Improving the passenger experience when trains are disrupted:

Transport Focus recommendations

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transportfocus

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1. Executive summary

In recent years the rail industry has made considerable efforts to improve passenger experience during disruption, in terms of its decision making and of passenger information. A lot has been achieved, but there is more still to do.

A key part of the Transport Focus 2024-27 business plan is to work with the railway to help improve the passenger experience when things go wrong. As well as carrying out research to better understand what passengers think, we have worked in detail on the ground with two train operators, Great Western Railway and ScotRail, observing what happens when something goes wrong. We watched how things work in control and customer service centres, while simultaneously we monitored the resulting passenger experience at stations, on trains and online. This put us in a unique position of seeing the industry and passenger perspectives together, and helped us identify issues that would not otherwise have been visible.

One example of a practical change coming from this is modification of the display screens at London Paddington to indicate if a train is on time, or not, rather than show an unhelpful "please wait" message. More broadly, we will continue to work through cross-industry groups focused on driving improvement in this area.

> ***"In 2026 we'll host a summit bringing senior railway leaders together to describe progress in addressing our recommendations and to discuss next steps in improving things for passengers in disruption."***
>
> *Natasha Grice, Director*

Top line conclusions

Our research and work on the ground has helped us to identify three key areas where we believe the industry should focus its efforts to make things better for all passengers when trains are disrupted, including those with accessibility or other additional needs.

a. Think passenger

When anything goes wrong on the railway there are two valid and potentially competing objectives: getting the service back to normal and looking after the interests of passengers inconvenienced in the meantime. The industry should constantly strive to maintain a culture that seeks the right balance between the two, never forgetting about those already caught up in a problem while it's being fixed.

b. Better information

The railway should substantially improve the quality of information during unplanned disruption. Particular focus is needed on providing clear, concise and useful information that helps passengers make an informed choice about what they do when there is a problem. That's information on websites, apps, station screens and available for staff to pass on to passengers. It will need investment in people and systems.

c. Keep people moving

When there is disruption, the railway should act decisively to keep people moving to where they want to go. It will mean challenging the idea that action isn't needed until a delay reaches 60 minutes, even when alternatives could have been offered so people get to work, a hospital appointment or school on time. It may mean offering alternative transport sooner than now. That will build confidence that the railway will do its utmost to minimise the impact on passengers when something goes wrong. In short, that people can trust it as a reliable way to travel.

High-level recommendations

In summary, we are calling on each train operator and relevant parts of Network Rail to prioritise:

- **Control centre reviews.** Review arrangements in control centres to make sure there is sufficient dedicated resource focused on delivering clear, concise and useful passenger information, and to 'check and challenge' decision making to ensure passengers' interests are protected when there is disruption.
- **Clarity about alternative routes.** Agree standing arrangements and clear descriptions for alternative routes where tickets can be used without extra charge for as many different disruption scenarios as possible, including with local bus operators, so advice can be given to passengers without delay.
- **Test the passenger experience.** Undertake live 'sense checks' of the passenger experience during disruption, similar to exercises undertaken by Transport Focus – this should be done by people who can bring a fresh, passenger-focused perspective and who come without previously acquired knowledge.

And we are calling on the wider industry – perhaps overseen by the Rail Delivery Group/Network Rail Smarter Information Smarter Journeys (SISJ) programme – to:

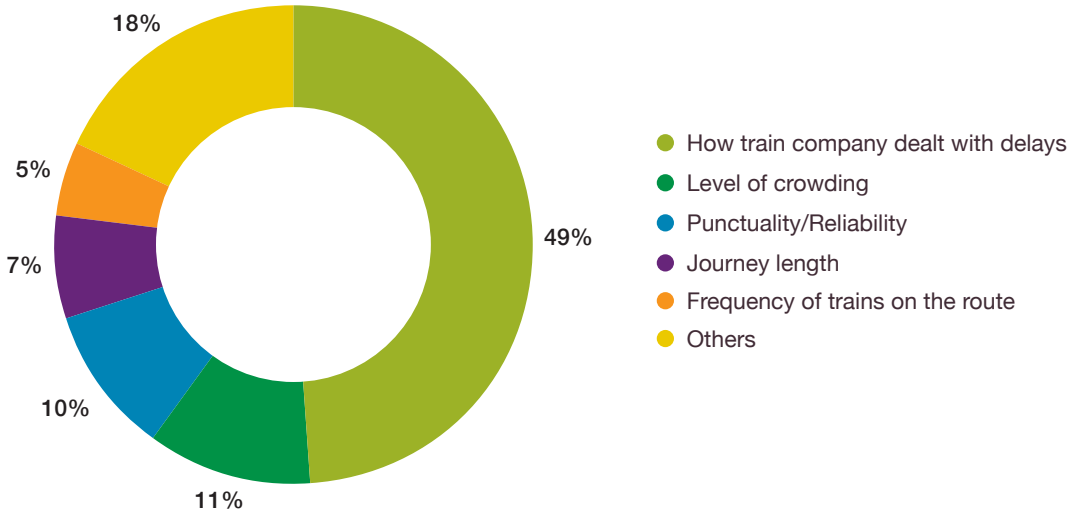
- **Review messaging and information systems.** This should, among other things:
    - Improve the national real time running database (Darwin) and other systems to ensure accurate, clear, concise and useful information gets to passengers and all railway staff who need it as quickly as possible.
    - Provide decision makers with information to help them make the best choice in disruption, including data on passenger loadings, Passenger Assist bookings, last connections of the day and CCTV images to understand passenger numbers on platforms.
    - Ensure passengers at stations are provided with clear, concise and useful information so they can make an informed choice about what to do instead when trains are cancelled or significantly delayed.
- **Complete phase one of Enhanced On-train Passenger Announcements (OTPA) via GSM-R** and subsequently roll it out to all train fleets as quickly as possible. This would mean control centre staff could communicate directly with passengers during disruption, speeding up the flow of information and reducing frustration/confusion about what is going on.

More detail and specific recommendations are set out later in this document.

2. Introduction

Passengers want their trains to run on time and not be cancelled. Obviously. But most understand that things go wrong on the railway from time to time, whether caused by an infrastructure fault, a train breaking down, bad weather or something else. In many walks of life, how things are handled when there is a problem makes a huge difference to the experience. Train travel is no different. If people feel the railway cares about the impact on them, and that it is doing its utmost to minimise the inconvenience, journey satisfaction will be diminished less and trust is more likely to be maintained. Indeed, we know from passenger surveys over many years that 'How train company dealt with delays' has the biggest impact on overall dissatisfaction with a journey.

