Clear, concise, consistent

Summary of research undertaken by
Transport Focus in conjunction with the rail industry
Smarter Information Smarter Journeys Programme

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transportfocus

Introduction

Passengers often report that the information provided by train companies during service disruption is unclear and inconsistent. This has been consistently highlighted in Transport Focus research, and we have long pressed the industry to address it.

Transport Focus continues to work with the Smarter Information Smarter Journeys programme (SISJ) to help ensure that passengers views and needs guide its work. To that end, we worked in partnership with SISJ to gain fresh insight into how passengers consume and use disruption information to make decisions about their journeys. There was particular focus on how alternative journey options are communicated and whether those messages are understood.

The SISJ programme is a rail industry initiative delivered jointly by **Network Rail** and the **Rail Delivery Group** and is charged with enhancing information so that passengers have the information they want, when and how they want it. The programme comprises a number of collaborative workstreams, focused on finding solutions to a range of different information issues. It has achieved a number of notable successes, such as alerting passengers to timetable alterations after they have bought their ticket.

This report provides a summary of the research findings, which can be read alongside the full research agency report (insert link once generated). The results are already being used by SISJ to inform its work and to give train operators greater clarity about what passengers expect of them when disruption occurs. Transport Focus is using the findings in its work with the rail industry to shine a light on disruption communications falling short of what is required and to explore solutions to prevent a recurrence.

Put me in control

Throughout the research, passengers spoke about information needing to give them back control over their journey when disrupted by delays and cancellations. The research demonstrated that providing the right information served a range of needs – emotional, functional and social.

Emotional needs included reassurance that it will be possible to complete a journey, providing information about alternative options, enabling passengers to make confident decisions. Functional needs included information about the impact on an individual journey, how long the delays will be, about the cause and compensation arrangements. While social needs included information required to share with others, for example courtesy calls to explain to a partner or friend what is going on.

To serve those different needs effectively, passengers want information that is:

Clear

Understandable, unambiguous

Jargon and technical language should be avoided, with as much context provided as possible. Passengers want to know the stations impacted, including start and end points and not just the name of the line or operator. Passengers want to know what is happening and why, the implications for their journey and clear instructions and directions about what they need to do as a result.

Concise

Short, so it can be read at a glance

Passengers don't want to be overwhelmed by long-winded explanations. Too much information makes it hard to identify the key points. There is only so much people can take in at once; many people will be looking at information on a small smartphone screen.

Consistent

Across all communications channels

Passengers link consistency with transparency and honesty. They need to believe they are receiving accurate information; conflicting messages, for example between station staff and information screens (either on a train or at a station) causes confusion and undermines trust. Passengers want information in different formats, including written and spoken words, British Sign Language and video with subtitles.

When information does not meet the clear, concise, consistent criteria, it can cause additional frustration and annoyance, on top of the original inconvenience of the disruption. It can make an already poor, stressful passenger experience worse.

The level of support passengers need varies depending on their familiarity with the journey. As a rule of thumb, infrequent travellers need more support than commuters (who are more likely to know what their options are from past experience). However, it is important that the railway avoids falling into the trap of assuming that all commuters know their options and that all passengers at peak times are commuters. Commuters, in particular, need to know how bad a disruption will be so they can minimise the impact – for example, deciding to work from home.

> *"The announcement for the delay came very late, pretty much when the train was about to arrive to pick us up. I think it would have been a lot better if we knew earlier so we could plan ourselves and know what to do and how we can manage the delay."*
>
> *North/Midlands, Commuting*

Despite understanding that staff might not have the complete picture, information vacuums where little or no information is provided cause worry, frustration and concern. If there is potential for disruption, passengers want early warning.

For planned engineering works, operators have greater ability to provide clear and actionable information on how passengers can complete their journeys. The research showed that passengers have some understanding that this is more difficult during unplanned disruption.

Spreading the word

Depending on the journey stage, most – but not all – passengers use digital channels (that is, websites and apps) to plan a journey or check for delays before reaching the station.

The habit of 'checking before you travel' is growing, regardless of frequency of travel or journey purpose, as it provides reassurance that the journey will be fine. And if there are warnings of delays it gives passengers time to work out if it's worth heading to the station, or they should abandon their journey or make alternative travel arrangements.

