



Understanding passenger response to disruption communications

Merseyrail qualitative research

May 2025

Background and objectives



BACKGROUND

Snow and ice had a major impact on Merseyrail services early in 2025, with a complete suspension of services for several hours on 9 January. This caused the Mayor of the Liverpool City Region to order a review into the preparations and arrangements for winter. Merseyrail itself identified scope to improve passenger communications and committed to carry out research among its passengers to inform next steps.

OBJECTIVE

The research aimed to explore passengers' experiences and views about communications at times of disruption and its impact on them. This covered but was not confined to 9 January, in order to help Merseyrail design communications improvements for any service disruption including that at the severe 'service suspended' end of the spectrum such as on 9 January.

Methodology – 4 x 90 mins 5-person group discussions and 6 x 60 mins individual depth interviews

Sample – 26 respondents
On-Line Group 1 Frequent Short & Medium Journeys
On-Line Group 2 Frequent Longer Journeys
On-Line Group 3 Infrequent Short, Medium & Longer Journeys
On-Line Depth x 6 with disabled passengers, across a spread of audio, visual, mobility and mild cognitive disabilities
Face-To-Face Group 4 – Digitally Disengaged travellers making Short, Medium and Longer journeys

Fieldwork took place 23-30 April 2025.

In each group and across depths:

Mix of those who have experienced disruption when using Merseyrail train services, including 8 of those that were impacted by the disruption in January.

Depth interviews were arranged to specifically focus on the needs of disabled passengers, though disabled passengers were not excluded from the groups.

13 people had experienced disruption when travelling on Merseyrail trains.

Mix of gender

Mix of age (all aged 18+) and lifestage

Mix of Socio Economic Group

Spread of channels used to find information about local train services

No quotas on ethnicity but aimed for a mix

Across the sample as a whole:

Half were users of the Wirral Line and half users of the Northern Line, within which:

Northern Line:

Mix of travel north and south of the city centre, and from each of the three northern routes – Southport, Ormskirk and Headbolt Lane/Kirkby – and the southern route from Hunts Cross via Cressington and Aigburth

Wirral Line:

Mix of those travelling north (West Kirby/New Brighton routes) and south of Birkenhead (Chester and Ellesmere Port routes).

None making journeys ONLY on the City Line.

Short = 2-3 stations

Medium = 4-6 stations

Longer = 7+ stations

Stimulus Overview

- List of potential channels to receive disruption comms
- Screenshots of Merseyrail website, app, and social media
- Log of communications over the January disruption
- Photographs of Merseyrail station screens
- Transcripts of Merseyrail audio announcements across a range of scenarios

INDICATIVE STIMULUS

Merseyrail website	Local newspaper or news website
Merseyrail app	Other social media
Merseyrail X account	Digital screens located at stations
National Rail website	Announcements by station staff
National Rail app	Central PA announcements (every station gets the same broadcast)
Other train operator website	Conversation with station staff
Other train operator app	On board announcements
Local radio	Local TV

We are now arriving at Sandhills, please use this station for the Taylor Swift concerts at Anfield stadium. Shuttle buses and a walking route are available. Please check last train times for return journeys at the station or via our app.



Sessions reviewed a selection of the above according to their experience.

Headlines



Key findings

Clear learnings

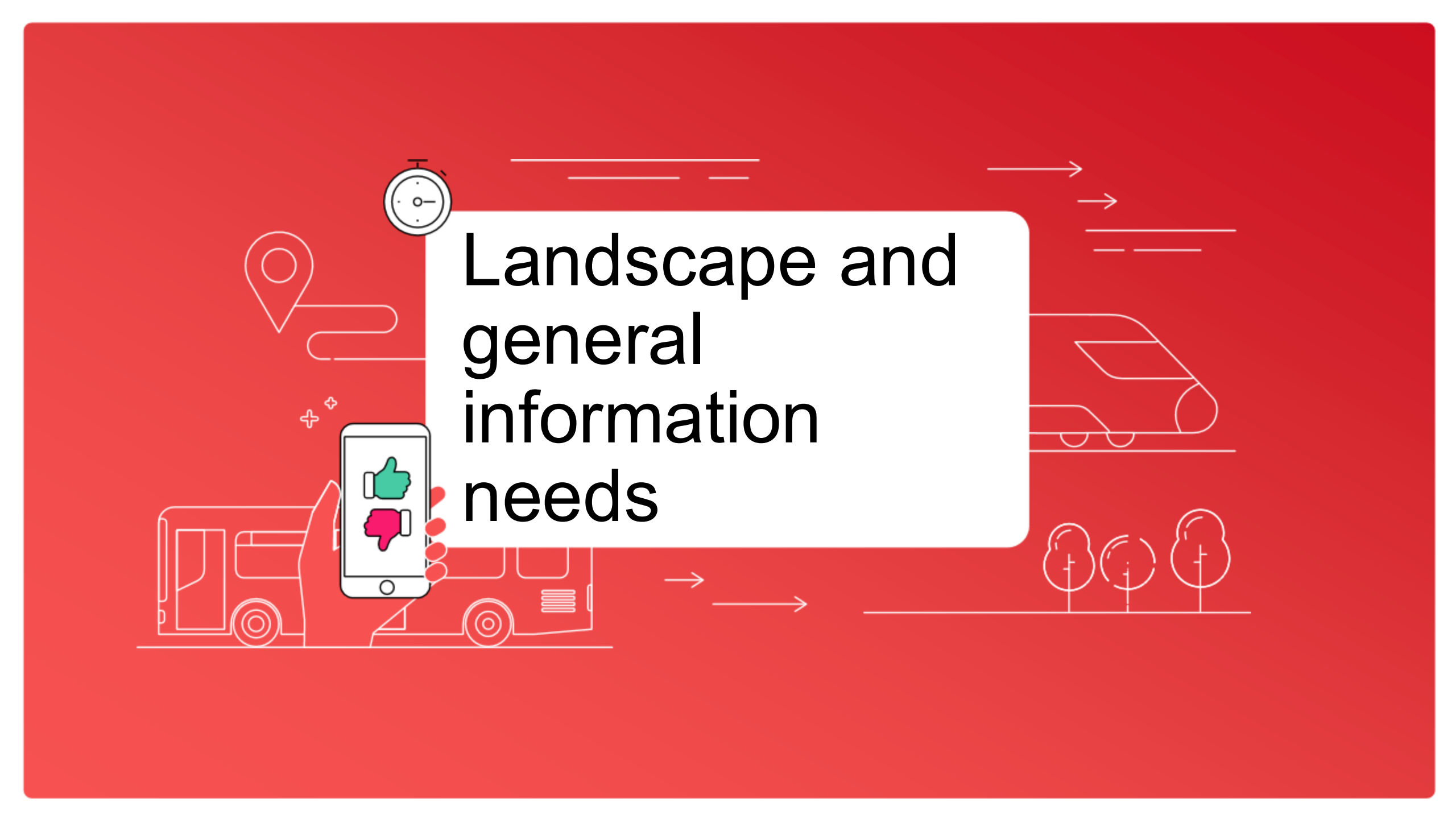
Across the research, the same opinions emerged around what respondents think of the Merseyrail disruption communications and what they would like to see.

Current messaging is broadly working

None felt that the current messaging is seriously flawed, but suggestions were made as to how it could be optimised to better meet passenger needs.

Consistent information required

Across disruption scenarios the needs are aligned. Passengers want to know what the impact is, what has happened, how long it will go on, and what alternatives they have.



Landscape and general information needs

Merseyrail was viewed positively by all in the sample

- Regardless of route, the staff are seen as helpful and cheerful.
- Recent investment in new rolling stock has been noted and is welcomed.
- There is a strong sentiment that Liverpool is lucky to have an extensive network of rapid rail services, and that overall, the service is very good.
- Views were aligned across routes – no major issues emerged that were specific to the Northern or Wirral lines.



Merseyrail is viewed as an asset to the city, and one which noticeably sets Liverpool apart from other areas.

Short journeys mean that when there is disruption there will generally be an alternative



Departures			
Time	Destination	Platform	Expected
15:00	Chester	3	On time
15:02	Southport	2	On time
15:05	New Brighton	3	On time
15:05	Headbolt Lane	1	On time
15:10	Ormskirk	2	On time
15:10	West Kirby	3	15:11
15:13	Hunts Cross	1	On time
15:14	Chester	3	On time
15:17	Southport	2	On time
15:20	Headbolt Lane	1	On time
15:20	New Brighton	3	On time
15:22	Ellesmere Port	3	On time

Time now 15:00.18

When there is a problem with an individual train, or a passenger misses their intended service, the expectation on the Merseyrail network is that there will be another train along shortly.

Except on the longest journeys, few fear being stranded.

“The Merseyline network is vast... there are plenty of routes home”

[M, 46, C1, Long Journeys, Frequent Traveller, Disability]

Passengers feel that they usually have other options – except when making the longest journeys – reducing some of the worry when there is severe disruption.