What has the biggest impact on overall dissatisfaction?



Source: National Rail Passenger Survey, Spring 2020

What passengers want from the railway when services are disrupted can be summarised in five points:

- **Treat me with respect**
- **Recognise my plight**
- **Help me avoid the problem in the first place (if not already caught up in it)**
- **"You got me into this, help get me out of it"**
- **Act joined up**

Information is a key factor in how passengers judge disruption handling. Good information can put a passenger back in control despite what has happened – allowing them to make informed decisions.

Poor information does the opposite. It causes angst, frustration and a sense of helplessness – for some it is actively distressing. Research shows a clear link between information quality and passengers' overall view of disruption handling.

Passengers want information to be:

- **Accurate**
- **Timely**
- **Clear and concise**
- **Useful**
- **Consistent across communication channels**

And they want it as personalised to them and their journey as is possible.

In recent years the rail industry has made considerable efforts to improve passenger experience during disruption, both in terms of its decision making and passenger information. A lot has been achieved, but there is more still to do.

Why does this matter? Poorly handled disruption generates dissatisfaction with journeys. It is frustrating for everybody, but for some passengers it is particularly important that the railway rises to the "you got me into this, help get me out of it" challenge – for example, those with a disability, a neurodivergent condition such as autism or who are travelling with young children. Poor handling chips away at people's confidence that the railway can be trusted to 'have their back' when something goes wrong. It is not unreasonable to assume it undermines repeat business and could be what sparks some into getting a car – or using the one they already have more often.

Transport Focus has made various recommendations to the rail industry in recent years about how to improve passenger experience during disruption. Many have been acted on, including through the Smarter Information Smarter Journeys programme (SISJ), a joint initiative between Network Rail and the Rail Delivery Group which we have been pleased to support in a number of areas.

In this document we set out updated recommendations to further improve passenger experience when trains are disrupted. We have drawn on new and existing insight, together with our experiences from ongoing engagement with the rail industry. That includes our collaborative work with Great Western Railway and ScotRail (and the Network Rail teams where they operate) to help them provide a better passenger experience when things go wrong.

The document starts with a section covering the strategic issues we feel are fundamental to making things better for passengers, followed by sections on issues related to 'policies, procedures and decision making', 'improving passenger information' and 'helping passengers avoid a problem in the first place'. We then cover specific types of service disruption, such as passengers stranded on trains, and conclude with how improvements in passenger experience during disruption should be measured.

Transport Focus will continue to work collaboratively with the rail industry in this important area. We believe the recommendations in this document will give additional impetus and focus to the industry's efforts to improve the passenger experience when services are disrupted.

3. Strategic issues

When something goes wrong on the railway the immediate focus (quite rightly) is on what needs to happen to put that thing right. However, the industry must be constantly vigilant that its desire to restore services to normal running as quickly as possible doesn't mean people caught up in disruption are overlooked. It is all too easy to make decisions to restore order without properly considering what happens to the passengers who are inconvenienced (for example, by terminating a train short of its destination or removing station stops).

Although by no means perfect, the railway is generally good at providing accurate, timely information about individual trains, whether digitally through websites and apps or through station screens and public address announcements. Data for these channels is usually derived from the national real time running database, known as Darwin, which ingests live data from the signalling system and other sources, including train operator control rooms. However, again with exceptions, the railway is generally not good at helping passengers understand what they can and/or should do instead, given what has happened. At its most basic, the industry continues to display and announce 'cancelled' without giving an answer to the inevitable passenger question 'so what do I do now?' In short, the industry tells passengers what they cannot do, but not what they can do instead.

Context is important in helping passengers decide what to do faced with disruption. Generally, the railway is not good at providing context that helps people interpret what the granular, train specific detail means for them. That is partly through weaknesses in constructing clear, concise text giving an overview of what has happened and the alternatives, for display on websites, apps, station screens and via social media. It is partly because technology used by the industry makes it difficult to publish clear, concise contextual information. And it is partly because few stations have adequate means to display that context in an integrated way alongside the train specific detail. The industry will need to address all three issues if it is to deliver the timely, clear, concise and useful information passengers require when trains are disrupted.

We have developed a set of strategic recommendations to the rail industry, all of which will help to address the five key things passengers want to see when disruption happens. Inevitably, some organisations are further ahead than others - but even better performers should challenge themselves to go further still.

Transport Focus recommendations to the rail industry are:

- That it actively strives to ensure 'check and challenge' in control room decision making to ensure the right balance is struck between two valid objectives: restoring the service as quickly as possible for the benefit of passengers later in the day, and the interests of those being disrupted 'in the moment'.
- That it develops and implements a strategy to substantially improve the quality and consistency of information during unplanned disruption. This should focus particularly on the written language skills needed to craft and disseminate clear, concise and useful information in the minimum time possible.

- That it objectively determines the human resources, including skills and numbers, and technology needed in control rooms to ensure passengers always receive excellent information during service disruption. Among other things, it must guard against:
    - staffing for workload on an 'average' day and being unable to meet passenger requirements when disruptive incidents occur simultaneously.
    - staff responsible for producing passenger information having additional non-deferrable tasks (for example, arranging special stop orders with train crew) that will detract from focus on their information role.
- That it develops an ambitious strategy to ensure that, during disruption, it is as clear to passengers what they should do instead as it is clear what they can no longer do. This should cover the cancellation of a single train, right up to total suspension of service.

4. Policies, procedures and decision making

In addition to the high-level strategic recommendations above, we have identified specific areas where policies, procedures and decision making should evolve to improve passenger experience during disruption.

4.1 Rising to the "You got me into this, help get me out of it" challenge

When something goes wrong, it is vital that the railway can provide passengers – promptly – with clear, concise and useful advice about what they should do instead. Policies, or perhaps how they are being interpreted, appear to prevent this always happening.

Transport Focus recommendations to the rail industry:

- That it embraces a 'we'll keep you moving' culture and practice, shifting away from the idea that no specific action is needed where a passenger will be delayed by up to 60 minutes. Inserting an hour's delay into a passenger's journey when alternatives may exist feels neither customer focused nor likely to engender trust in the railway as a reliable means for transport. It also results in passengers being entitled to 100% delay repay, which might otherwise be avoided.
- That if there is confidence following a cancellation that the next train will run on time, and passengers are expected to wait for it, that must be made clear to those inconvenienced. If there isn't confidence in the next train, alternatives should be set out, be they other trains, railway-organised replacement transport or scheduled bus or tram services, with or without ticket acceptance.