Passengers use a wide range of digital channels, but typically have one or two 'go to' sources of information they trust and use regularly. This is influenced by familiarity and route coverage.

These range from train operator apps and websites to channels such as National Rail Enquiries, Trainline and X.

Before and after arriving at the station

Passengers say they are more likely to check what is happening on their way to the station if the journey is particularly important, or if they already know there may be disruption.

Once at the station and on the train, information screens, public address announcements and members of staff, become much more significant. If passengers don't get the clarity or reassurance they need, they'll then turn to digital sources to confirm things and plan their way around the disruption.

Alerts, such as push notifications are appreciated, but if they vary from what passengers see and hear around them at the station then they can create confusion.

The main exception to this relates to disruption to normal timetables caused by engineering work, where frequent passengers keep an eye or ear out for posters or announcements in the lead up to a journey. By definition those who are digitally disengaged will not see push notifications.

"On the way to the station I tend to check either the TOC's Twitter or the Twitter of the train station. If I had wind of something that might be going on, I'd check the NRE app."

North/Midlands, Business

"When approaching the platform I would listen to announcement, look at the info screens, observe passenger reactions in case I missed any announcement. If there is a significant delay, I would go to the information desk to ask at the ticket office."

North/Midlands, Leisure

Among passengers there are degrees of comfort with using digital channels. Some feel forced (against their preference) to use digital channels. Most entirely digitally disengaged passengers tend to travel without a phone and rarely receive unplanned disruption information before they get to the station.

Local radio travel information reaches only a small number. Sometimes the digitally disengaged will turn to support from family and friends, travelling companions, or a carer.

Onboard the train

Because of imperfect data reception (either through Wi-Fi or mobile data), online channels are not necessarily accessible to passengers once on a train. It is also perceived that once a train has become delayed, online channels become less accurate. Staff therefore become important. Passengers look to staff to provide accurate information, including advice on how to complete their journey, for example alternative routes if a connection is going to be missed. Updating passenger information systems on board is welcome, but not as a substitute for staff who are 'in the know'. Those who are anxious, or disabled, for whom the impact of disruption can be more acute, particularly value the support that staff can provide to help them complete their journey.

At the destination station

Most passengers just want to leave the station and get to where they are going. However, a small number noted that they value being reminded that they could be eligible for Delay Repay. This could be an area for improvement, to help the industry demonstrate that it recognises the inconvenience that the delay has caused and wants to 'do right' by passengers.

Disabled passengers

Many disabled passengers, especially those with a mobility impairment, spend more time planning journeys than others. They often use information about station facilities and layout to make sure a journey will be accessible to them. Mobility impaired passengers might, for example, look to avoid stations without step-free access. When disruption occurs, it puts or threatens to put those carefully considered plans at risk. Those passengers therefore need support from staff to help them replan their journey via an accessible route and provide reassurance that assistance will be provided throughout. If journeys become longer and involve more changes because of the disruption, this support becomes even more important.

> *"[when I was traveling as a carer] the staff were really nice but then on a different journey, I had it where the train was cancelled or delayed and there was a lack of staff and whenever you asked for help going 'is this the right train or not' they literally just turned a blind eye."*
>
> *South, Leisure*

This can also be a concern for those travelling with small children, perhaps using a pushchair or buggy, and those who are nervous or anxious when travelling.

Where an alternative route might involve a bus or coach rail replacement service, or alternative modes such as a scheduled bus or a taxi, wheelchair users have concerns about them being accessible. This should therefore be made clear in any information provided.

Making it easier to replan a journey via alternative accessible stations would significantly improve the confidence and experience of disruption for these passengers.

Warning symbol fatigue

One of the online information sources commonly identified by passengers was the National Rail Enquiries website and app. They use the warning symbol below to indicate disruption or that something about the journey is different from normal.

The symbol is easily recognised by passengers, with many claiming that they would investigate what information the warning was trying to draw attention to.

However, although improved since, because at the time of the research there was only one symbol to indicate a range of disruption events, passengers felt it could easily be overlooked due to overuse. This desensitisation can lead to the warnings being ignored.

