.

- **A simpler fares system**

Fares are seen as complicated by even very experienced rail users and are a source of confusion and anxiety for many people, particularly less frequent users and certain vulnerable groups. Passengers believe that a simpler and more intuitive fare system would avoid many of the 'honest mistakes' that passengers make and for rail staff, would remove much of the ambiguity about what were/were not genuine errors.

- **Ensuring everyone can easily buy a ticket**

Buying the right ticket can also be a challenge, particularly for those not comfortable with digital channels or using machines. Without staff assistance, some people are excluded from buying a ticket while others may be able to buy a ticket but are fearful of making a mistake.

- **More staff**

Staff can help people to buy a ticket or provide reassurance that people have got the correct ticket. The presence of staff at stations and on trains is also seen as a deterrent to fare evasion and other types of anti-social behaviour.

- **Better use of technology**

Passengers suggest that some of the problems of fare evasion can be addressed through better use of technology. For example, passengers struggle to understand why there is not a database of registered Railcard users.

- **Closing the gaps**

Passengers can be tempted to think that the railway is happy to tolerate fare evasion when they see open ticket barriers or when tickets are not checked on trains. They suspect (and fare evaders confirm they are correct) that this is an 'open invitation' for some to dodge fares. While understanding that the railway has resource constraints, claims by the railway to be concerned about fare evasion can sound hollow against this backdrop.

- **An improved, better value service**

Passengers identify some quite fundamental problems with the railway: high prices, poor service, complicated fares, a lack of staff etc. Few see these as reasons to deliberately evade their fare, but many feel that these issues undermine passengers' confidence in the railway.

Conclusions

Although they are unsure about its scale and impact, passengers recognise that fare evasion is a problem that the railway should address, both to challenge antisocial behaviour and to protect against revenue loss.

However, passengers have a different understanding of what fare evasion is compared to that used by the railway. For passengers, intent to evade is key.

The railway is seen to contribute to difficulties in fare selection and ticket purchase, with confusion around prices and terms and conditions making it easy for passengers to be 'caught out'. The lack of effort to consistently collect fares is seen to undermine security and provide opportunities for fare evasion.

There is an appetite from passengers to see action on fare evasion, particularly through

more rigorous revenue protection. However, passengers feel this should take place in tandem with a range of improvements across rail services, including simplifying fares and ticket purchase, increased staffing, embracing technology, closing security gaps and providing a better rail service that builds more trust and affinity between passengers and the railway.



Contact Transport Focus

Any enquiries about this report should be addressed to:

Sharon Hedges

Senior Engagement Manager

sharon.hedges@transportfocus.org.uk

Transport Focus

7th Floor

Piccadilly Gate

Store Street

Manchester

M1 2WD

www.transportfocus.org.uk

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