- That if there are no viable alternatives, and no prospect of securing any or sufficient rail replacement transport, passengers should be given the option to make their own way confident that they will be reimbursed later if they send in a receipt.
- That it determines how late a train needs to be before it is in effect cancelled – in terms of the impact on people waiting for it – and therefore passengers with train-specific tickets are entitled to use one of two trains before or two trains after.

4.2 Speeding up commercial decision making

When something significant goes wrong, the railway will generally modify the normal rules around ticket validity, refunds and amendments. The cause could be known in advance (severe weather is forecast or industrial action called), or an incident may just have happened. However, time can ebb away while various parties are brought together to discuss and agree the commercial policy or while ticket acceptance is arranged. This can lead to situations in which passengers hear of Met Office severe weather warnings likely to affect their journey, but the railway is unable to say if they can have a refund or travel on a different day if they decide not to risk it. With disruption on the day, passengers can be left not knowing if they can jump on another train or use the local bus.

Transport Focus recommendations to the rail industry:

- That it pre-agrees refund/'ticket valid on a different day' policies for as many scenarios as possible, so they can be deployed when needed without incurring delays while approvals are sought. Associated passenger communication material should be available 'on the shelf' to be used immediately when needed.
- That ticket acceptance arrangements become 'standing agreements' between all train operators that can be invoked without holding up advice to passengers while permission is sought. Exceptions may be necessary, but they should be few and far between.
- That it seeks to negotiate similar 'standing agreements' with local bus operators which can also be invoked without delay while permission is sought and granted.

4.3 Helping train running controllers make the best decisions

Control room staff have a huge amount to think about when managing an incident in real time. The more aids that can be provided to help them make the best decisions for passengers the better, including having key information at their fingertips.

Transport Focus recommendations to the rail industry:

- That train running controllers should have access to live data for every train indicating, among other things:
    - the number of passengers on board (if live data is not possible, the number usually travelling on that service and/or the number of bookings indicated by the reservation system for that day).
    - Passenger Assist bookings, both quantity and nature.

- Other trains with which that service connects, and where relevant ferries, and whether they are 'last connections' of the day.

- That train running controllers should be alerted when a particular station has not had and/or will not have a train stopping at it for over X minutes, to guard against oversights impacting disproportionately at specific locations.

4.4 Amendments to National Rail Conditions of Travel

Changes are needed to the National Rail Conditions of Travel to give clarity to passengers at times of disruption. In part this is to address issues arising from the shift to single-leg pricing.

Transport Focus recommendations to the rail industry:

- Passengers holding out and back single tickets who are delayed on their outward journey, whether by a cancellation or late running train, should have the right to return on a later train than booked – commensurate with the outward delay incurred – irrespective of ticket type.

- Passengers holding out and back single tickets who choose not to travel because their outward train is delayed or cancelled should be entitled to a fee free refund of both the outward and the return tickets.

- Passengers choosing not to travel because it is likely or certain that they will be delayed after leaving, or that it will not be possible for them to reach their destination, should be entitled to a fee free refund – as would a passenger intending to catch a train that has already been delayed or cancelled.

5. Improving passenger information during disruption

Again, in addition to the high-level strategic recommendations above, we have identified specific actions the industry should take to improve passenger information during disruption.

5.1 Information production

5.1.1 Better estimates to facilitate more accurate information to passengers

Transport Focus recommendation to the rail industry:

- That routine use is made in disruption communications of data-driven estimates of the likely:

  - Time to fix the problem/earliest time trains will start moving.

  - Time by which the service will have recovered to a reasonable degree, even if there remain some delays and cancellations.

  - Time that all the knock-on effects have worked their way out of the system.

5.1.2 Presenting alternatives to passengers in the most helpful way

Currently, the industry tends to mention that ticket acceptance is in place and leave passengers to work out for themselves if it is useful to them. It also sometimes uses phrases that passengers don't fully understand.

Transport Focus recommendations to the rail industry:

- That as part of helping passengers make an informed choice about what to do during disruption, the way 'ticket acceptance' is referred to in passenger information should be changed. Information should set out passengers' options for getting where they want to go, supplemented by clarity that it is either at no extra cost or that extra is payable (for instance, a bus fare). And if passengers do (or might) need to pay extra, to be clear if those costs will be reimbursed later if evidence is provided.
- That it ceases to use the phrases 'easements', 'reasonable route' and 'ticket acceptance' in public facing communications, whether written or spoken. They shouldn't be necessary if information is presented like this example intended for GWR passengers: "Customers travelling between London and Oxford should use Chiltern Railways to/from London Marylebone. GWR tickets can be used with no extra to pay, including on the London Underground Bakerloo line between Paddington and Marylebone."
- That it is clear to passengers the time until any alternative arrangements apply, and whether that time refers to somebody starting their journey or needing to have completed it.

5.1.3 A review of messaging system functionality and Darwin delay reasons

We have observed numerous examples where messaging systems, coupled with limitations in the list of Darwin delay/cancellation reasons, hamper production of information that is accurate, clear and concise. Among other things, requiring messages to say that a line is blocked when it is not and requiring an inaccurate reason to be given because there isn't a suitable one in the list.

Transport Focus recommendations to the rail industry:

- That it reviews message systems used to disseminate disruption information and make changes to ensure they support the production of accurate, clear and concise information.
- That it reviews the delay and cancellation reasons used in passenger facing systems (the Darwin delay reasons) to:
    - Plug gaps where it is not currently possible to give an accurate reason (such as "a problem with the station platform" and "a late running train coming the other way".
    - Rationalise the list to eliminate duplication, including unhelpful inconsistency in how the same cause is described (such as "a vehicle striking a bridge" and "a road vehicle colliding with a bridge").
    - Update reasons where they could be more concise.

5.2 Information at stations

Transport Focus recommendations to the rail industry:

- That it determines how, when renewing or enhancing station customer information systems, the finished product:
    - Can convey context information that allows passengers to understand what is going on during disruption and what it means for them and their journey. This will involve determining how best to integrate a contextual overview with train specific detail, display video clips (for instance of flooding or a tree blocking the track) and show National Rail Enquiries visual disruption maps.
    - Can explain when a train is starting at a station further along the line, but it is possible to connect with it by catching a different train. Currently, it is possible only to display 'cancelled', even when it is possible for passengers to still catch that train.
    - Can explain what is happening when a train is terminating short or diverted to a different place. Currently, systems tend to display the revised terminating station, deleting the station passengers are expecting to see or hear as their reference point. Systems do not always make it clear if passengers for stations where a train will no longer stop should still catch it, and what arrangements will be in place when they get to the new terminating station.
    - Can display British Sign Language in the best way for its users, including during disruption.