When travelling by train, passengers look for information in three key locations

Before leaving for the train

- Want to know that the train is on time
- Appreciate advance notice of any disruption (gives time to make another plan)
- Updates are more important when on a deadline (work/study, etc) than when returning home
- Those walking 10-20 mins to the station might check again on route to see if anything has changed



At the station

- Checking to make sure everything is running well
- Interested in advance notice of any likely disruption to their later return journey
- Expect to see detailed information in the ticket office, and notice of the next train when on the platform
- Would ideally like all information on the platform as well, rather than some in the entrance hall and some on the platform



On the train

- Expect to know the next station
- Need updates when there are unexpected stoppages/other disruption so that they can make plans
- Less need for information about alternatives at this point as they're on the train and committed / cut off to an extent

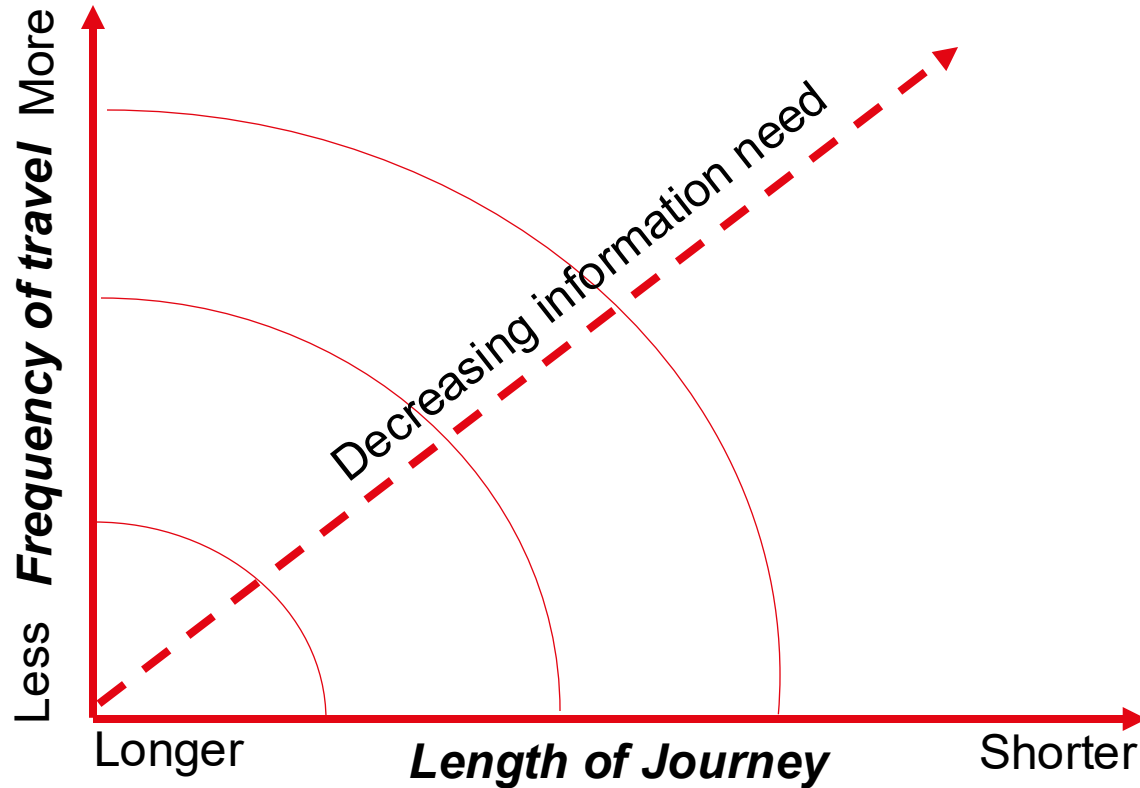
Information is desired at all stages of the journey – to provide reassurance and allow for plans to be changed as needed.

A yellow and black high-speed train is stopped at a station platform. In the background, there is a brick house with a gabled roof and a chimney. The train has a yellow body with black accents and a yellow bicycle symbol on its side. A semi-transparent text box is overlaid on the train.

“You've got to know whether the trains are coming or not... a couple of times I've been up, and there's been an accident or something on the line... and it's so frustrating because your plans for the day have to change, you've got to go back home and get your car, or you've got to make a phone call to say ‘I'm going to be late’, or ‘I'm not coming in...’ so it is important to know”

[Mixed Group, Long Journeys, Frequent Travellers]

Longer journeys, and less frequent travellers, require more information

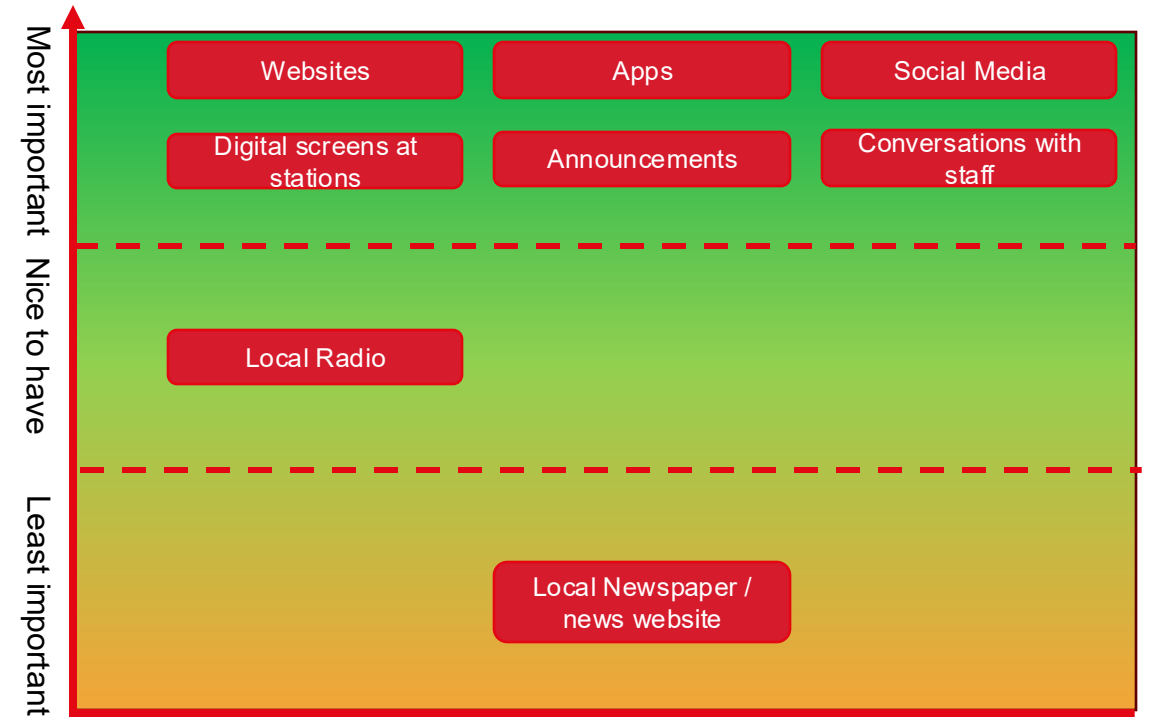


- While most passengers need some communication, the greatest demand for information and support is from those making the longest and least frequent journeys.
 - There is more that could go wrong, and they lack familiarity with the route and their options.
- Short trips of 2-3 stations, made multiple times per week, mean that passengers are familiar with train times, frequency, and their options when things go wrong.
- Those travelling less frequently need to be reassured that they are making the right choices and can access information when they need to.

All have much the same needs from communication, but those with the least experience need the most help.

Overall, information currently comes from digital sources and the stations

- The majority of the audience is digitally engaged, and they expect to look on their phones first for information – both at home and when out and about.
- When at a station, the default is still to look at phones, but with an expectation that there will be clear information on screens, and staff available to get clarifications.
- On the trains mobile reception can be variable, which increases reliance on on-board announcements and displays (improved on the new trains).
- Local media are less important, though those listening to local radio appreciate the travel updates that they hear.



The smartphone is the principal source of information, but this needs to be robustly backed up by the information displays and announcements when on the Merseyrail estate.

Departures

Time Destination

Platform

19:05 Southport

2 On time

19:07 Headbolt Lane

2 On time

19:10 Liverpool

2 On time

19:11 Ormskirk

2 On time

19:15 Liverpool Central

1 On time

19:20 West Kirby

3 On time

19:28 Ormskirk

2 On time

19:29 Liverpool Central

1 On time

19:31 West Kirby

3 On time

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19:08:06

“I'm used to making the same trips, I'm a creature of habit, I know where to get on and where to get off. If something changed I'd have to ask someone”

[Mixed Group, Short/Medium/Long Journeys, Digitally Disengaged]

Most important channels – in more detail: digital

Websites

- Merseyrail website is felt to be user friendly and informative, more used than National Rail or the Trainline for local services
- First stop for those who think they already have too many apps, and do not want to download more

“The information on the website is very current and it tells you what you need to know”

[F, 48, C1, Short Journeys, Frequent Traveller, Disability]

Apps

- Merseyrail app is clear and informative
- Some lack of awareness that it exists – Trainline is being used by some because they think it's the only option
 - The Merseyrail app could benefit from further promotion
- Expected to be the same functionality as the website

“I didn't even know that there was a Merseyrail app!”