For example, while information about lifts being out of order is extremely important for some passengers, others do not need to know. Passengers therefore suggested that different symbols should be used to distinguish between different disruptive events. This would provide additional clarity and encourage passengers to engage with alerts.

Similarly, when combined with the words 'on time' the warning triangle can confuse passengers. The triangle (which may be being used to alert passengers to a different aspect of the service) sowed seeds of doubt among some that 'on time' was accurate, creating anxiety as a result. There were also those who said they had ignored the warning because the train was reported as being 'on time'.
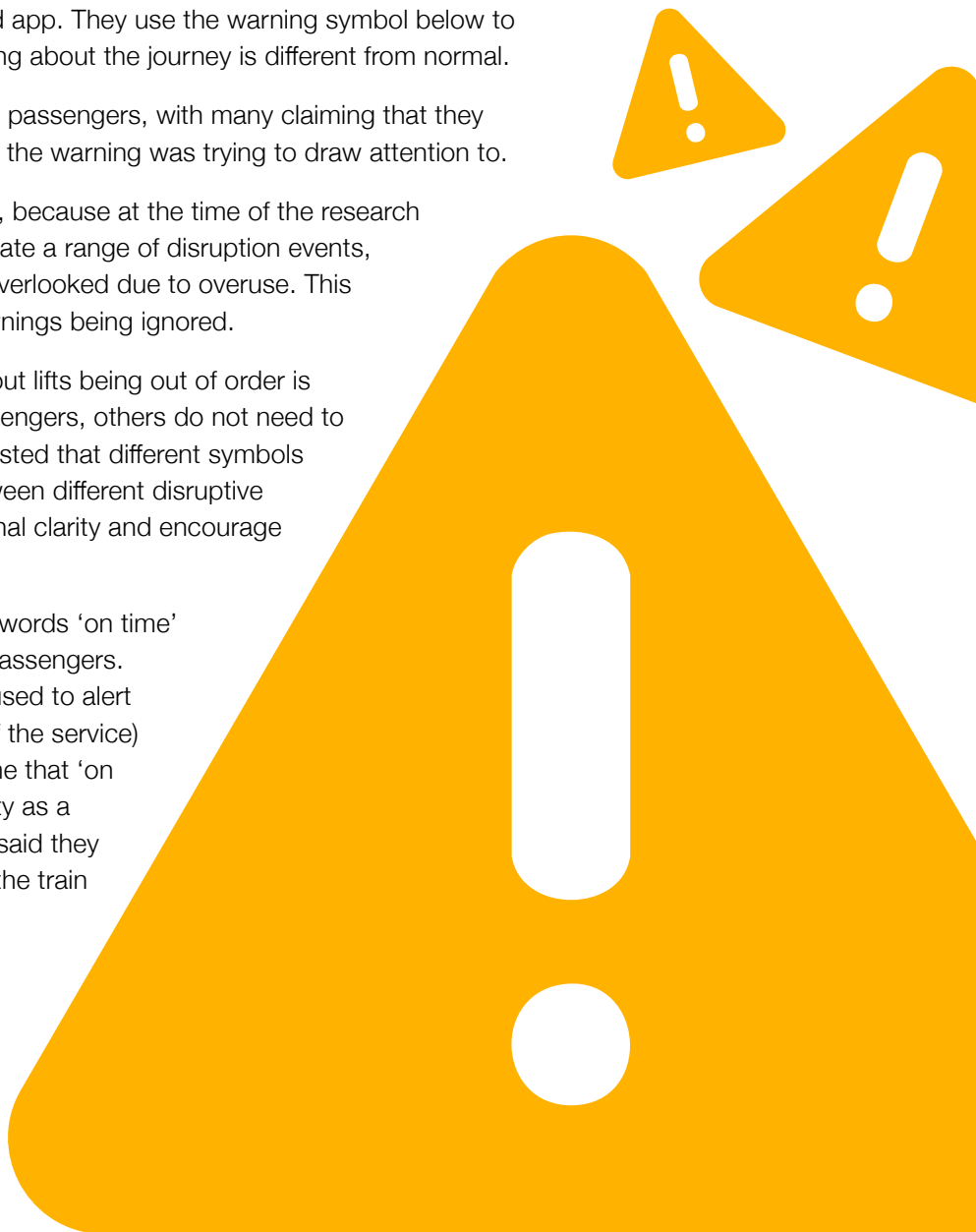
⚠️ **On Time**

