

Shaping Rail's Future: Customer Community

Report: June 2023

Workshop: focus on stations
Summary



Shaping Rail's Future: objectives



- ✓ Hear about rail users' – and potential users' – experiences, impressions and opinions of the railway in Britain
- ✓ Understand strengths and weaknesses, and where improvements are needed
- ✓ Involve rail users in potential solutions and new ideas to help shape the future of rail

Introducing the customer community

40



Participants with a mix of:

- Reasons for using rail, and frequency
- Rail dependency
- Disabilities and not, and other needs e.g. travelling with buggies
- Demographics, lifestyles, attitudes
- Regions and urban, rural or suburban context

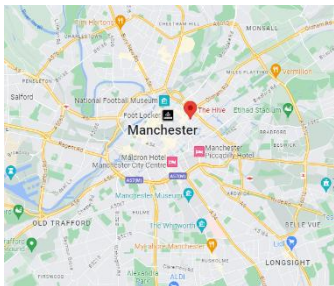
Each month, participants complete activities and answer questions around a particular topic

Via short videos, text, images

Individually, interacting with a moderator, and/or with each other

12 months from February 2023

In addition, two face to face workshops to discuss topics further, generate ideas, and feed back on proposed concepts and solutions



Saturday 17th June 2023
Central Manchester

Full day workshop

with nearly all of the community,
joined by GBRTT and Transport
Focus colleagues



Deep focus on customer experiences at stations:

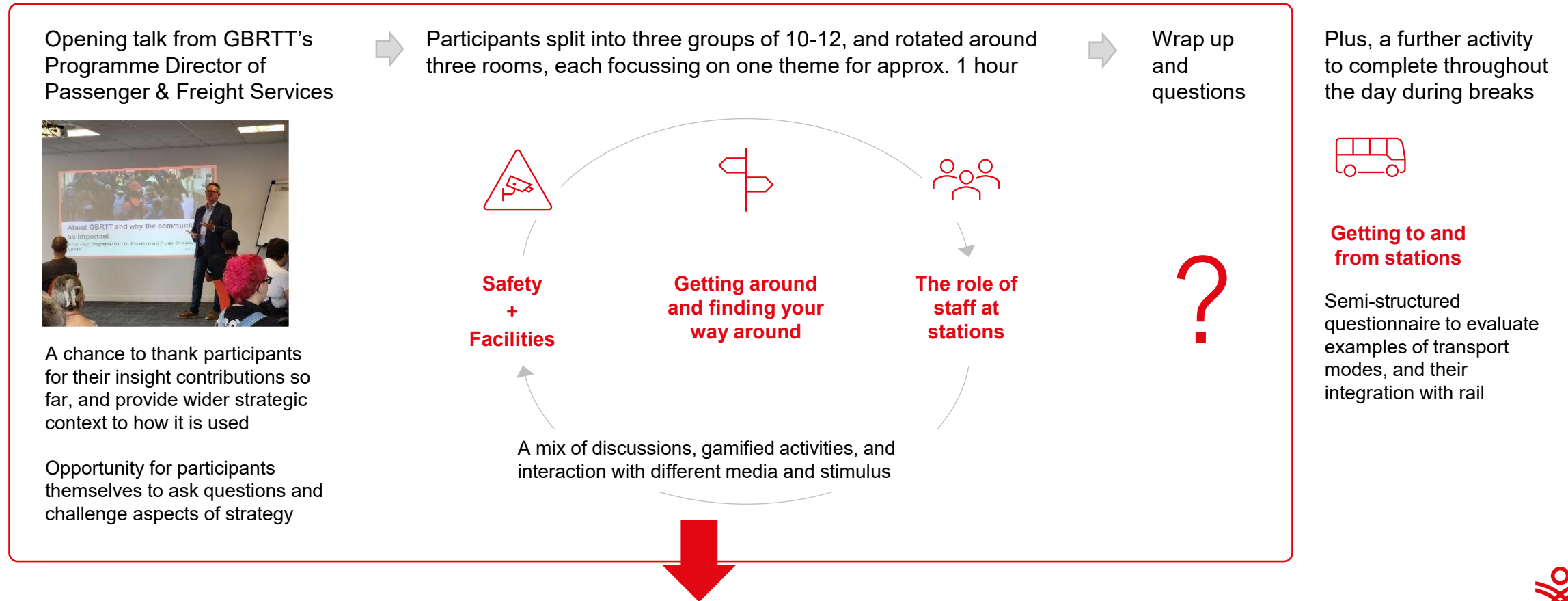
Safety
Facilities
Getting and finding your way around
The role of staff
(Onward travel)

Second workshop to take place in
November 2023, focussing on
customers' on-board experience

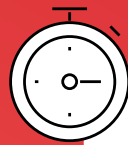
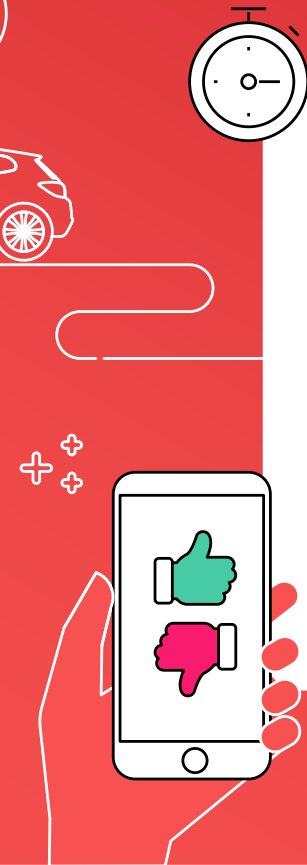


The workshop: a chance to engage face to face with the community, and hear richer discussion around customer needs to complement their online feedback

....and they worked hard!