[F, 25, C1, Medium Journeys, Frequent Traveller, Disability]

Social media

- X is key for the most digitally engaged and frequent travellers
 - Much less use of other social media for travel purposes
- Some belief that it will be faster with the news than website or app
- Allows interaction between user and Merseyrail to check what is happening and establish alternative options

“X updates really quickly – it's up to date”

[Mixed Group, Short/Medium Journeys, Frequent Travellers]

Digital sources of information are rated most highly by the majority of the sample – allowing them to look up information as and when they need it.

Most important channels – in more detail: at the station / on the train

Digital screens at stations

- Extremely useful for checking details
- Preference for those that don't scroll over multiple pages (frustrating waiting for relevant information to come round)
- Positioning of screens could be improved – more information currently available in the ticket office than on the platform

“You're looking to make sure that your train's on time – you can see all the times, cancellations”

[F, 48, C1, Short Journeys, Frequent Traveller, Disability]

Announcements

- Useful when there are last minute alterations / changes
- Need to ensure volume is high enough to stand out at the busiest stations
- Passengers need to be listening out for announcements, so could benefit from introductory sound alert before speaking starts at stations or on trains

“It's a volume thing – every second word you can't hear”

[M, 46, C1, Long Journeys, Frequent Traveller, Disability]

Conversations with staff

- Valued for getting answers to questions sparked by other information
- Generally perceived to be approachable, reasonably well-informed and good ambassadors for Merseyrail
- Need to ensure that staff have access to the most up to date information

“The people in the ticket office at Hunts Cross know me – so they tell me what to do”

[Mixed Group, Short/Medium/Long Journeys, Digitally Disengaged]

Station communications are strong supports for the digital channels.

Other channels – in more detail

Nice to have

Local radio

- Seen by majority of the audience as a legacy communications channel
- HOWEVER, will be heard in the car, at home, or the workplace so useful to get a message out when there's significant news

“You get radio news bulletins with the travel reports”

[Mixed Group, Short/Medium/Long Journeys, Digitally Disengaged]

Least important

Local newspapers /TV / news websites

- Least important
- Have been overtaken by groups on eg Facebook as a source of local news
- Most will not think to look unless the ‘paper’ itself has alerted them via their social media feed

“I wouldn’t think to look at a local news website”

[Mixed Group, Short/Medium Journeys, Frequent Travellers]

Local radio is not listened to by many in the sample, however it remains an important part of life for those that use it. Newspapers and sites are seen as useful for finding out about something after it has happened, but are not a destination for up to date travel information during disruption.

There are differences in channel use among disabled passengers

Reliance on app/web over screens

- Screens at stations can be difficult to read for those with poor eyesight
- Too much information/too many adjacent screens can overwhelm those with anxiety or ADHD – preference for personalised information on the app

Staff are crucial

- Additional need for reassurance or assistance – some passengers are extremely sensitive to unexpected/last minute changes of plan
- Disabled passengers who are digitally disengaged may have lots of questions about their journey and no other way to contact anyone
- Need to ensure volume levels and enunciation of announcements are clear for those with hearing conditions – especially at the busiest / noisiest stations and on trains

“I find station screens difficult to follow – there’s too much going on and I can’t pay attention”

[F, 25, C1, Medium Journeys, Frequent Traveller, Disability]

“I want to speak to the staff, I’ve got a good relationship with them”

[M, 44, E, Medium Journeys, Frequent Traveller, Disability]

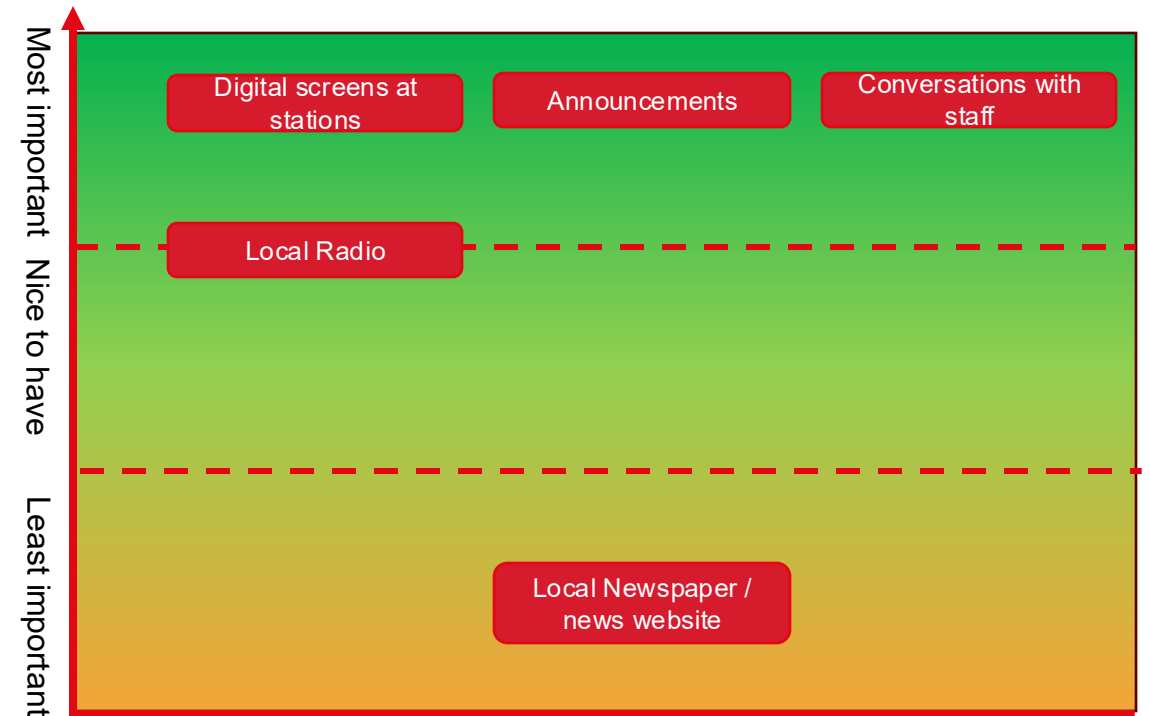
Disabled passengers were largely looking in the same places for information as everyone else, but there are nuances depending on their condition and how it affects them.

For the digitally disengaged, priorities are different and audio/visual announcements become much more important

- The digitally disengaged audience is unsurprisingly not interested in what is available on the websites or apps – for them the information provided at the station is absolutely key.
- Local radio plays a much more prominent role for this audience, providing them with travel updates before they leave the house.

“I won’t look online – I get there early, turn up and look at a board, or ask the ticket guys”

[Mixed Group, Short/Medium/Long Journeys, Digitally Disengaged]



The digitally disengaged audience is much more reliant on the information finding them – they have fewer avenues to look for it away from the stations and trains themselves.

Experiences of disruption



Four key types of disruption were experienced

More sympathy for Merseyrail

Less sympathy for Merseyrail

Welfare

- Disruption due to welfare incidents is most tolerated
- Disruptive to their plans but most try and see the bigger picture and just want to know what the impact is for their journey

Weather

- Sense that weather too easily disrupts UK public transport and operators should be better prepared

Faults

- When due to old infrastructure cues lack of investment
- Some frustration on Merseyrail that the new trains and signalling are going wrong too often

Overcrowding

- Train companies should be better able to forecast demand
- Everton test events highlighting need for longer/more frequent trains and bigger stations
- Race fixtures at Aintree cause congestion and a preference to avoid travelling at the peak where possible

“It’s clear trains aren’t running, so why would you need to know more about it?”

[Mixed Group, Long Journeys, Frequent Travellers]

“It was quite scary [at Aintree], the train was absolutely rammed and then people actually physically opened the doors and people started barging on the train... they forced the doors open and got on... you just couldn’t move”

[Mixed Group, Short/Medium/Long Journeys, Digitally Disengaged]

Sympathy with Merseyrail during disruption depends on the extent to which it is thought that they are in control of the situation. The unplanned is one thing, but faults and overcrowding feel less forgivable.

Communication is just one facet of what sets the passenger mood during disruption

The disruption itself is the key emotional disruptor for passengers

- The most frustrating element is not the communication – it's the fact disruption is happening at all
- Lack of ability to travel as expected, with the knock-on effects on passenger plans, sets the context through which respondents then view the communications

“I’ve got more of an issue with the disruption than with the communication around it – what they tell you is fine”

[Mixed Group, Short/Medium Journeys, Frequent Travellers]

“You can find out what you need to know – my issue is more about the service itself rather than the communications”

[F, 48, C1, Short Journeys, Frequent Traveller, Disability]

Disruption communications are intrinsically breaking or updating bad news to passengers. It is the disruption itself that causes dissatisfaction, and the communications that can amplify or mitigate that.