5.3 Information on board trains

5.3.1 Information direct from control rooms to passengers on a train

Communication with passengers on a train usually involves messages relayed using the public address system by the driver or conductor. If it is a driver only train, information can be passed to the driver only when it is safe to do so from a distraction perspective. This all takes time and restricts the flow of customer service information to passengers, who can experience an information vacuum as a result. A long-standing Transport Focus ask is that control rooms – 'the single source of the truth' – are able to communicate directly with passengers in disruption situations. We are therefore strong advocates of the SISJ programme 'enhanced on-train passenger announcements (OTPA) via GSM-R' initiative.

Transport Focus recommendations to the rail industry:

- That the first phase of OTPA is completed as soon as possible, and passenger feedback is gathered to inform next steps.
- That modification of ontrain display screens (that is, passenger information system screens) proceeds rapidly to ensure that d/Deaf people and those with hearing impairments receive the same information as is being announced.

- That it presses ahead with subsequent phases of OTPA as soon as possible, incorporating learnings from the initial roll out. The priority should be to extend the facility to all driver only trains, however those with a driver and a conductor should ultimately have it as well because it will ensure a faster flow of accurate information to passengers.
- That OTPA is used on approach to interchange stations to advise passengers if disruption is affecting a route people are likely to be changing onto, including those of non-National Rail providers. An example of many would be advising southbound Thameslink passengers not to get off at Kentish Town if the Northern Line is out of action. This will give passengers the opportunity to stay on the train and find an alternative route to their destination.

5.3.2 Announcements when a train stops between stations

Transport Focus recommendation to the rail industry:

- That renewed effort is made throughout the railway to ensure an announcement is always made within two minutes of a train stopping between stations, including because it is running early. This is one of the industry's Customer Information Pledges (G4).

5.3.3 On train passenger information systems

Transport Focus recommendation to the rail industry:

- That the passenger information system (PIS) on new and refurbished trains can receive updates from Darwin in real time, facilitating:
  - Confirmation that the train is on time, or how many minutes early or late it is.
  - Arrival times at subsequent stations, revised in the event of early or late running so passengers see and hear accurate predictions.
  - Amendments to the calling pattern, origin and destination of the train – with additions and deletions acknowledged.

5.4 Increasing information accuracy

5.4.1 Linking data to enhance information accuracy

A service can show as 'on time' from its origin station even though the train to operate it will not arrive in time, or will never arrive because it has been cancelled.

Transport Focus recommendation to the rail industry:

- That it makes maximum use of linkages between one train and its next working (associated workings) in data consumed by Darwin. Care is needed to take account of trains being 'stepped up' (where a spare train is used instead of the one originally intended) where that is a potential solution in disruption, but often it is impossible for a service to depart until another train has arrived.

5.4.2 Enhancements to Darwin

Transport Focus recommendations to the rail industry:

- Development of logic so Darwin takes account of delay that will be caused to a train by one coming in the other direction on a single-track route. Darwin currently assumes that a train will proceed without further delay, even when that is impossible. This results in live departure/arrivals information online and at stations being inaccurate, and can cause platform indicators to advertise the wrong 'next train'.
- Automatic recalculation of arrival times when station stops are inserted to or removed from a schedule. This will address the situation in which a train calling at additional stations in lieu of a cancelled service gets later and later in comparison with Darwin's predications. Similarly, where stops are removed during disruption to recover time, it will ensure accurate arrival times at the remaining stations.

5.5 Quality control and consistency

Transport Focus recommendation to the rail industry:

- That it boosts the importance it attaches to reviewing, in real time and through a passenger lens, what people are seeing on their phones and computers to:
  - Ensure it is as accurate, timely, clear and concise and useful as possible.
  - Ensure consistency of information with other train operators on the same route, National Rail Enquiries, independent ticket retailers and media outlets. An individual train operator cannot dictate to other parties, but it can seek to correct inaccurate or misleading information.

6. Helping passengers avoid a problem in the first place

6.1 Disruption alerts

A key element of "help me avoid the problem in the first place" is met by push notifications to passengers when delays or cancelations occur on their route.

Transport Focus recommendation to the rail industry:

- That it continues efforts to provide and encourage take up of tools for passengers to be alerted to a problem, tailored as closely as possible to their specific journey.
- That all train operators maintain an area on their website setting out the options that exist for passengers to receive alerts.

6.2 Notifying passengers who have bought a ticket on a train that is later cancelled or amended

We have championed and supported establishment of the Rail Delivery Group Timetable Comparator Service (TCS) and are delighted that it is up and running. We look forward to the related Engineering Sales Suppression (ESS) tool coming on stream, which will take trains 'off sale' that cannot run because engineering work has completely closed part of their route. Both address long-standing Transport Focus asks of the industry. However, we have four recommendations to ensure things are 'watertight' in terms of passenger awareness when a timetable change occurs after ticket purchase.

Transport Focus recommendations to the rail industry:

- That it becomes a requirement for all accredited ticket retailers to consume TCS data and generate alerts in accordance with RDG good practice.
- That the Passenger Assist service consumes TCS data and uses it to make alternative arrangements with any passenger already booked to travel on a train that is subsequently cancelled or amended.
- That scope of the TCS is extended to include cancellations and amendments made in the 48 hours before a train is due to operate (that is, alterations made by control rooms rather than through Short Term Planning arrangements).
- That a simple, low-cost means is devised to alert passengers who purchase in advance at a ticket office or through telesales when a cancellation or amendment to their journey is identified by the TCS.

7. Specific types of service disruption

7.1 Situations in which the railway would rather people 'do not travel'

The industry should keep firmly in mind the findings of Transport Focus research in partnership with the SISJ programme into passengers' views and understanding of 'do not travel' messaging. Passengers do not understand why the railway would run trains and tell people not to use them. Some dislike, as a matter of principle, the railway instructing citizens of a free country 'do not travel'.

Passengers want the railway to lay out their options, alongside information to help them make an informed choice – such as the likelihood of having to stand or the potential to become stranded part-way through a journey.

Transport Focus recommendations to the rail industry:

- That its overall approach should be to provide information that allows passengers to make an informed choice about what they do. Encouraging people to defer journeys is one thing; instructing them 'do not travel' is another and should be used only in truly extreme circumstances.
- That to facilitate informed choice, passengers should be warned about their probable journey experience if they do travel (for instance, significant delays or likelihood of standing), or if there is a genuine risk it will prove impossible to reach their destination – or, even if they get there,

that they won't be able to get back.