This report summarises the key themes in what participants told us throughout the day



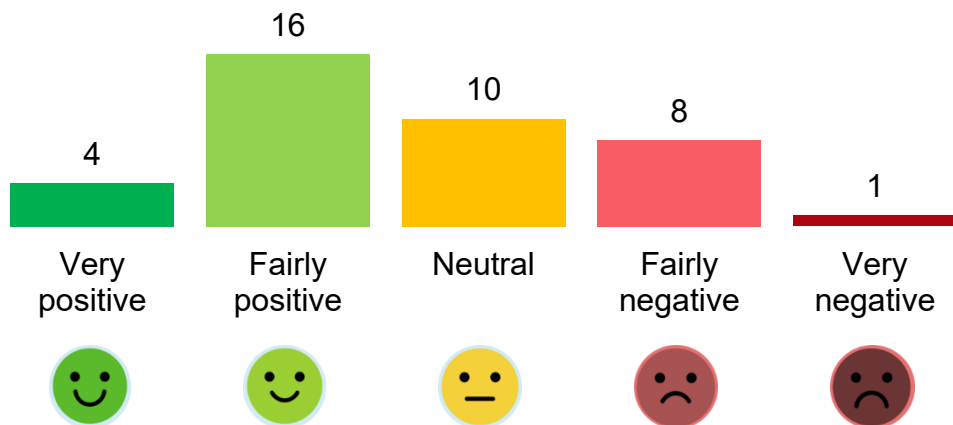
(Context):

How participants were feeling about rail overall at the time

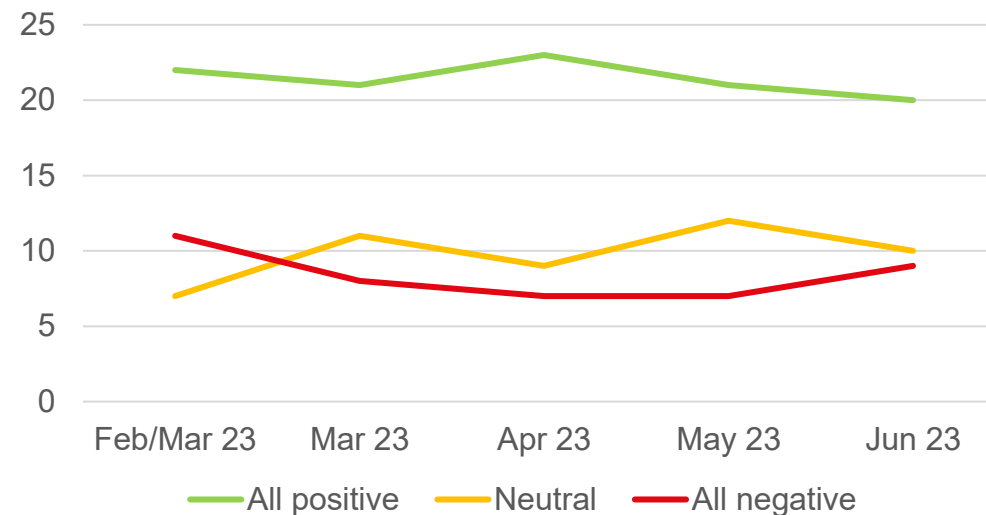
Activity conducted via the online research platform: Feb-Jun '23

Mixed impressions of rail overall among the community, remaining fairly similar through the year so far

How you feel about travelling by train at the moment: A snapshot
(Task 26)



Trend so far



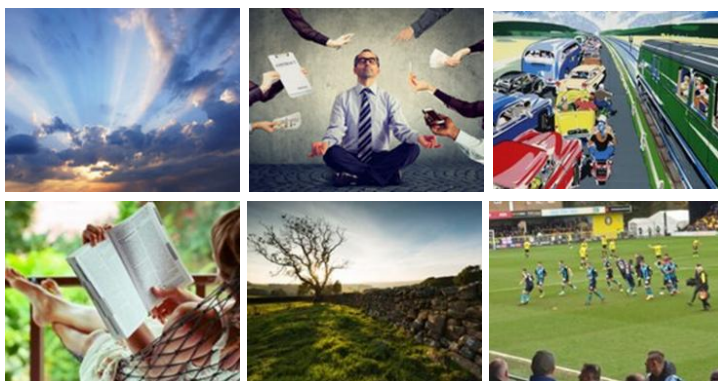
Participants are more likely to be positive when they....

- Typically travel for leisure, rather than work reasons (with regular commuters in particular being less positive overall)
- Live in more urban areas
- Do not have a disability or other health condition

Base: all community participants, Jun 2023 (39); figures shown are absolute number of people

Customers come to the rail service with huge variation of perception, meaning and experience

For many a train journey has meaning in its own right: so much more than a means to an end

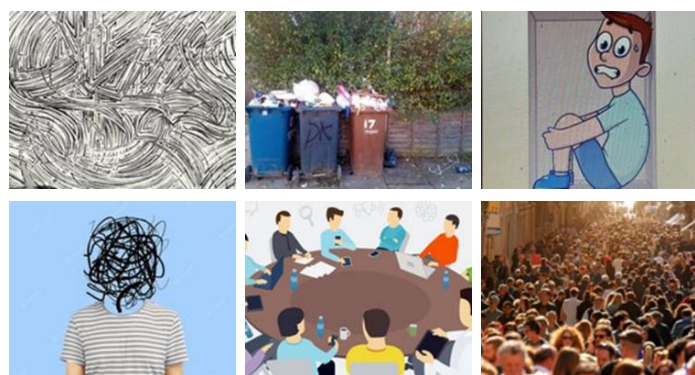


Relaxing
(Environment)

Productivity
Facilitator

Efficiency
Adventure /
interest

But a range of factors can limit this potential



Unreliability
Customer effort

Overcrowding
Indifference

...leading to frustration and disappointment at worst, and at best, generally conflicted feelings towards rail



“ *Train travel as a concept - incredible. I would love to do it more.*

Train travel in the UK - I actively avoid it because of how expensive and run down everything is. ”



The customer perspective on station facilities

The fundamental requirements, for all stations regardless of size

Stations must facilitate my....