No one wants their journey to be disrupted, but timely communication makes a difference

Initial notification of disruption

- Creates a sense of unease
- Need to know more to understand the position
- Want to know what this means for them and their journey

***“Straightaway you’re thinking
‘oh God there’s delays’,
starting to get a bit anxious”***

[F, 48, C1, Short Journeys, Frequent
Traveller, Disability]



Further information

- Reassured
- Calmer
- Able to make a plan

***“You can click through and get
the detail and that would be
calming”***

[F, 25, C1, Medium Journeys, Frequent
Traveller, Disability]

Disruption is concerning, but at its best the messaging around the subject provides reassurance and arms the passenger to make the right decisions about their onward travel.

Where a passenger is affects how they experience disruption

Before leaving for the train

- Least impact – can make a decision whether or not to travel
- Have access to home Wi-Fi and phone meaning they can replan relatively efficiently, contact anyone they need to, and assess next steps
- **NEED – timely communication of developments so that they don't travel if they don't need to**

At the station

- Can be disappointing – especially when they've travelled from home/work thinking everything was fine (information has changed)
- Can be very stressful, particularly if they need to retrace their steps home, but also have options at this point that they need to decide between in terms of next steps
- **NEED – a reasonable idea when things will be back to normal and alternative transport options**

On the train

- The most frustrating, particularly when the train is held at a location they didn't expect to be in, or between stations
- Potentially poor phone signal – so dependent on announcements made on the train
- **NEED – clear communication of what is happening as it happens**

At their destination

- Not an immediate issue, but concerns start about how easy it's going to be to get back
- Have time to make alternative arrangements when they have just arrived
- When trying to return home, disruption is frustrating but less likely to be on a deadline than they were in the morning
- **NEED – to understand what their options are and when things will be back to normal**

Information is desired at all stages of the journey – to provide reassurance and allow for plans to be changed as needed.

Overall – disruption makes passengers feel negative, and crave the certainty of a new plan

“You feel angry because it has disrupted your day, your time”

[Mixed Group, Long Journeys, Frequent Travellers]

“It’s like ‘oh my God, panic’”

[F, 25, C1, Medium Journeys, Frequent Traveller, Disability]

“It’s annoying but there’s nothing that you can do... frustrated, annoyed, but I’ve got to get to college”

[F, 48, C1, Short Journeys, Frequent Traveller, Disability]



Across experiences, three negative elements emerged as frustrations which could be addressed

Digital screens giving ‘false hope’

- Frustrating to stand at the station thinking that there will be a train, but seeing the five-minute delay become ten minutes, and eventual cancellation
- Suspicion that Merseyrail must have known sooner that it wasn't going to run, so why didn't they say so quicker?

“I don't like the departure boards holding out false hope of trains”

[Mixed Group, Short/Medium Journeys, Frequent Travellers]

Being given the wrong information

- At least one example of a passenger being told by a member of staff that there were no trains, but then a train arriving (which they boarded)
- Suggests that staff need better information about what is happening

“They told me to get a bus – but I could still see people waiting so I ignored them, and a train came”

[Mixed Group, Short/Medium Journeys, Frequent Travellers]

General information flow to staff

- A passenger on his way to Southport for his wedding anniversary was stranded at Formby
- Lack of information about alternatives meant having to wait at Formby for the next southbound train 2 hours later
- There was no apology when a train finally arrived, and when he got back to his origin station staff there were unaware there had been disruption

“Two hours hanging around Formby station... and no apologies when a train came”

[Mixed Group, Short/Medium/Long Journeys, Digitally Disengaged]

The key need is to feel that information is being passed to passengers as quickly as possible, and that staff can answer questions – when this doesn't happen, it causes doubt and uncertainty.

Situation changing between checking the app and arriving at the station was a common experience

- This discrepancy highlights the need for information to be passed on quickly.
- Most respondents recognised that things do change, and that it is often their own fault for not checking frequently enough.
 - However, it still adds up to wasted time, and potentially arriving to a destination late.
- Little idea from respondents about how to resolve this issue, as they imagine alert notifications could quickly become repetitive and irrelevant.
 - If there was a way of opting into alerts for your specific journey which would come in if there were any changes then that could be interesting.

“The app said they were running, but when I got to the station [in January] they weren’t. I was only going somewhere to visit someone, but it messed up my day. I should have known better”

[Mixed Group, Short/Medium Journeys, Frequent Travellers]

“The app just updated while I was walking to the station. I walked back to my dad’s and stayed with him. I could have had an alert notification while I was walking but I’ve turned them off because I get annoyed by the constant bings”

[M, 44, E, Medium Journeys, Frequent Traveller, Disability]

Overall, respondents were tolerant of the situation changing, but they need reassurance that they are getting the latest updates as soon as they are known. As long as the station has the right information when they get there, that is acceptable.

Passengers have four key questions when disruption occurs

What is the impact for me?

- What is the implication for the network/route/individual train
- If delays, how long?

What is happening?

- Require a summary of the problem
- No need for exhaustive detail, but do need a reason for what is happening

How long will it last?

- Require reassurance that Merseyrail is dealing with the problem
 - Can I wait for things to get back to normal?
 - Is it worth changing my plans?
 - If I go, how easy will it be to get back later?

What can I do now?

- Are there other routes?
- Is there a scheduled bus I could take?
- Are there replacement buses?
- (Minority) Can I claim back my ticket cost?

“Basically, I need to know what the disruption is, are trains running? If not, when will they run, is there an alternative for me, and if I do get to the destination, how do I get back?”

[Mixed Group, Short/Medium/Long Journeys, Infrequent Travellers]

“What’s the disruption, how long will it last, what are my options – there’s almost always another option”

[M, 44, E, Medium Journeys, Frequent Traveller, Disability]

These needs come up whether thinking about closure of a single station, disruption to a line, or suspension of the whole network.

A yellow and black high-speed train is shown on tracks, with a text overlay in the center. The train is moving from left to right. The background shows green trees and a clear sky. The text overlay is a semi-transparent white box with black text.

“In January, when it was snowing, the fella was like, there's no trains coming, you're going to have to get the bus, this was at Brunswick, so I was like ok... but my instinct was to just go back to the train station, so I did, and the train came”

[Mixed Group, Short/Medium Journeys, Frequent Travellers]

The short, frequent nature of most journeys within Merseyside, means decisions can be made quickly when there is an issue

- Across the sessions, there were multiple examples of people leaving the train/station as soon as they knew there was disruption without looking for more details.
 - Calling family/friends to rescue them.
 - Getting on a bus / in a taxi.
- Consequently, they might not have found out what the cause of the disruption actually was – it's more important to carry on with the journey, and that feels achievable.

“I don't bother looking, I just try to solve the problem. I'm more interested in getting to where I'm going”

[Mixed Group, Short/Medium/Long Journeys, Infrequent Travellers]

“We just formulated the plan then and there”
[Mixed Group, Short/Medium/Long Journeys, Infrequent Travellers]

Because passengers feel that they have got other options, the depth of information needed about other options is potentially greater than on longer journeys across the country.

Lack of up-to-date bus information emerged as a specific gap for some passengers



- When leaving the station because of disruption there is a feeling that a bus route won't be far away (if a replacement bus is not being provided).
- What printed bus information there is can be difficult to see if people are crowded round it.
- At this point, it would be helpful if station staff were briefed on the bus services available nearby in terms of timing/frequency – especially for disabled passengers or the digitally disengaged.
 - Respondents recalled instances where station staff were unable to help them with nearby bus routes and they had to work it out themselves.
 - Better not to assume that everyone can/will just look it up on their phone.

Staff, website and app being able to advise on alternative transport options in the vicinity of the stations would be a good way of reassuring passengers of their options when plans have to change.

Review of current communications



Before being shown examples, specific recall of disruption messaging was limited



- Sense that Merseyrail does communicate as necessary, and that there are few obvious gaps in the content.
- Recall of the suspension in January was limited to a succession of services marked 'cancelled' and closed stations with noticeboards outside saying no trains.
- Passengers believe that there is usually clarity on what has happened, and what the consequences are, but that what can be done instead is sometimes a gap.

No one spontaneously thought the communication was poor, but there was limited recall of how Merseyrail communicates during disruption.

Audio announcements are a crucial information source when passengers are at the station or on the train

- Overall audio announcements strike the right tone and communicate that disruption may be coming up.
 - Centralised announcements to all stations from the control room reassure that everyone is getting the same information.
- Live announcements are preferred to pre-recorded ones, they don't listen properly to the latter because there are so many.
- The digitally disengaged tend to be most reliant on the content of audio announcements and are not helped by being directed to the website – example messaging that covers the nature of the disruption with description of the impact works best.
 - Ideally announcements could direct listeners to staff or screens as well.



The most useful audio announcements are those that give details without the need for further research.