- That if no trains are running and no rail replacement is being provided, the message should be explicit that you ***cannot*** travel rather than an instruction 'do not travel'.

7.2 Temporary timetables when poor weather is expected

The railway must continually strive to be as resilient as possible to poor weather; passengers cannot rely on a fair-weather only railway. However, when the weather is exceptionally bad passengers' best interests might be served by operating a temporary timetable that can be delivered robustly (or at least with manageable levels of disruption). However, it is important to explain to passengers why it is necessary; without that there is a tendency for people to assume train companies running fewer or slower trains are trying to save money or protect their performance figures. It is also important to give passengers as much notice as possible, including sight of the temporary timetable itself, so that they can check what it means for them.

Transport Focus recommendations to the rail industry:

- That notwithstanding the underlying 'day A for day C' architecture for short-term planning timetable amendments, it ensures that it is possible to implement a 'day A for day B' regime for any train operator whenever needed. As part of this, as many properly planned temporary timetables should be stored 'on the shelf' ready to deploy as possible.
- That it is transparent about the reasons for running fewer trains, extending the journey time, starting the service later than normal or not running any trains at all. The industry must help passengers understand why it is necessary and what will be achieved by doing so. It must help passengers trust that decisions have been made for valid reasons.
- That any temporary timetable should be published and prominently signposted on a train operator's website as far in advance as possible, and certainly no later than 1600 the day before it is due to operate. It should also be reflected in journey planners as far ahead as possible, with inaccurate schedules highlighted as such until that point. Passengers should not be waking up in the morning to discover that the timetable has been altered overnight.
- That when a formal temporary timetable has not been introduced, but selected trains have been removed from the timetable or amended at short notice, details should be published and prominently signposted on the relevant train operator's website.
- That it should not use the phrase 'emergency timetable' to describe a properly planned temporary timetable; it can give the impression that there is an emergency going on.

7.3 Passengers stranded on trains

Disruption where a train comes to a halt for an extended period between stations can significantly compromise not just passenger experience, but also passenger welfare. Research Transport Focus conducted jointly with the Office or Rail and Road (ORR) found room for improvement in the way such incidents are handled, including in arrangements to get people to their destination after eventually leaving the train. Key points arising from this work, which informed revisions to the industry's guidance note 'Meeting the needs of passengers stranded on trains' (GN-049), are as follows.

Incident response roles (whether within Network Rail or a train operator) must be properly defined and deployed, in particular to ensure that:

- There is sufficient emphasis on the welfare and experience of passengers while the problem is being sorted out from an operational perspective.
- A 'stranded passengers champion' and 'stranded trains champion' (roles set out in GN-049) is always appointed and individuals fulfilling those roles are appropriate. Those who are appointed champions must be suitably trained and be, for the duration of an incident, relieved of their normal responsibilities to concentrate fully on the role.

Plans and procedures must be fit for purpose in the following regards:

- They will result in evacuation being complete within 90 minutes (or the train being on the move within 90 minutes) of coming to a stand – unless there are clear safety, welfare and customer experience advantages in their remaining on the train. 90 minutes is critical because an electric train with no power will have flat batteries by then, and so no heating/ cooling, lighting, toilets etc.
- They require actions to be taken at the outset, on the assumption that evacuation will be necessary, standing down a rescue effort if it is not needed rather than scrabbling to mobilise one when it is too late.
- They are suitable if multiple trains are stranded in the same area at the same time. It is no good having a perfect plan that assumes only one train is ever stranded at the same time.
- They are robust at identifying passengers with additional needs, including less visible needs.
- They put sufficient emphasis on what happens after rescue, and are sufficiently robust to deliver continuing support to passengers until they reach their intended destination (as set out in GN-049), including:
    - Having a strong "we stranded you, we'll get you home" culture and practice.
    - Anticipating passengers' needs once they've been rescued, for example people's concerns that connecting buses, trains, trams and underground systems will or might have finished for the night.
    - Anticipating the need for hired-in buses, coaches and accessible taxis, including thinking about how long it will take them to get where they are needed.
    - Anticipating the need for hot or cold drinks, food, medicine, foil blankets, hotels etc.
- They are periodically tested and rehearsed in as realistic manner as possible, designed to surface issues that might arise in the heat of an incident (such as not knowing who has the keys to unlock waiting rooms and toilets at a particular station after hours, nobody having a corporate credit card to organise sustenance for rescued passengers, lack of experience in maximising use of a limited number of taxis by identifying people going to the same destination etc).

Engaging effectively with passengers stranded on trains will help prevent people climbing out of their own volition (self-evacuation). This requires:

- A clear, concise, accurate and speedy explanation of what has happened and what is being done to rescue passengers. Being honest with people, and avoiding information vacuums

that lead to a sense of abandonment, will reduce the likelihood that people climb out of the train unsupervised.

- Maximum use of control room direct communication to passengers using GSM-R as possible as it will give confidence to passengers that 'someone in charge' knows they are there.
- Specialist training for front-line teams in soft communication skills needed to maintain confidence and trust when there is no or only bad news.

Transport Focus recommendations to the rail industry:

- That guidance note GN-049 is thoroughly embedded throughout the railway.
- That every part of the railway takes concrete steps to make progress against the maturity model developed in conjunction with GN-049.
- That all parts of the railway make use of the related good practice guide developed by the Rail Delivery Group, and are rigorous in recording learnings from each stranded passengers incident and contributing them to the central repository for the benefit of all.

7.4 Passengers stranded at stations

People being stuck at a station because of major disruption also requires industry focus. It could be a small number of passengers at a small, unstaffed station; it could be a large number of passengers at a major terminal.

Transport Focus recommendation to the rail industry:

- That a "how we will look after passengers at X" plan is drawn up for every station, covering various things, including:
  - Arrangements for shelter (including details of the nearest public houses, hotels, etc).
  - Arrangements for refreshments (including details of the nearest shops and their opening hours).
  - Alternatives to get people to where they want to go.
  - How to mobilise staff to the station to help.

8. Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and continuous improvement

It is vital that the railway monitors how passengers rate their experience during disruption, including their assessment of the information provided, alongside internal metrics in various areas. This will allow the industry to measure improvement and have confidence that initiatives are working for passengers.

