



Improving passenger experience when trains are disrupted

January 2026



Introduction

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. This short document describes what we have done so far, our high-level conclusions about what needs to change and our intended next steps to help make things better.

It also provides links to two other January 2026 publications – our detailed set of recommendations to deliver improvement and a summary of recent research carried out in partnership with the rail industry.

What matters to passengers

When trains are disrupted, what matters to passengers can be summarised as five things:

- That they are treated with respect.
- That their plight is recognised.
- That they are helped to avoid the problem in the first place (if not already caught up in it).
- That the railway rises to the challenge “You got me into this, help get me out of it”.
- That different parts of the railway act in a joined-up manner.

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.

They also want it to be as personalised to them and their journey as is possible.

Our approach to making things better

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.

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.

- 1. 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.
- 2. 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.
- 3. 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. But it 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.



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 periodically, 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 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 via Global System for Mobile Communications – Railway** 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 contained in our main report.



→ Next steps

In the coming months Transport Focus will use its recommendations to work with the rail industry to help achieve better passenger experiences during disruption. This will include:

- Continued in-depth work with Great Western Railway and ScotRail, and ensuring other train companies are also focused on implementing our recommendations.
- A further tranche of detailed work on the ground in 2026, this time with Northern.
- Helping National Rail Enquiries deepen its focus on making information clear, concise and useful.
- Hosting a summit in autumn 2026 bringing senior railway leaders together to describe progress in addressing our recommendations and to discuss next steps in improving passenger experience when there is disruption.

Contact Transport Focus

Any enquiries about this research should be addressed to:

Guy Dangerfield
Head of strategy and intelligence
guy.dangerfield@transportfocus.org.uk
www.transportfocus.org.uk

Transport Focus
7th Floor
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

*Transport Focus is the operating name of the
Passengers' Council*