Audio announcements can be improved for greater clarity in terms of what is happening and consequences

More useful

Less useful

On Saturday 26 October and Monday 28 October, passengers travelling from Fazakerley to Headbolt Lane will face delays of up to 10-minutes. This will impact services from start of service until 19:35.

We are now arriving at Sandhills, please use this station for the Taylor Swift concerts at Anfield stadium. Shuttle buses and a walking route are available. Please check last train times for return journeys at the station or via our app.

Clear on disruption, timings and impact, doesn't leave any questions about what is going to happen

Due to the Grand National Festival, from Thursday 3 to Saturday 5 April, there will be changes to train times on Northern line services. Please visit [merseyrail.org/Aintree races for more information](https://merseyrail.org/Aintree-races-for-more-information).

Due to engineering work, on Sunday 30 & Monday 31 March Rail replacement buses will be running between Chester and Hooton. Find out more at merseyrail.org

During the festive period there will be changes to our timetables, with some services finishing earlier than usual on Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve. Also our special Boxing Day service returns. Visit [merseyrail.org/Christmas for more information](https://merseyrail.org/Christmas-for-more-information).

Clear on disruption and that there might be impact, but all leave questions as to extent of impact, what that means for individuals, and **signpost only a digital source for more information**

TO IMPROVE: tweaking the announcements to leave fewer questions and signpost more sources of further information could improve their usefulness for the digitally disengaged in particular.

Screens at stations and on trains provide useful information to all audiences

- Clear information about forthcoming trains at the platform.
 - No information missing.
-
- Strong demarcation between the two lines.
 - Clear 'at-a-glance' display of the current situation.



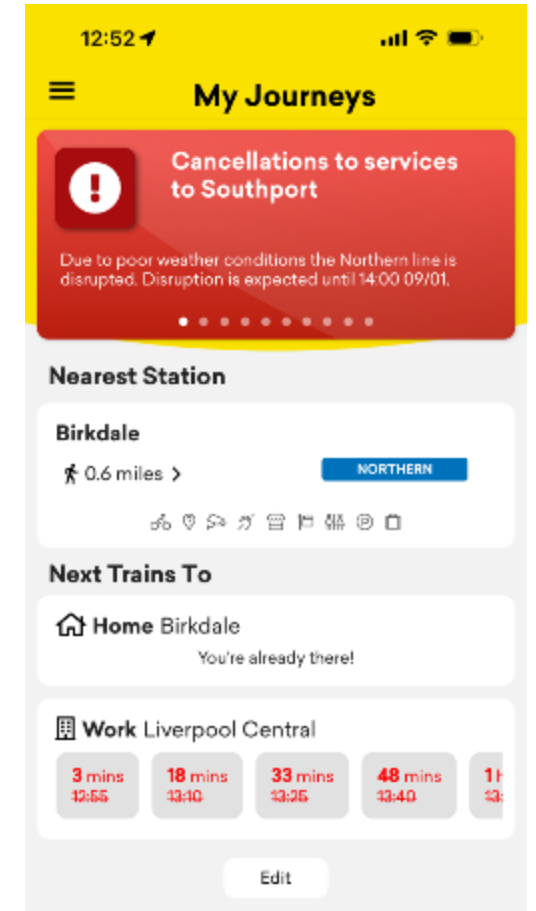
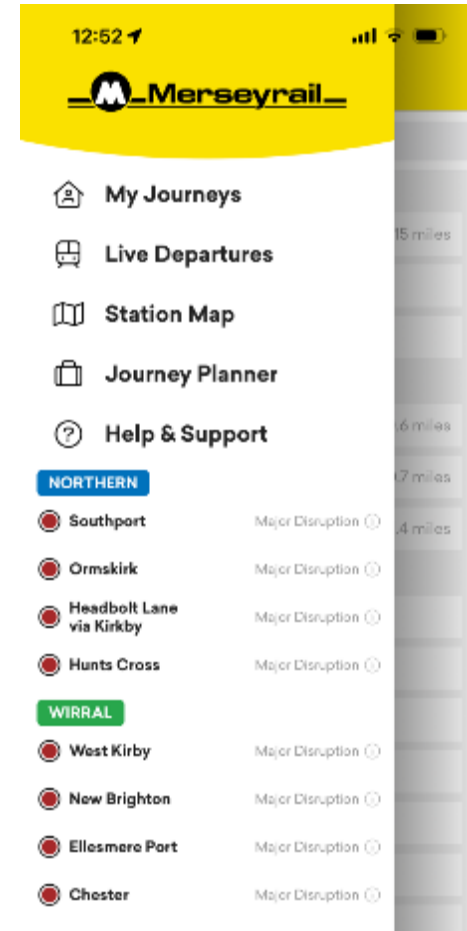
- Overview of services from the station is clear.
- ? Going over multiple pages can be frustrating while waiting for relevant information to come round, or when it moves on before passengers have finished reading it.
- ? Could be helpful to have these at platform level in more locations so that passengers can see at a glance if disruption is widespread.



TO IMPROVE: Avoid going over multiple pages as much as possible – use additional screens to achieve one per page ideally. Consider siting screens where they can be seen from the station entrance, and providing more information on the platforms.

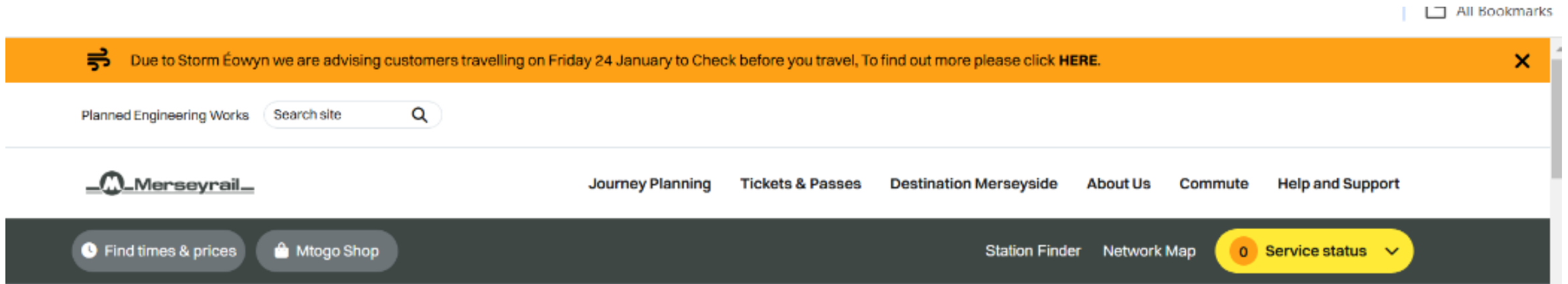
The app was well received

- Clear and easy to navigate.
 - Meets expectations for clarity of communication and speed of update.
 - Limited awareness – some users of other apps were seeing the Merseyrail app for the first time in the sessions.
 - Performed strongly and several indicated that they would be downloading it after the session.
 - Key benefit is being able to see all Merseyrail information in one place, without having all the other national rail options there too.
- ? Some query over how much you can do everything in the app vs being directed from it to the website – ideal would be to do everything within the app.



TO IMPROVE: A key source of information for its users, more could be done to promote awareness of the app so that it can benefit more passengers.

‘Calamity banner’ messages make sense as an alert

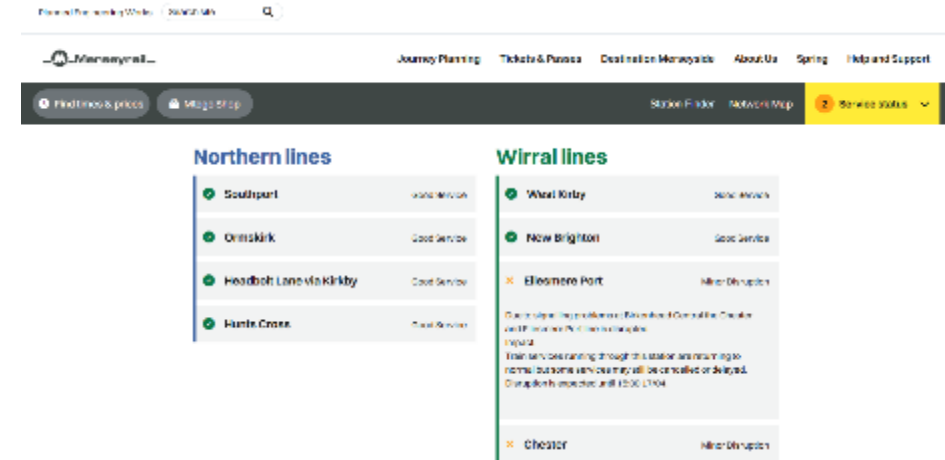


- Text is informative and makes readers want to click through for more information.
- ? Some worry that they would miss it, because they're conditioned to look for the service status button and the colour is close to the Merseyrail brand palette.
- Could be enhanced by changing the colour to something more stand out, and repositioning to be a larger box that covers the screen and has to be clicked on to remove.