Access to / interface with rail		Ability / right to travel		Comfort as a customer, and a person		
Well facilitated in/onward travel*	Step-free & other accessibility features	Ticket purchase facilities	Assistance	Comfortable (and safe) waiting areas	Toilet(s)	Café / refreshments
Close to station Close to main and / or step-free station entrances	Accessibility (or not) known in advance – incl. temp. changes + help points near lifts to speak to staff on site or nearby, in case of operational problems* Width of gates, thoroughfares, corners, etc. (and number of wide gates, etc.)	Accessible / operational at all hours (not inside locked ticket hall) Accessible at all station entrances	(Train services, platforms, tickets, disruption, etc.) Delivered face to face where possible Remote assistance call buttons as a minimum Special assistance where possible, with reliable advance booking & info	Involving seating, shelter, lighting ...but not feeling too enclosed (transparent walls / doors popular) In all populated areas but on all platforms as minimum Close to and visible to/from platform, for easy access to train	For use incl. by those with reduced mobility and large luggage, people (both M and F) with small children Accessible from most populated areas: all entrances, platforms, concourses, etc. Adult Changing Places facilities at larger stations	<i>Where possible</i>

Larger stations are also expected to facilitate my...

- Potential non-familiarity with journey / complex journey
- Comfort, time and other needs in context of a potentially longer or more significant trip
- Generally higher expectations for comfort and safety

And, to be functional, key principles apply to all facilities:

- ✓ Clear, consistent signposting*
- ✓ Well maintained, clean, open / operational
- ✓ Promote personal safety**
- ✓ Empathetic layout / location (e.g. quiet room not located close to pub)
- ✓ Reliably integrated with other info sources: what's (working) at the station, entrance / exit considerations, etc.

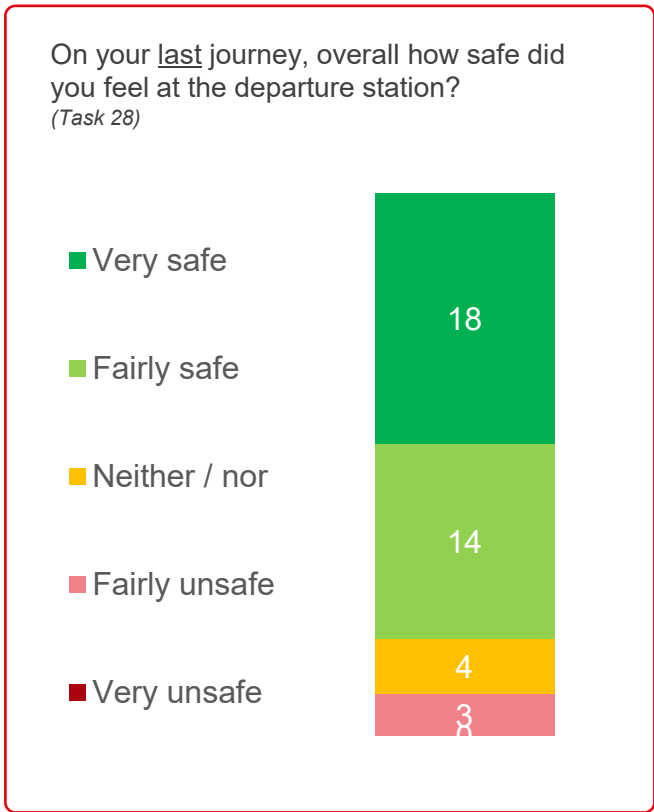
The customer
perspective on
safety at stations

Participants feel safe for much of the time when travelling by train, but there are several areas for concern, dominated by risks from other people

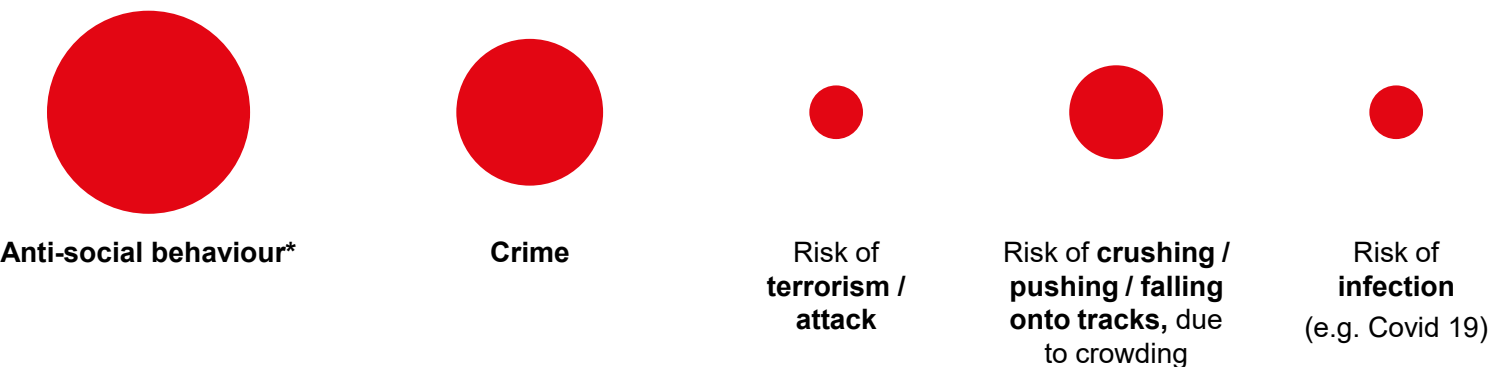
Overall safety perception



Causes of any concern



Threat or discomfort caused or aggravated by other people in the vicinity has the greatest impact on safety perceptions