> *"I find that quite misleading for it to say 'on time' with a warning."*
>
> *Scotland, Commuting*

Since the research was undertaken National Rail Enquiries has introduced new disruption symbols within its journey planner – both on the website and within the app. These warn passengers of:

- Engineering work

- Issues impacting the accessibility of the journey

- Other information

A three-tier severity level warning is in place for each category. This will hopefully offer passengers a more effective way to distinguish between the different types of disruption, alert them to changes to the journey status, and highlight advance notice of upcoming events.

⚠️ Potentially Delayed

In contrast to displaying the alert symbol next to 'On time', a proposal to warn passengers of a potential delay was well received. Passengers welcomed the advance warning that this would provide as it gives an opportunity to search/plan alternative routes if concerned about the potential impact. The earlier the warning the better. However, passengers also suggested it should be made clear that there was more information to come.

> *"I can trust potentially delayed… because they're acknowledging something's happened, there's an alert."*
>
> *Scotland, Commuting*

In contrast to being given a warning that a train may not be on time, passengers were less keen on the suggestion that operators could similarly warn that a train might not run at all. This primarily concerned the 'will it or won't it' uncertainty created, and a perception that a warning would inevitably lead to eventual cancellation.

Because of the 'will it or won't it' challenge for passengers, great care should be taken in using 'potentially delayed' and 'potentially cancelled' to avoid a negative reaction. Explaining why and when it will be clear one way or the other will be critical.

Status updates - the need for specifics

In addition to the warning triangle, passengers were asked for their views on other status messages used by National Rail Enquiries.

At every stage of a disrupted journey, passengers expect clear and concise information that will help them decide if they need to make alternative arrangements, and what those arrangements should be. They therefore preferred messages that contained specific information about their journey.

In the example below the "3 mins late" was easily understood and set up an expectation of minor disruption. Where 'a bulletin on this service' was used, without further detail, passengers struggled to understand what the impact was for their journey. It was too vague. It could mean there was no real consequence, and left passengers uncertain whether they needed to investigate further.

Many passengers felt unable to plan around disruption effectively due to the lack of clear and actionable information.
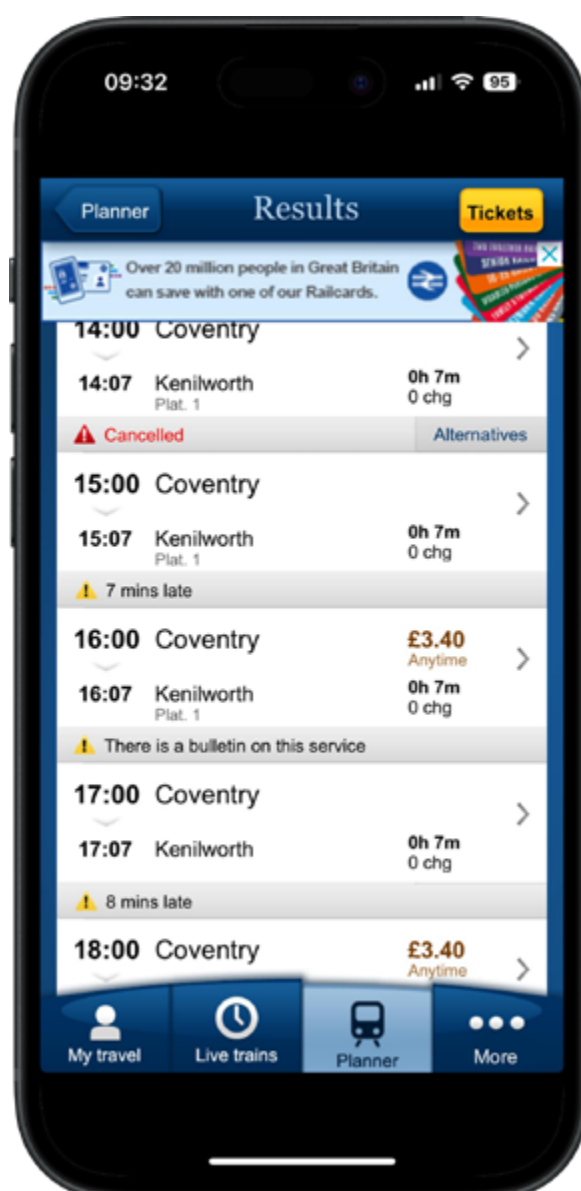
In the example below, the use of both the red banner and the word 'Alert' drew passengers' attention to the fact that there was a problem. However, they felt that it was ambiguous whether the train would be running or not. 'Major Disruption' also raised further questions for some. They understood that the impact would be significant in respect of their journey, but were disappointed it gave no indication how long the disruption would last.