TO IMPROVE: Ensure critical passenger messages, such as that there is a significantly reduced service operating tomorrow, are highly prominent on websites. Where the message is in 'house style/colours' it can lead to vital information blending in with the rest of the webpage or feeling like a 'will you accept our cookies?' message.

Rainbow boards on website, app and at stations are extremely helpful to planning

- Easy to read at a glance – on website, app, and station screens.
- Breaking down by line and colour coding makes navigation easier and avoids overwhelming the reader
- Informative.
- Ability to click through for more information enhances usability.
- Line updates that give specific delay lengths and when the disruption is expected to be over are especially helpful.



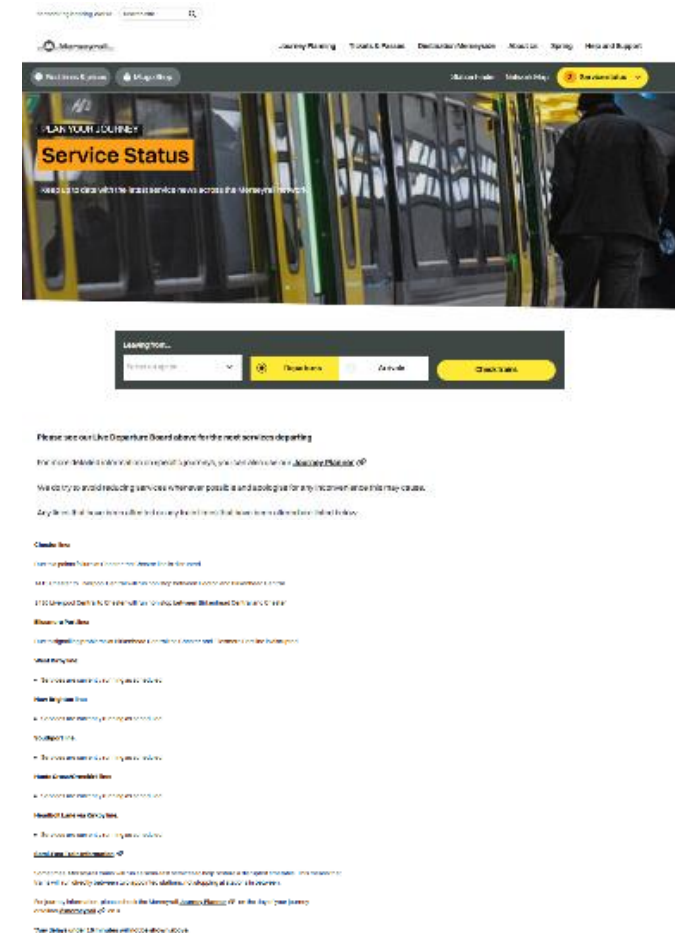
“I go online and check these a lot, it’s just dead easy to click on it”

[F, 48, C1, Short Journeys, Frequent Traveller, Disability]

The rainbow boards were recognised across the sample, and are a key way of disseminating information for Merseyrail passengers

The service status page layout could be improved

- Train by train information is useful when trying to find out about a specific service.
- ? Level of information all placed together can be overwhelming for those not used to seeing it, and finding the right service can be a case of working through everything until it jumps out.
- Overall feeling that it's good that the page exists (no one called for its removal) but not as user friendly as the Rainbow Boards.
- Potential to optimise by breaking up the white space with horizontal barriers between lines, and using larger/bolder/more colourful destination headings.



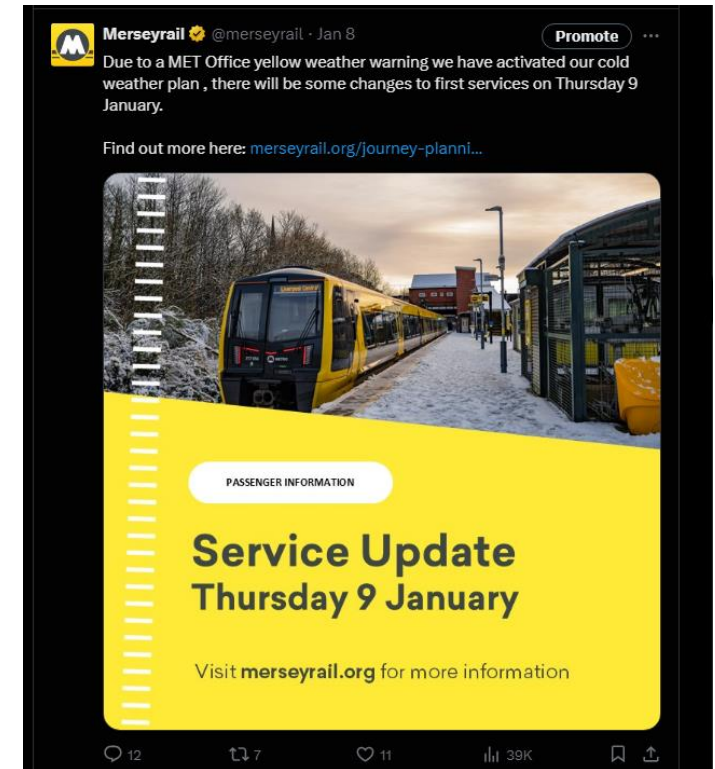
TO IMPROVE: Consider breaking up the screen more visually so it is less of a list.

Messages on X about forthcoming disruption raise questions

- Clearly signposts to click through for more information.
 - Mention of the Met Office reassures that this decision has not been taken lightly.
 - Image is appropriate to the subject being communicated on.
- ? Raises questions about what the 'cold weather plan' is, and therefore what sort of changes to services (fewer? Different times?).

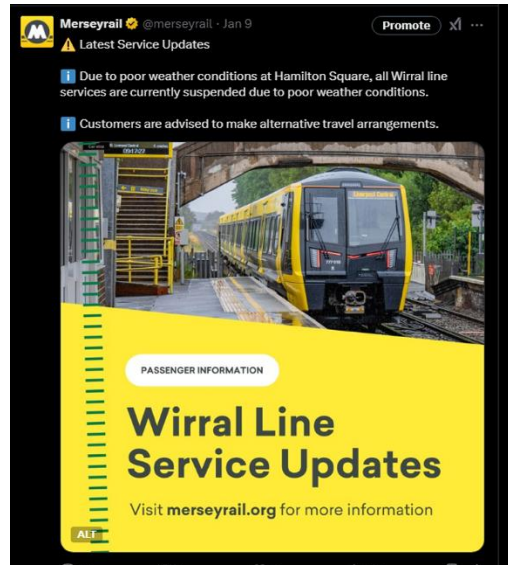
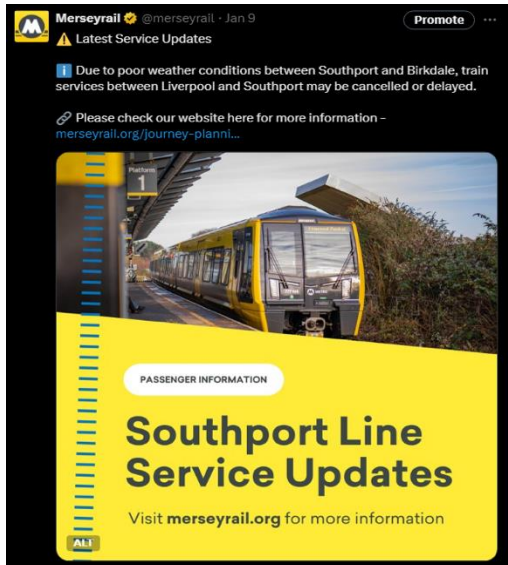
“It doesn’t tell me what their cold weather plan is, but it would make me check the next day before leaving the house”

[Mixed Group, Long Journeys, Frequent Travellers]



Clear that there is going to be disruption, likely to drive traffic to the website, but could talk more (briefly) about if delays or cancellations are likely.

Messages on X during disruption gave more clarity but still leave some gaps and uncertainty



- Clear that there is going to be disruption, and which services might be cancelled/delayed.
- ? Imagery doesn't really match the weather conditions being talked about – potentially confusing passengers.
- ? Southport and Birkdale are not far apart – giving 'poor weather conditions' as the reason here can feel unlikely (would be more widespread) so if it's because the weather has caused frozen points somewhere then say so.