Operational hazards / linked to physical building fabric
less front of mind; accidents on the railway itself rarely a concern



Base: all community participants, June 2023 (39);
figures shown are absolute number of people

Bubble sizes provide a qualitative indication of the relative size of, and severity of risk from, these different safety issues, in participants' perception

The workshop explored what contributed to these safety concerns, and ways to address these factors

There are a variety of factors which create or exaggerate these concerns

- Feeling alone or vulnerable
- Crowding & density of people / property
- Poor cleanliness or maintenance
- Perceived / actual enclosed (trapped) areas
- Hazardous infrastructure / machinery
- Police incidents / poor perception of local area



While not all of these are within operators' direct control, customers suggest and expect a range of tangible measures to reduce / mitigate these factors:

Staff and customer service

- Visible, present staff
- Intercom / help button to speak to staff
- Staff consciously looking out for people, pro-active help / reassurance
- Particular attention paid to customers' vulnerability and / or perception of safety at times of disruption management

Optimising space

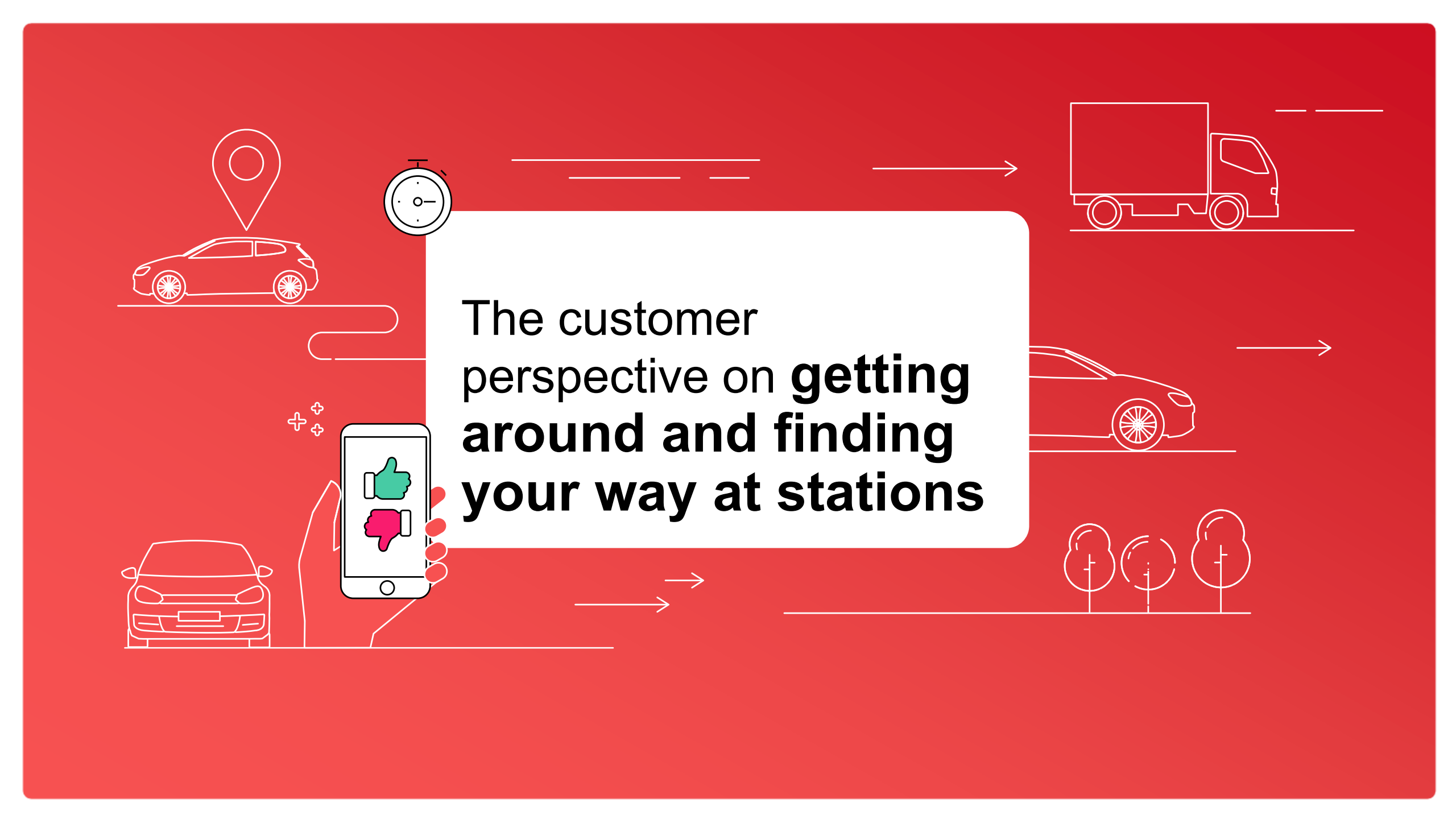
- Reduce clutter (unnecessary furniture, signage), create open sight lines & freedom of movement
- Physical barriers to protect from railway danger (e.g. glass doors between train and platform)