Live tracker ⟳

● Tue 16 Jul, 19:41 → 20:10

⚠ **Disruption Alert**

Major disruption between Newcastle and Darlington expected until the end of the day

🚆 CrossCountry   XC1830

19:41   **Newcastle**
On time   Plat. 4

29m   View stops

20:10   **Darlington**
On time   Plat. 1

The overriding concern of passengers was that status updates should help them make a decision. Passengers want to be able to make an informed choice about how they can best complete their journey and what is likely to happen next.

"It's information that you can do something with… At least you've got something to work with and your expectations are set in the right place."

Wales, Business/Personal

"That's quite vague though…from what I can see there, the actual start and end time doesn't appear."

Wales, Business/Personal

"I like to know what the delay is for… Oh there's trespassers on the line… that makes me think oh my goodness, that's quite serious."

Wales, Business/Personal

Making alternative arrangements

In many instances of severe disruption train operators work together so that passengers can use their tickets (which might ordinarily be restricted to a particular operator, route, train and/or time of day) on each other's services. The phrase most used to describe the relaxation of ticketing rules is "ticket acceptance", although there are many variations. Given the variation between operators, and passengers' desire for clarity and consistency, we asked about understanding of ticket acceptance.

As you might expect, those who travel on the rail network most frequently are more likely to have an understanding of the concept. Similarly, there was stronger understanding in areas where there were multiple operators.

Conversely those in rural areas (where alternatives were likely to be limited), or whose station was smaller and served by only one operator, were least familiar with the concept, and had a lower understanding.

Experience appeared to be the main driver of understanding.

Applying the three principles highlighted by passengers (the need to be clear, concise, and consistent), current ticket acceptance language fails to pass the test.
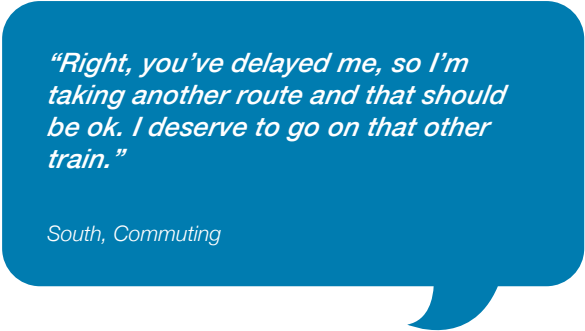
- It's not always clear what is meant by ticket acceptance.

- Explanations are often long and complex, overwhelming and confusing passengers – not concise.

- The lack of consistency in how the concept is described operator to operator does little to reassure passengers that they don't have to take matters into their own hands or seek reassurance from staff.

Passengers felt ticket acceptance could be made clearer by explaining what they need to do, where they needed to go for further information and how they could complete their journey as quickly as possible. They also wanted more customer friendly language, with less railway jargon.

During severe disruption, when ticket acceptance might be in place, passengers appear to fall into two distinct groups.

Risk takers – these passengers will use any route they deem appropriate to get to their destination, feeling it is their 'right' to get on any service having already paid for a ticket. They would happily argue their case if questioned, but were also more likely to accept, and be able to afford, extra charges if 'caught'. These are most likely to be business travellers with a good knowledge of the appropriate route options during disruption.