Transport Focus recommendations to the rail industry:

- That it measures success and targets improvement using two questions in the new Rail Customer Experience Survey, both asked only of passengers who have experienced a delay. The questions are:
    - "Thinking about the delay you experienced when travelling between X station and Y station, how satisfied or dissatisfied were you with how useful the information about the delay was" (Q54).
    - "Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied were you with how well the delay was handled? (Q56a).
- That it works with Transport Focus to develop and deploy a metric for the quality of written disruption information, using an explicitly passenger lens to assess whether information is clear, concise and useful.
- That the industry maintains focus on the Customer Information Pledges it has made, in particular:
    - A1 - "we commit to measuring and publishing how well we deliver against them". We cannot see that all train operators are yet doing this.
    - G4 – "[we will] announce if the train stops unexpectedly between stations or will be late departing a station, so you know what is happening". Renewed effort is needed to ensure an announcement is always made within two minutes of a train stopping between stations, including because it is running early.
    - H2 – "[we will] give you a reason for the alteration if the train is delayed by over ten minutes, if the train is cancelled or if we change the stations the train will be calling at". As well as measuring whether a reason has been applied, the industry should target the timeliness of it being done:
        - in the case of a cancellation, at the same time as the cancellation is processed.
        - in the case of late running, within five minutes of a train being recorded in Darwin as running 10 minutes late.
- That every quarter each control room should arrange an in-depth peer review of how it handled at least one Customer Service Level 2 (CSL2) incident, focusing on the passenger impact, identifying what went well and what could have been better. As well as operational elements, it is vital that this includes passenger information and other aspects of customer service.

Appendix A

Summary of recommendations to Great Western Railway and Network Rail Western Route following Transport Focus observations in December 2024. This included observing:

- **in Control;**
- **online;**
- **at London Paddington; and**
- **at Bristol Temple Meades.**

Recommendations relating to Control, including as it relates to production of online passenger information

1. A plan should be developed and implemented to substantially improve the quality and consistency of online information during unplanned disruption. Alongside a focus on upskilling staff, improving IT systems and building a strong relationship with the National Rail Communication Centre (NRCC), GWR should boost its quality control arrangements for passenger information - both 'in the moment' and as part of post-event learning and continuous improvement.
2. GWR and Network Rail should agree whether Control or Paddington station will post delay estimates into Darwin in relation to trains starting at Paddington. They should also establish a robust process for agreeing what the delay is likely to be, whichever team then posts the information into Darwin.
3. GWR should review the purpose of its @GWRHelp social media function and consider integrating it within Control.
4. GWR should revitalise its approach to giving passengers the information they need to make an informed choice during disruption. It should embrace an explicit 'these are your alternative options' philosophy, amending policies, systems and processes where necessary in order to 'live by it'.
5. Manifested online but more about policy and decision making, GWR must strive to anticipate, and have credible consumer-focused answers to passengers' reasonable questions during disruption. In particular, avoiding situations in which passengers are being told about – or noticing – disruption or expected future disruption (e.g. forecast of severe weather), but all they can be told about refund availability and alternative travel arrangements is, in effect, "we haven't decided yet".
6. GWR should build a strong working relationship with the National Rail Communication Centre (NRCC) in order that, among other things:
   a. passenger information about GWR services is consistent across GWR and National Rail Enquiries platforms.
   b. GWR takes advantage of the NRCC's capability to make changes directly in Darwin where necessary.
7. As well as a wider review of requirements, GWR should seek to make a range of immediate small-scale improvements to the software used to post messages to its website, so

staff are better equipped to create excellent passenger information.

8. GWR should consider providing control staff with an alert that a particular station will have no train calling at it within the next X minutes (configured to account for different service frequencies at different stations) in order that they can consider options to mitigate the impact.

9. GWR should consider providing the following aids to control staff:

   a. An alert in particular scenarios to consider posting a message to the Paddington OIS/ Scala boards.

   b. An alert after X minutes to check that an existing Paddington OIS/Scala message remains appropriate.

   c. An alert that a train is running 10 minutes late and there is no delay reason attached to it in Darwin.

10. GWR and Network Rail should work together to generate better estimates of 'trains won't be moving until at least ..' that can be used in communication with passengers in the early stages of a disruption incident.

11. GWR and Network Rail should determine the most efficient, foolproof, way to pass information between different functions on the Control floor, whether within each organisation or between the organisations.

Recommendations relating to London Paddington

12. Immediate improvements should be made to the passenger experience at London Paddington so:

   a. In place of "please wait", the expected departure time (or 'on time') displays as soon as that information shows in Darwin (and delay information should be input to Darwin as soon as a reasonable estimate of departure time is available).

   b. the expected boarding time. This is the norm at London Kings Cross, for example.

These two changes will address the current major weakness that passengers are provided with no clue about the length of a delay, despite that information being available through online channels.

13. GWR should set a minimum time between the platform number being advertised and dispatch of a train. This should vary by platform, reflecting the distance involved from the main concourse and whether there are ticket barriers for passengers to negotiate. In addition, when it is clear that the platform number will be displayed later than is ideal, efforts should be made to assure waiting passengers that once the platform number does appear they need not run, the train will not leave without them. The CIS, public address and concourse staff should all be part of that communication.

14. Automated 'next fastest train to' functionality should be introduced at Paddington, as is used elsewhere in the event of a cancellation. We acknowledge that during significant disruption this may need to be supressed to avoid causing confusion.

15. Investigation should take place into whether equipment to make manual announcements needs to be improved or there is a training need among staff making such announcements.

16. When a train is cancelled (assuming the cancellation is not 'last minute') passengers should be told via both the CIS and PA announcement in time to catch the previous train. For passengers who are at Paddington in plenty of time for their train, the railway should strive to offer them an alternative which still gets them where they are going on time.

Recommendations relating to Bristol Temple Meads

17. Changes should be implemented at Bristol Temple Meads to ensure passengers can navigate the station calmly and confidently, ensuring that they are in the right place to board when their train arrives. There should be a particular focus on passengers with additional needs, irrespective of whether they have a Passenger Assist booking. We envisage a thorough 'first principles' review and that changes are likely to be required to physical wayfinding and other signage, as well as to how staff are deployed to help passengers. There should be focus on mitigating challenges caused by the much-needed roof renewal project, as well as looking to the longer term once this is complete.

18. There should be an investigation into late notice platform changes. This should lead to an action plan to minimise occurrences, in particular of changes with significant passenger impact. This should include:

a. Examining the causes, including whether the 'platform working' plan actually works.

b. Understanding whether greater clarity to signallers about platform changes that are innocuous and those that must be avoided because of the impact on passengers.

c. Considering a minimum 'notice period' for changing a platform to ensure that passengers can calmly relocate if they must.

d. Considering whether signallers need to access to CCTV platform images to understand the volume of passengers who will be affected by their decisions.

19. Solutions and/or mitigations should be found as soon as possible to various customer information system (CIS) issues that we have highlighted in relation to Bristol Temple Meads.