Environment

- Bring signs of life into enclosed areas and tunnels
- Make exits (escape routes) clear, reduce impact of blind corners: e.g. mirrors, lighting, signage
- General cleanliness and upkeep
- Lighting
- CCTV

Managing footfall and customer flow

- Keep bad actors off site, especially at night (tactics include: deterrents, security staff, where possible avoiding physical barriers)
- Manage people into zones and away from access points / thoroughfares / platform edges



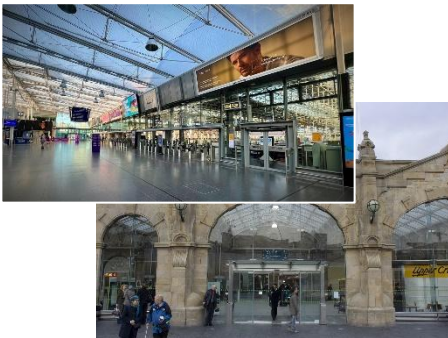
The customer
perspective on **getting
around and finding
your way at stations**

(In addition to signage) participants highlighted features which are important in helping customers to **find their way** around easily at stations

Management of the space

Open plan / transparent walls & doors

As well as allowing sight lines, feeling light and open promotes a perception of being able to get around easily – part of a more general overall feeling of being in control*



Avoiding clutter

Of both station furniture and other obstacles, and around wayfinding signage (e.g. catering signage, other advertising)

It was very easy [to find my way at the station].... Signs were large and clear. The environment was open, clear to access and not cluttered with too much unnecessary information.

(Rachel, mainly business)

Quiet areas

Needed by those feeling anxious or overwhelmed – for any reason – to reset and re-orientate

Lighting

For example, where a thoroughfare to a certain facility or area is not well lit, or free of signage or other signs of life, customers can lose confidence in whether they “should” be taking that route

It was hard to find ...eventually I stumbled upon 13b but ...the entrance appeared to be very darkly lit Also, [the] space seemed more closed and small in comparison to the main concourse.

(Clive, mainly business)

Further information provision

Staff presence

As a back-up or clarifier to other information, for more complex wayfinding needs, or customers with additional challenges to using the wayfinding information

...there may be instances in which people are looking for specific help which might be less clear through the signs.

...[this needs] approachable, knowledgeable staff around the station to ask, or perhaps an interactive / touch screen map, with a search function and help button. I do think the value of having real humans for help is invaluable.

(Rachel, mainly business)

Information hubs

In larger stations: maps, interactive screens, staffed information desks

*See also separate report on safety at stations

Evaluation of signage in particular provided some broad learnings in terms of both...

Placement

Naturally, signs and wayfinding devices must be clearly visible

This usually means signs above eye-level, but other (or supplementary) options like floor markings and waist-level railings / stretch barriers also have a role and are popular in the right circumstances

Signage must follow a route through from start to conclusion, including all start points and natural breaks

Customers can have difficulty finding facilities like toilets or lifts, when overhead signs take them to the general area within the station, but the facility itself is tucked into a corner or is poorly marked in its own right

A particular problem mentioned by some participants was sometimes knowing which direction to head in when coming out of toilets, lifts, etc.

...and following a route through to its conclusion must be practical for those following the signs

For example, participants with reduced mobility, or with experience of having luggage or buggies for example, expressed frustration with signage which took them to an exit, to discover that the exit involved steps. Signage to exits and other facilities needs to indicate accessibility of the route and its conclusion.

Content and design

Visual clarity is paramount

The amount of information must be very carefully considered – it's subjective, but generally this is not a salient issue for customers using station signage

Visual cues, including icons and distinct visual identities ("brands") for some facilities and services, are generally useful and popular

...as is clarity of meaning

There can be different interpretations of terms like "Passenger Assistance" (a specific service, known by staff and by those customers who use it, but can be assumed as relevant to all), and "station services".

Sometimes, local knowledge affects whether other rail and public transport services are recognised as, for example, "other train services", "National Rail services" or something else. These need to be made really clear, using unambiguous terms

Decisions about which services or locations are shown on signs is important

At exits, customers generally prefer local points of interest to be indicated, rather than street names



Key to all of these points is consistency across the rail network, regardless of operator

In discussions around how to facilitate **movement around stations for all**, the workshop built further on the facilities requirements for all stations:

Stations must facilitate my....

Access to / interface with rail

Step-free & other deliberate accessibility features

In/onward transport within easy and close proximity to station, and to its step-free entrances
Lifts & ramps available as often as possible: increasingly felt to be unacceptable not to do so
Consideration for width of gates, thoroughfares, corners, etc.

Info. about appropriate areas on trains, and where to wait on platforms to reach them efficiently

Presence of these features (or not) to be made known in advance – incl. temporary changes

Wide access gates for those with luggage, children, wheelchairs, etc.

- More needed in some stations
- More time allowed to pass through before the gate closes
- Staff assistance or facility to set bags down, if hands are full or have limited use

(Consistently) more manageable gap between train and platform – another area of frustration especially at newer stations or integrating with newer rolling stock. Really effective mitigation of this where the issue is insurmountable, including:

- More time to board / alight
- Assistance from staff
- Management of crowding at doors

Ability / right to travel

Assistance & information

(Wayfinding, moving around, boarding trains, etc.)