Risk avoiders – Passengers who will wait for the 'correct' train if they are unsure about the information provided. They are more likely to want to avoid any chance of extra charges and are anxious about getting it wrong. As such, they are more likely to seek out staff before acting.

> *"Right, you've delayed me, so I'm taking another route and that should be ok. I deserve to go on that other train."*
>
> *South, Commuting*

Staff therefore have an important role to play in communicating ticket acceptance, particularly for those making unfamiliar journeys, or infrequent travellers. Passengers look to them to provide reassurance, and clear advice on what to do. There is a feeling that when in a stressful situation such as severe disruption 'you just need a human'.

At a station, this could be on the platform, on the concourse or at an information desk to help passengers seeking personalised guidance, specific to their circumstance and/or journey. The advice should explain any cost implications of the alternative options. More generally, whether on a station or train, passengers expect to hear public address announcements confirming that ticket acceptance is in operation, general guidance on the options, where to go for more information and how long the arrangement will apply.

When looking online for information passengers note that journey planners, while useful for notifying that there is disruption and exploring alternative routes, are not always clear if ticket acceptance is in place, or what routes can be used with their original ticket. The electronic displays on stations and trains were thought to have similar shortcomings, with few passengers recalling ever having received actionable information about ticket acceptance via this medium.

Finally, passengers can be confused by information about how long ticket acceptance will be in place. Giving clear guidance such as *"if boarding a train before xx.xx"* rather than saying *"until xx.xx"*, is preferred by passengers. With the latter, it is not clear whether you have to be at your destination by the time specified or to have started out by that time.

Since the research was carried out, train operators have generally adopted the phrase "at no extra cost" instead of "ticket acceptance" to indicate when tickets may be used where they would not normally be valid. In addition, train companies owned by DfT Operator have introduced improved arrangements to carry each other's passengers during disruption.

Are there unreasonable routes?

Within the language used to describe ticket acceptance, operators sometimes suggest passengers can travel "via any reasonable route". By implication this means that there are also unreasonable routes – routes on which some tickets will not be accepted, leaving passengers liable for an extra charge. But these are rarely ever explained during disruption.

Multiple passengers admitted using alternative routes to complete their journey without knowing for certain if the route they'd chosen was allowed. A reasonable route was interpreted as what the passenger, not the railway, considered to be reasonable. Their priority is to get to their destination as quickly as possible with minimal additional disruption.

Other than speaking to staff, who might be in high demand, passengers were unsure where they could go to get the clarity they wanted.

To unlock the meaning behind 'ticket acceptance' and 'reasonable route' passengers supported the following principles:

- Confirmation that their existing ticket can be used at "no extra cost". Passengers expect that there will be no additional charges if they need to use an alternative route to get around disruption.

- Listing specific routes that can be used.

- Naming key stations between which tickets can be used.

- Confirmation of how long the acceptance arrangements will be in place, even if explained as "until further notice".

Passengers also wanted the industry to avoid using phrases such as "mutual ticket acceptance" and "reasonable route", which were in themselves felt to be confusing.

Using only the names of alternative operators (missing out the added detail of key stations) was also considered unhelpful. Many passengers are unfamiliar with the names of operators, and who runs which service.

Similarly, when providing information on alternative modes that could be used, clarity is needed on what that service is, for example a bus and where to catch it. Simply naming the operator and route was not enough.

Passengers also described how the way information is set out can mean it takes longer to digest key points. Long and convoluted sentences can be hard to interpret and understand.

> *"It just seems like it's really wordy and you don't want to read an essay, you just want to get straight to the point."*
>
> *North, Business*

> *"Bullet points, like a list. It's easier to read"*
>
> *Wales, Commuter*

Overall headline conclusion

Passengers need to be able to absorb the information they are being given quickly, especially if they are rushing for a train, or on the move. Using clear, simple, and concise language enables this. Bullet points of key information, listing names of stations or specific trains that are included in the ticket acceptance arrangement, could help make large amounts of information easier to digest.

> *"I want a clear, concise list of what I can do and in writing that it has no extra cost"*
>
> *Wales, Commuter*

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