Appendix B

Great Western Railway/Network Rail Western Route response to Transport Focus recommendations

Clear, timely and consistent information during disruption plays a core role in improving customer confidence, and we recognise the responsibility this places on both Great Western Railway and Network Rail.

Network Rail and Great Western Railway have been operating a joint control centre for more than a decade, which has helped us deliver a more customer-focused operational response when things go wrong. The teams expanded this close working further in April 2025, when the teams came under a joint leadership structure. We are always looking to build on those successes together, learning lessons from colleagues elsewhere on the rail network and beyond.

We were pleased to welcome the Transport Focus team into the operational Control Room in the first stages of this research, to help them learn about the challenges the railway faces and how our processes work and see how they could be improved.

Many of the recommendations reflect areas where improvement activity is already under way. Others provide helpful challenge that have informed how we continue to strengthen our approach to customer information over the 12 months since the research was completed.

This response sets out how both organisations are already strengthening customer information during disruption, and how the Transport Focus recommendations will further shape that work.

Recommendations relating to control, including online information

Recommendation 1: A plan should be developed and implemented to substantially improve the quality and consistency of online information during unplanned disruption.

Clear information during disruption is a priority for Great Western Railway. Over the past year, we have taken on both the feedback from the Transport Focus team, completed a self-assessment against the CRG team Standards for Customer Experience during Disruption and taken on the improvement areas from our own customer insights and industry workstreams such as Smarter Information Smarter Journeys to create an ongoing improvement plan. As part of this we have introduced a series of improvements to strengthen quality and consistency of information, including standardised customer message templates aligned to the Customer Information Pledges, refreshed message banks to improve clarity and speed of updates. We have also held joint workshops with Transport Focus to help embed passenger needs into Control processes and refreshed recruitment for customer information roles with greater emphasis on communication skills.

These changes have been supported by updated training materials, stronger quality assurance arrangements and an increased focus on post-incident learning and continuous improvement.

Recommendation 2: Great Western Railway and Network Rail should agree whether Control or Paddington station will post delay estimates into Darwin in relation to trains starting at Paddington.

A clear and robust process is now in place between Route Control and Paddington station control. Enhancements to customer information screens allow expected departure times to be displayed on the concourse, supported by agreed industry systems input procedures and shared accountability between teams.

Recommendation 3: Great Western Railway should review the purpose of its @GWRHelp social media function and consider integrating it within Control.

Great Western Railway recognises the importance of timely, helpful communication with customers. The social media team provides a responsive, human voice for the business, translating operational information into clear, practical advice that supports passengers and maintains confidence during disruption.

Since 2015, the team has been deliberately positioned outside the Control room, allowing it to remain strongly customer-focused while maintaining structured and effective links into operational command. This ensures customers receive clear, personalised responses rather than purely broadcast operational updates.

The majority of social media enquiries relate to fares, retailing and Delay Repay, with fewer than one in five contacts directly linked to live disruption where closer integration with Control might add value. The team is therefore based within Security Operations and Communications Centre at Milford House, enabling close coordination with Control while reflecting where most customer interaction sits.

This approach is kept under review and benchmarked against industry practice. Based on current evidence, relocating the function fully within Control would not deliver a material improvement for customers, though we remain open to change where clear benefits can be demonstrated.

We've recently introduced an AI chatbot which can handle simple queries quickly, allowing our expert teams more time to respond to more complex queries and supporting customers.

Recommendation 4: Great Western Railway should revitalise its approach to giving passengers the information they need to make an informed choice during disruption.

Disruption messaging is now clearly structured to set out the full range of options available to customers, in addition to a clear recommendation from the team. This helps to support informed decision-making, rather than directing customers towards a single course of action.

We are also working closely with other train operators to ensure our ticket acceptance arrangements with them can be communicated simply and consistently, providing unambiguous detail passengers need so they can travel with confidence.

To strengthen this further, our digital teams are exploring small-scale enhancements that make alternative options clearer and easier to act upon, including linking directly to relevant bus service information where ticket acceptance on bus routes is in place.

Recommendation 5: Great Western Railway must strive to anticipate and provide credible answers to passengers' reasonable questions during disruption.

We recognise our customers value travel advice based on quality, credible information – and this can take longer to provide in the early stages of an incident.

We are always looking at ways to speed up the delivery of accurate, actionable information and we always review how well that has gone, and identify where improvements can be made after every incident.

In some cases, we are able to predict potential disruption, for example, when severe weather is forecast. Here, specialist modelling from Network Rail, with input from Great Western Railway helps us continually improve the advice we give customers through established Command and Control arrangements. This supports timely decisions on service levels, customer advice and the need for ticket easements.

Frontline colleagues are supported through an internal staff information app that provides the latest service amendments and agreed customer advice. Refresher training in 2026 will reinforce effective use of these tools to support customers during disruption

Recommendation 6: Great Western Railway should build a strong working relationship with the National Rail Communication Centre (NRCC).

The National Rail Communication Centre is a key partner and plays a key role in ensuring customers receive consist, actionable information however they are accessing it. A dedicated communications channel now links Control directly with the NRCC, supporting faster issue resolution and greater consistency of information across channels.

Recommendation 7: Great Western Railway should seek to make a range of immediate small-scale improvements to the software used to post messages to its website.

Work is under way with suppliers and industry partners to deliver tactical improvements that enhance message readability and usability. Customer information requirements are also being fed into wider industry technology development to support longer-term improvements.

Recommendation 8: Great Western Railway should consider providing Control staff with alerts where a station will have no train calling within a defined time period.

Tools highlighting service gaps and late-running trains, directing Controller attention to potential customer impact, have been in place for some time. We will continue to look at the latest technology to improve these further, including a tool to highlight service gaps at specific stations during disruption.

Recommendation 9: Great Western Railway should consider additional alerts to support timely passenger information

This type of alert, which highlight late-running trains are already widely used by Controllers. We will continue to look at the latest technology to improve these further in line with the latest technology as it becomes available, particularly in areas that reduce the need for manual alerts.

In addition, we are currently working with our Customer Information System provider to develop a link to traffic management systems used by Network Rail to support signalling across a significant part of Western Route. Once in place, any platform changes made ahead of time will automatically appear on station displays, ensuring we give passengers maximum notice of any change by negating reliance on manual intervention.

Recommendation 10: Great Western Railway and Network Rail should work together to generate better early estimates of disruption duration.

GWR and Network Rail regularly review responses with this in mind, with a view to sharing accurate, actionable information as early as possible, while ensuring it remains proportionate, credible and

genuinely helpful to customers.