Delivered via face-to-face staff where possible

With consideration for different sensory or other needs (incl. audio, visual, large print and simplified information)

Remote assistance call buttons as a minimum, including near to lifts for example in case of operational problems

Special passenger assistance where possible

- With reliable advance booking & info
- Better promotion and understanding of who may use this

Better and consistent recognition and response to signals such as sunflower lanyard (gained some traction during Covid, which has not been fully maintained), disabled / pregnant badges, etc.

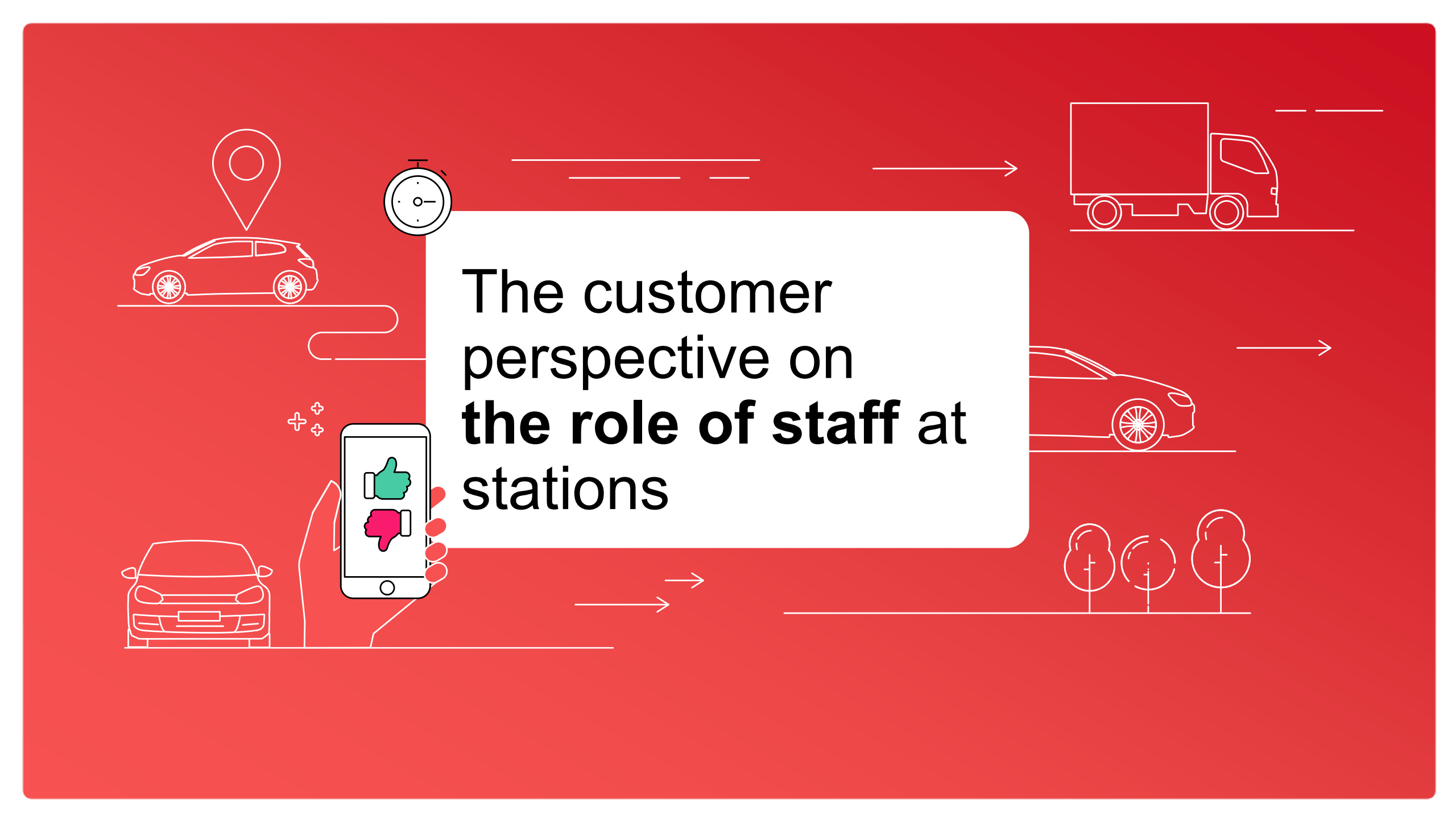
Comfort as a customer

Comfortable, practical waiting areas

Involving seating, in most populated areas but on all platforms as minimum

Sufficiently close to and visible to/from platform edge, for easy, efficient access to train

Empathetic layout / location (e.g. quiet room not located close to pub)



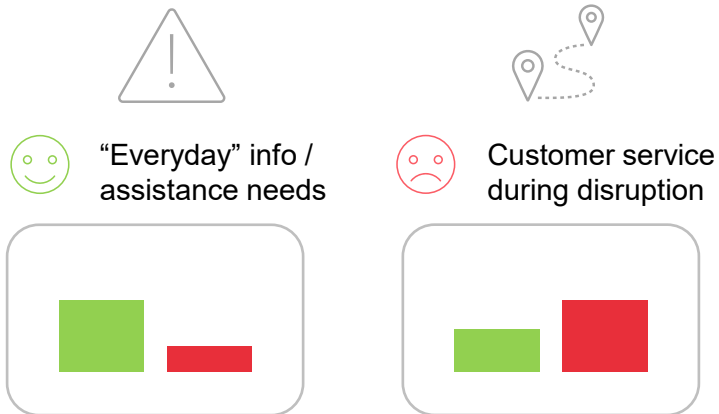
The customer perspective on **the role of staff at stations**