“It's the latest service update – I know that if I click on it all the information I need is going to be there”

[F, 48, C1, Short Journeys, Frequent Traveller, Disability]

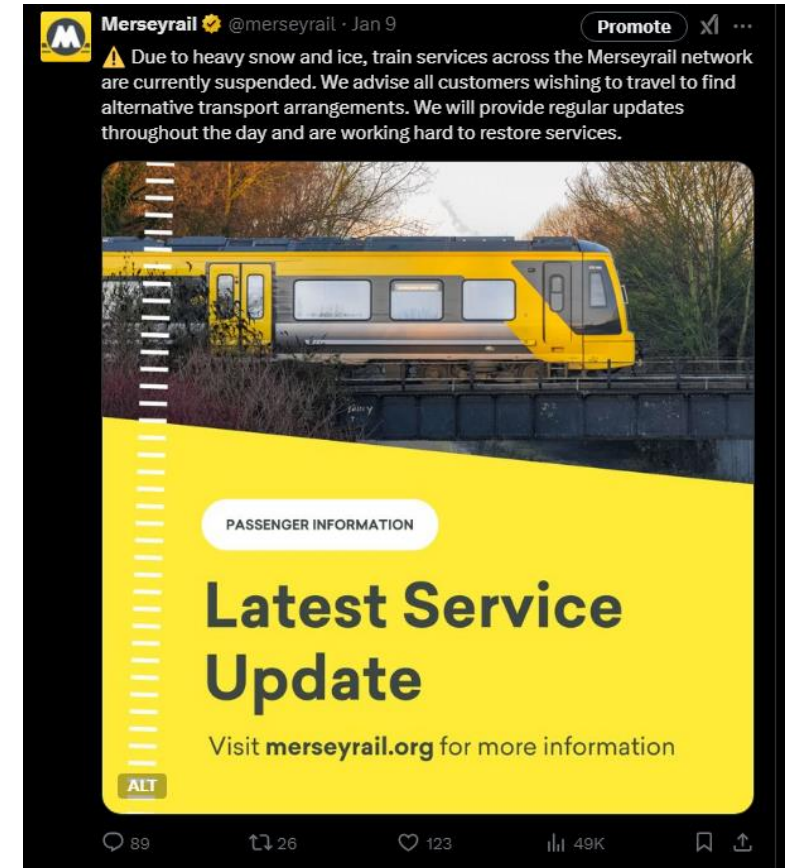
TO IMPROVE: Consider less localised expressions of weather effects (or help passengers understand why one locality has been affected more than another by the same weather), ensure imagery matches text content.

The full suspension notice example was clear and unequivocal

- Very clear that the network is suspended – could be more descriptive of what has caused this ('heavy snow and ice' but not everywhere, and what has this caused?), and currently does not explain that there has been a power loss due to a frozen third rail.
- 'regular updates' communicates that Merseyrail are working to address the problem and committed to keeping passengers informed.
- ? Imagery again does not match the message text, could be improved by having a cold weather / snow scene.

“Basically it’s not happening, so make other arrangements. At least you know for first thing it’s just ‘no’ – not a lot more they can say”

[Mixed Group, Long Journeys, Frequent Travellers]



Overall, a sense that there is very little more that can be said in the circumstances – if replacement buses are being provided then that could be indicated, but otherwise a case of individuals making alternative arrangements.

Information examples are straightforward

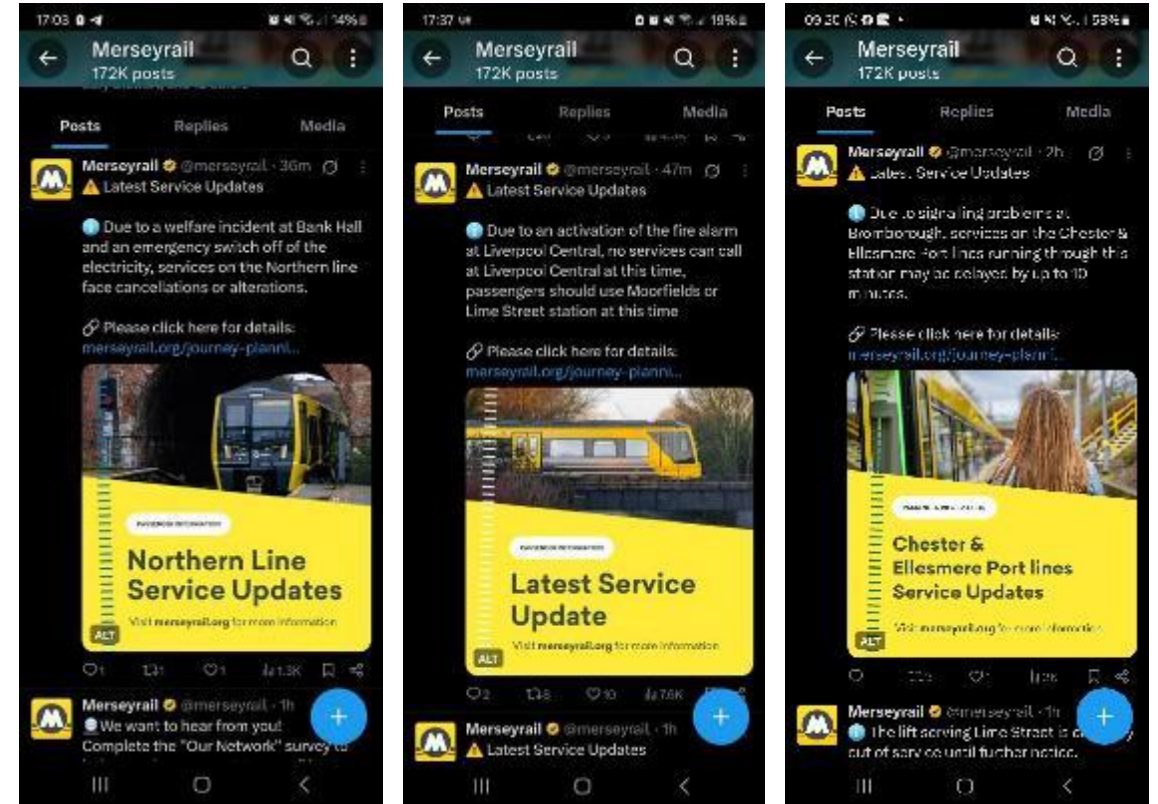
- Social media examples that give hard timings (eg 'delayed by up to ten minutes' rather than just 'delayed') were preferred – more informative.
- Logical flow
 - Social media flags the nature of the incident and provides link to more information.
 - Service status deals with individual trains.
- Appropriately professional tone throughout.
- No missing information or unanswered questions.
- Website example on the left is visually what would be preferred for the Service Update page – more broken up and easier to follow.



Overall, language is clear, and the messages are delivered. Where possible try and avoid unbroken 'lists' of information.

Social media information by disruption type

- The welfare incident example gives an appropriate amount of detail about the disruption, no one wanted more information about the incident.
- Would appreciate some indication of how long the disruption may last, or confirmation that that can't be estimated.
- The fire alarm post contains everything necessary to change plans as it suggests which station to use instead.
- The signalling problems example is the clearest in terms of providing a hard estimate of likely delays.



Response to the three examples was broadly positive overall, with minor points where improvement could be made.

Layering information is not an instinctive desire, but makes sense

- When considering disruption messaging, the spontaneous desire is for all the necessary information to be in the same place – passengers don't want to work to find out the information they need.
- However, working through example communications brings home the breadth, depth, and range of information that different people might need
 - Suggests that the current layered approach is the most coherent way of providing the information.
- This pushes the more digitally engaged in the direction of wanting apps or Journey Check so that they can bring up their routes/journeys immediately.



Because of the need for information about different routes and individual trains, the layered approach is appropriate – however, the ideal would be individually personalised information in one place.

There was a split on how far an apology is necessary

- Apologies were not thought to be necessary by most
 - Those travelling most frequently, and for work purposes, took the view that apologies quickly become routine and insincere.
 - Preference for communication of what is happening and what is being done about it.
- However, less frequent travellers and those with anxiety tended to want to hear apologies
 - Feels like an acknowledgement of their position.
 - Reassures that Merseyrail are aware that disruption has a human impact.
- Where space allows, there was interest in apology from Merseyrail as part of the initial layer of communication – ‘we’re sorry that’ – however this should not be at the expense of the more important information.

“I’m not bothered about whether they apologise or not, purely because I feel like businesses never mean it”

[Mixed Group, Short/Medium Journeys, Frequent Travellers]

“Maybe they could have a little bit of empathy in there – like apologies, it would help because it’s frustrating for people. A little bit of friendliness wouldn’t go amiss”

[F, 48, C1, Short Journeys, Frequent Traveller, Disability]

Most were broadly satisfied with the communications as presently worded, however a minority would like to see more apology from Merseyrail to add empathy.