Timely, indicative information helps customers make informed choices. At the same time, in the early stages of an incident, understanding is often limited and still developing. Providing estimates too quickly, before the nature and scale of an incident are clear can create false certainty and lead to further frustration if information later changes.

With this in mind, Network Rail has recently reviewed its incident management standard, placing greater emphasis on milestone planning with indicative timescales and on sharing this information more consistently with train operators. Combined with data-driven insights from comparable past incidents, this approach is intended to improve the accuracy and confidence of the information we provide to customers.

Recommendation 11: Great Western Railway and Network Rail should determine the most efficient way to pass information across the Control floor.

Great Western Railway and Network Rail Control teams now operate under joint leadership, strengthening integration and shared decision-making. As part of our joint work during 2025, we have trialled a new floor layout to improve information flow and role alignment across the Control floor, which demonstrated improvements in this area. This work is now being developed into detailed proposals, which we will be using to seek funding that would enable this reconfiguration work to take place.

This collaborative approach will continue to develop as the industry moves towards Great British Railways.

London Paddington Recommendations

Recommendation 12: Immediate improvements should be made so customers have clearer information about delays and boarding.

Taking on this feedback, we've worked with our supplier and we've improved processes so expected departure times during delays can be shown on customer information screens rather than generic "please wait" messaging. This has now been rolled out to all customer information screens at London Paddington.

To give customers certainty, once an expected departure time is issued, it is treated as an 'earliest departure' committed time, even if a delay is subsequently recovered. Public announcements and manual messaging have been aligned to reflect this approach.

Recommendation 13: A minimum time should be set between the platform being advertised and train dispatch, with reassurance provided where platforms are shown later than ideal.

As part of the Team Paddington programme, GWR and Network Rail have strengthened boarding arrangements to help customers board calmly and safely. Indicative minimum boarding times have been introduced as a trial and are monitored, with announcements and staff reassurance emphasising that customers do not need to rush where delays occur.

Additional staff support is provided for priority services during busy periods, supported by clearer announcements and customer information screens.

Recommendation 14: Automated 'next fastest train to' functionality should be introduced, where appropriate, during disruption.

The current customer information system does not support automated "next fastest train to" functionality, but this aspiration has been captured as part of future customer information system replacement plans.

Recognising the inherent unpredictability of disruption, this requirement will include the ability to suppress the feature during significant disruption, where necessary.

Recommendation 15: An Investigation should take place into whether equipment or training for manual announcements needs to be improved.

A recent review and audit of the public address system identified audio quality issues in customer announcements and remedial work is underway. Ongoing work with the team who make the announcements has enabled us to introduce triggers and more personalised announcements, proactively providing information to customers about delays, cancellations and especially advice on alternatives.

Recommendation 16: When cancellations are known in advance, customers should be informed in time to catch earlier services and offered suitable alternatives.

Where cancellations are confirmed in advance, customers are informed through customer information screens, frontline colleagues and public announcements in time to board earlier services. Alternative routes and ticket acceptance are communicated as soon as agreements are in place, so customers can make informed decisions and continue their journeys where possible.

Bristol Temple Meads Recommendations

Recommendation 17: Changes should be implemented at Bristol Temple Meads to ensure passengers can navigate the station calmly and confidently, with a particular focus on passengers with additional needs.

Bristol Temple Meads is a complex station environment, temporarily made more challenging by the essential roof renewal programme. While we had placed a number of mitigations in place during this work, temporary structures and hoardings associated with that work have impacted the clarity of wayfinding.

During 2025, Network Rail has introduced clearer and larger signage, enhanced platform zoning to support customer boarding, and improved wayfinding within the subway area. Further reviews are planned as the roof project progresses and the temporary obstructions are removed. This has been informed by ongoing insight into wayfinding and customer information needs.

Visible staff presence and accessible information are central to supporting confident passenger movement. Additional staff have been recruited to support passengers with additional needs, regardless of whether a Passenger Assist booking has been made. Planning is also under way to review signage and staff deployment ahead of the opening of the Eastern Entrance, expected in late 2026.

Recommendation 18: There should be an investigation into late notice platform changes at Bristol Temple Meads, leading to an action plan to minimise occurrences.

Late-notice platform changes can significantly impact passengers' train travel experience, adding needless frustration and anxiety. Work is under way with Network Rail, GWR and industry partners to review and reduce these wherever possible.

This includes reviewing platform working arrangements, linking the customer information system and the traffic management system to speed up communication of platform changes, improving shared understanding of which changes have the greatest customer impact, and reducing unnecessary alterations.

A platform alteration guide has been introduced within Network Rail operations, supported by the local station team, to improve decision-making and minimise avoidable disruption. We are building cross-functional awareness via the 'spend a shift' campaign within Network Rail that will encompass external opportunities in phases 2 and 3. The aim is to build engagement, awareness and knowledge of the areas the affected teams work in, including the Thames Valley Signalling Centre and Bristol Temple Meads Station.

Recommendation 19: Solutions or mitigations should be found as soon as possible to customer information system issues at Bristol Temple Meads.

We recognise the limitations of the current customer information system at Bristol Temple Meads, and plans for a full system renewal will be progressed once the wider station construction work, particularly the associated rewiring programme, has been completed.

In the interim, mitigations have been introduced to improve accessibility and information provision, including the installation of induction loops and British Sign Language totems.

Appendix C

Other Transport Focus publications on this subject

Clear, concise, consistent, January 2026

Avanti West Coast disruption research update, December 2025

Improving the passenger experience when trains become 'stranded', August 2024

What rail passengers need during extreme heat, April 2024

'Do not travel' – what does it mean to passengers?, August 2023

Smarter Information, Smarter Journeys – improving passenger information on the railways, March 2023

Improving the passenger experience when rail services are disrupted, February 2023

Rail strikes feedback to stakeholders, June 2022

Extreme heat, July 2022: the passenger experience, August 2022

Passenger information at railway stations, July 2021

Passenger information during the 'Beast from the East' and Storm Emma, March 2018

Communicating suicides on the railway, June 2015

Reacting to extreme weather, July 2015

Valley Lines disruption improvements (Arriva Trains Wales), March 2015

Key issues from rail disruption Christmas 2014, December 2014

Passenger information when trains are disrupted, September 2014

Information: Rail passengers' needs during unplanned disruption, September 2011

Rail passengers' experiences during the snow, March 2011

Delays and disruption – Rail passengers have their say, November 2010

Passenger information: a vision, July 2008

Passenger information – what, when, where and how?, September 2004

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