A snapshot of rail users' experiences and priorities for customer service

In general:

Earlier in the year, via activities in the online research platform, participants had demonstrated that:

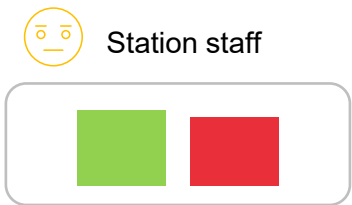
- **Customer service is a critical element** in the overall experience of rail, for **all types of journey and customer contexts**
- The rail industry is usually **fairly good at providing “everyday” customer service**, but – while there are pockets of excellence – it's **less consistent during disruption**



...and at stations specifically:

Their feedback also highlighted that:

- **Customer service is most critical** – most needed, appreciated, or missed – **at stations** (especially when departing / interchanging)
- ...but that **delivery of customer service at stations is mixed**
- This is partly due to the way staff interact with customers and how well they resolve issues, but **a major issue for customers is often a lack of visible / accessible station staff**



Workshop discussions added more detail to the customer perspective on **staff responsibilities and functions at stations**



Naturally, rail users focus on the ways in which they want staff to interact with them

- **Specific, individual assistance and support**, like help with ticket purchase, wayfinding, and with luggage, etc.
- **Broader customer care**, like managing crowding and passenger flow, and providing a human presence for safety and “just in case” of queries or problems



And less on the “behind the scenes” requirements

Like despatch, gate control, cleaning, etc.

If the industry wishes to take a customer-first approach to rail delivery overall, then **there may be a strategic culture change needed in some places**, to move the planning and management of station staffing away from that of a mainly operational, safety model, towards one with a greater emphasis on customer service (as well).

Graphs give a qualitative indication of how relatively often the community talked positively and negatively about customer service experiences in different circumstances, and from different types of staff. See full report on customer service, for more detail.

Key areas in which customers wish to see staff at stations, and overall customer priorities for the functions and responsibilities staff fulfil in these locations

	Entrances / exits	Transport interchanges	Car park / bike storage	Thorough-fares	Ticket offices	Concourse / TVM / waiting area (roaming)	Dedicated info desks	Gates	Platforms
Welcome / acknowledgement	✓	✓		✓		✓		✓	✓
Directions / wayfinding	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Ticket purchase / queries					✓	✓	✓		
Assistance: train services	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Assistance: in / onward transport	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		
Mobility / luggage / special assistance	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Security / safety <i>Personal / property / risk from other people*</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓

- Precise staff activities in each station location will depend on individual layouts, usage, localities, and other factors, and there might be primary functions relevant to some locations. However, there is an **expectation that staff in all of these areas will be able to provide a range of different customer service needs.**
- **At larger stations**, customers expect that individual or teams of staff will cover each of these areas, at all times when services are running
- **At smaller stations**, customers appreciate that it is acceptable for a small number of staff to move around to cover all of these areas, and/or to be contactable and for customers to be “seen” here

Essential function
 Other assumed ability

Some further important themes in the management and deployment of staff at stations

Staff need to be...

Accessible to customers

This community emphasised **the importance of visible, front-line staff at stations**, to meet core needs around safety, individual assistance, and broader footfall management.

Key implications for this include:

- More **roaming** staff
- Staff **throughout hours of service**
- **Easy to find and reach** staff, incl. identifying and optimising areas where people gravitate for help, clear signposting, uniforms, etc.
- **Approachable** staff: attitude, body language, physical position
- Mixed views on staffing at small stations: overall this is worth review, and **where staffing is not practical, really effective, innovative steps to mitigate for this are vital**

Connected

This means staff being connected:

- **To customers on site** – i.e. visible where possible, but otherwise reachable via pager-style or tablet devices, for example
- **Via the local area** and wider network – especially relevant for smaller stations with few or no staff. For example, ideas such as roving, responsive customer service teams working across a small local network of stations, and remote, “video call” contact with contact centres via TVMs or similar points on site, were both popular with participants
- **To the wider network in terms of information**. Customers expect that on-site staff should have the best, most up to date information about services (regardless of operator)

Broad, not narrow in terms of role, responsibility, knowledge

Customers expect that any staff that they could come into contact with at a station – regardless of specific role or employer – **should be able to help them**, or at least to be constructive in setting them on the right path.

This means putting in place the **recruitment criteria, training and ongoing management principles** that will create and facilitate a staff force with the ability, agency and flexibility to do **what customers need, not what a system allows**

Participants also felt that this is important for staff morale and so, in turn, performance