Current language and tone were felt to be appropriate

DO

- Use clear unambiguous language
- Give clear timings of likely delay and disruption length as quickly as possible
- Apologise where appropriate
- Maintain a tone of professionalism
- Give details where possible
- Choose words that impart maximum detail – ‘snow and ice’ or frozen points

“‘weather conditions’ could be all sorts”

[M, 44, E, Medium Journeys, Frequent Traveller, Disability]

DON'T

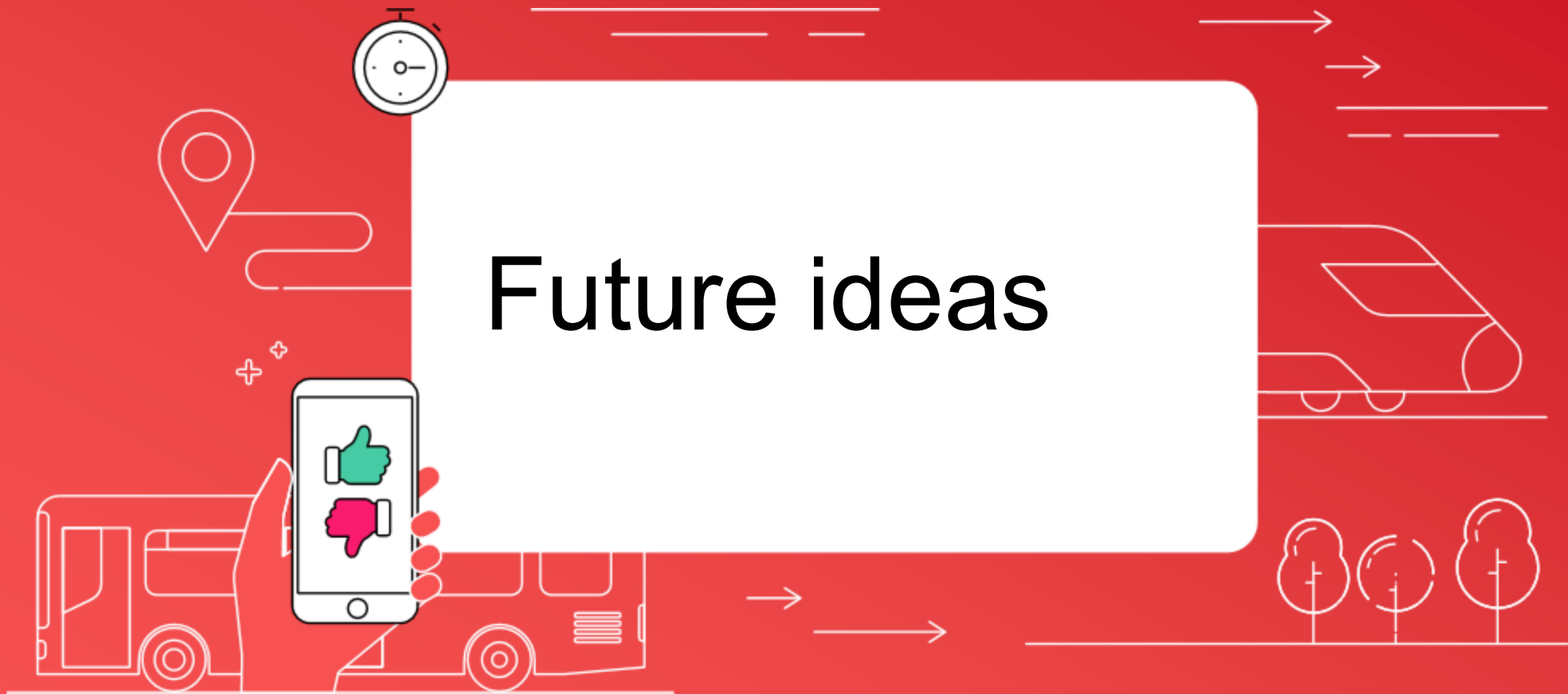
- ? Be too vague – ‘poor weather conditions’
- ? Use vague references to poor weather for highly specific areas (eg ‘between Southport and Birkdale’ – raises questions about why it’s so bad there and not anywhere else)

“If it’s just between Southport and Birkdale that the weather’s bad, that’s a very small area”

[Mixed Group, Long Journeys, Frequent Travellers]

Overall, the disruption messaging comes across as professional and coherent, with only minor alterations needed to improve reception.

Future ideas



Passengers found JourneyCheck valuable

- Provides a wealth of detail on services and facilities.
- Exceeds expectations by going into, for example, lifts to individual platforms – very useful for disabled passengers.
- Potential to have personalised information sent to them is motivating for the most digitally engaged and most frequent travellers.

“Ideally it would be on their app and personalised, so you don’t have to go looking for the right info”

[Mixed Group, Short/Medium Journeys, Frequent Travellers]

“I like the idea of having it embedded on the website so you can choose what you want to see”

[Mixed Group, Short/Medium/Long Journeys, Infrequent Travellers]

“There’s a lot of information... you could forward plan for the week”

[F, 48, C1, Short Journeys, Frequent Traveller, Disability]

Clear desire from respondents for this tool to be taken forward by Merseyrail.

WhatsApp has great potential as a future channel

“WhatsApp would be good because it’s direct person to person”

[Mixed Group, Short/Medium Journeys, Frequent Travellers]

“That would be great – especially if you were in a flap, and there was no one at the station that new an alternative bus route or whatever”

[F, 25, C1, Medium Journeys, Frequent Traveller, Disability]

“People like myself, I feel that we need more information and more direct information”

[M, 46, C1, Long Journeys, Frequent Traveller, Disability]

- WhatsApp provides the ability to interact with Merseyrail and get bespoke answers to questions. Raising awareness of this option would drive people to use it.
- Push nature of notifications means that important information is less likely to be missed.
- Potential for sub-groups – disabled passengers would welcome the ability to register for updates that would provide more help/support tailored to their circumstances.

WhatsApp groups are increasingly used for communication, and being able to deal with Merseyrail direct via the app is attractive. There is an expectation that they will be talking to a human through the channel rather than AI or a bot – likely to diminish in appeal if this is not the case.

Webchat is less highly valued across the sample

➤ Webchat provides the ability to get answers to questions.

? Passengers find it difficult to imagine webchat being manned by real people 24/7 (24/7 operation is the expectation).

? Resistance to use of AI or chatbots.

? Frustrating experiences on other sites.

? Difficult for exact questions to be understood/default to stock replies.

? Disbelief that AI augmented replies will be more accurate than a human agent.

? End up using a lot of time then needing to speak to a 'real person' still.

“I don’t really have much trust in webchat because I always feel that you get left waiting for them for ages – I feel like WhatsApp is more immediate”

[F, 25, C1, Medium Journeys, Frequent Traveller, Disability]

“I probably wouldn’t use it... it’s very rare that I have an issue where I feel like I need to speak to a bot at first, then be put through to a human”

[M, 46, C1, Long Journeys, Frequent Traveller, Disability]

“I’ve been put off live chats over the last year or so, just because the majority of them are AI bots now and you can never get to speak to a passenger advisor”

[Mixed Group, Short/Medium/Long Journeys, Infrequent Travellers]

There was negativity towards the idea of webchat unless it is going to be operated by humans.



Recommendations

Overall recommendations

- Digital channels are key for most people
 - Prioritising disruption messaging on the website and app ensures that most people will see it, this can then be supported by social media for the most digitally engaged.
- Maintain investment in and quality of audio and visual announcements on trains and at stations
 - Expected by all and vital for the digitally disengaged.
 - In areas with poor mobile reception or Wi-Fi, screens and announcements are the difference between confident decision making, and stress/worry.
- Passengers are wary of opting into updates, fearing multiple repetitive alert messages
 - Look into ways of offering passengers the ability to opt-in to alerts (and publicise any that currently exist) for their specific journey only.
- Passengers expect consistency of messaging through and across all channels of communication so they can trust what they're being told and not worry that they are being given wrong information
 - Ensuring staff, website and app are able to advise on alternative transport options from stations will reassure passengers of their options when plans have to change.
 - Ensure accurate information flows to all passenger touch points as quickly as possible.

Individual comms recommendations

- Audio announcement
 - Adjusting announcements to leave fewer questions and signpost more sources of further information than the app and the website could improve their usefulness for the digitally disengaged.
- Station screens
 - Avoid going over multiple screens as much as possible.
 - Use additional screens as much as possible so that pages do not need to rotate.
 - Consider siting screens where they can be seen from the station entrance, and providing the same depth of information on the platforms as in the booking office.
- App
 - A key source of information for its users, more could be done to promote awareness of the app so that it can benefit more passengers.
- Calamity banner
 - Ensure critical passenger messages, such as that there is a significantly reduced service operating tomorrow, are highly prominent on websites.
 - Where the message is in 'house style/colours' it can lead to vital information blending in with the rest of the webpage or feeling like a 'will you accept our cookies?' message.
- Service status page
 - Consider breaking the screen up more visually so it is less of a list
- Social media
 - Consider less localised expressions of weather effects (or help passengers understand why one locality has been affected more than another by the same weather), ensure imagery matches text content.

Tone and content recommendations

- Most were broadly satisfied with current communications in terms of tone and content.
- However, most also felt there was still room for improvement in terms of:
 - Using clear, unambiguous language.
 - Providing clarity about length of likely delay and duration of disruption.
 - More of an apology to signal greater empathy with passengers (minority view).
 - Maintaining a tone of professionalism.
 - Giving details of what has happened/is happening as quickly as possible.
 - Choosing words that impart maximum detail and are not vague – for example, ‘snow and ice’ or frozen points rather than ‘poor weather.’

Contact

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Transport Focus is the operating name of the
Passengers' Council