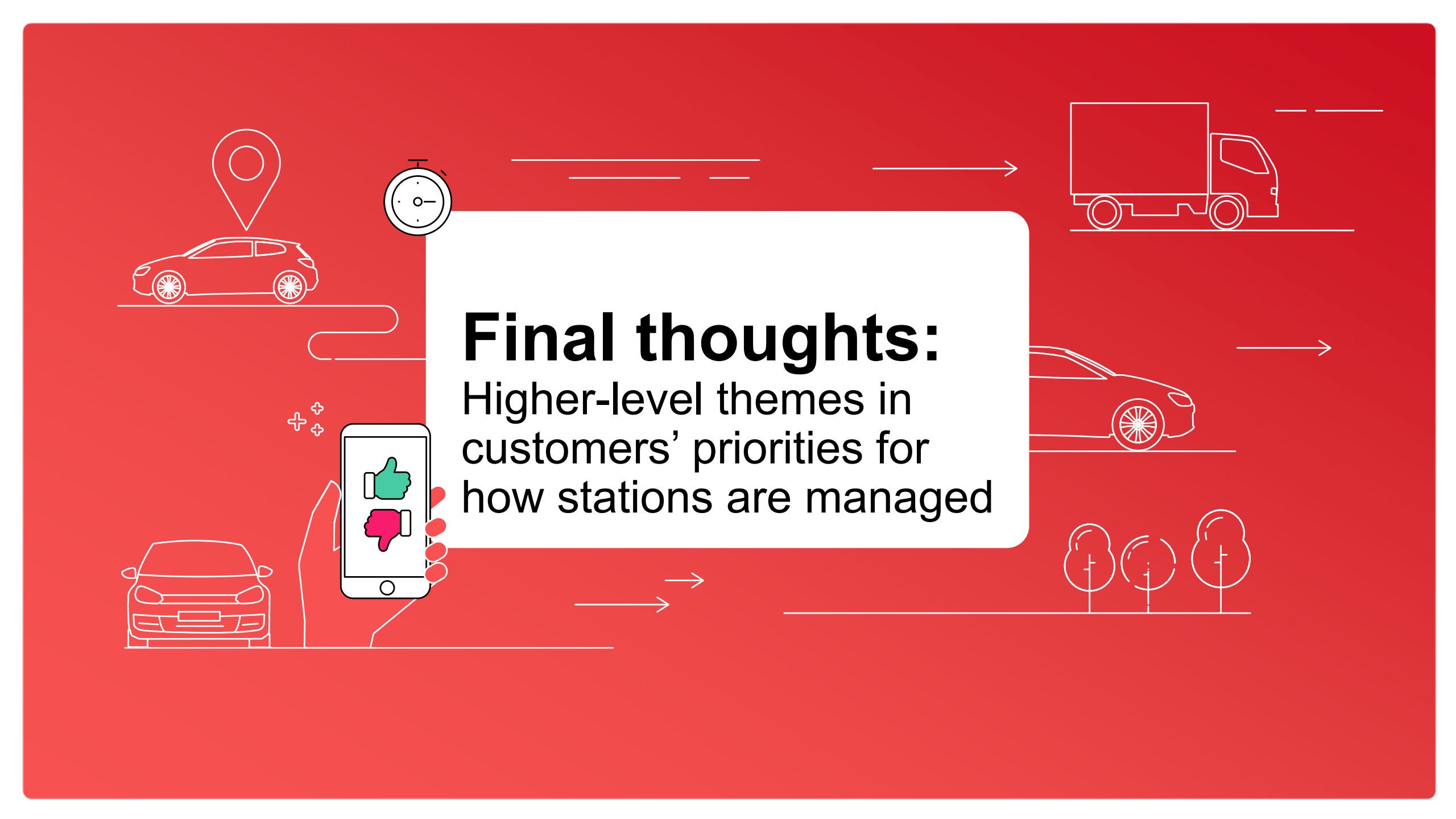
Customer focussed

In terms of both:

- The **functions** they perform, rather than logistical priorities
- The **way they perform them**, prioritising pro-activity & ownership, empathy, and the professionalism to deal with many different, sometimes difficult, scenarios

In some places, this may mean additional staff are needed to cover both the functions of value to customers, and operational responsibilities

Many rail users perceive that staff receive little effective training / support around customer service, again indicating that **more attention is required on recruitment, training and ongoing staff support, specifically with their customer-facing responsibilities in mind**



Final thoughts:

Higher-level themes in
customers' priorities for
how stations are managed

Some key themes ran through all the topics discussed in the workshop, as critical in making all aspects of railway stations work well for customers

Presence of staff

This community of rail users cannot emphasise strongly enough how important staff (on board and elsewhere, but particularly at stations) are to them.

To customers, helpful, available, accessible staff are a cornerstone in ensuring that they can find and use station facilities effectively, that they feel safe on site and in the surrounding area, and that they can find and make their way around, to and from stations. This is all in addition to the invaluable role that staff play as the interface between the train service operation, and the customers who use it, in terms of helping them to buy tickets, find and access the trains they need, and navigate disruption.

Pride in stations

Many of customers' needs and priorities for stations in terms of facilities provision, safety, getting around, and customer service overlap in the sense that they often come down to ensuring that stations feel well looked-after and inhabited.

For example, a well-kept, well-lit tunnel or subway is likely to feel safe, is more conducive to customers knowing which way to go (because it doesn't look "off-limits"), is more likely to feel as though staff are close by or have been recently, and can be more accessible due to being free from puddles, litter and other obstacles

Interconnectivity across channels and touchpoints

Stations – and the railways in general – “work” best when all the touchpoints that customers use provide the same information, at the same time, and/or where online channels support and enhance the tangible station experience.

This might be by providing digital information about facilities and accessibility in advance (or even on site), or by enabling customers to book assistance, onward travel or parking reliably in advance.

Crucially, it also includes agnosticism for the operator of any given route or station

Connectivity across the (local) network

Participants' discussions highlighted the value in working to make stations themselves – especially smaller sites and those with limited staff – feel and act connected with others along the route and nearby.

This might be through smaller stations being managed and staffed as satellites to larger hubs, and by making it easy for both staff and customers to access off-site support.

Importantly, any such models for management, or staff or other services, must be made really clear, salient, and easy to interact with

About Transport Focus

Transport Focus is the independent consumer organisation representing the interests of:



Bus, coach and tram users across England outside London.



Rail passengers in Great Britain.



All users of England's motorways and major 'A' roads (the Strategic Road Network).

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Transport Focus is the operating name of the Passengers' Council

We work to make a difference for all transport users.