

Shaping Rail's Future: Customer Community

Report: Nov 2023

**Workshop: the on-board experience
Summary**



Shaping Rail's Future: the customer community



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

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

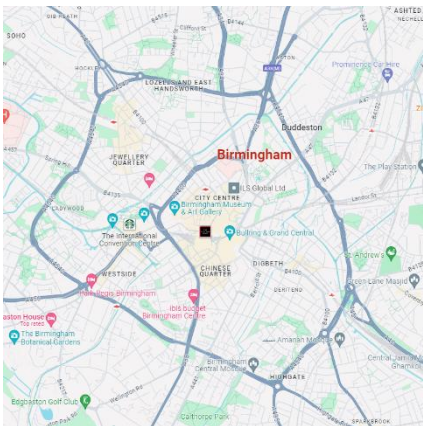
In addition, two face to face workshops to discuss topics further, generate ideas, and feed back on proposed concepts and solutions



12 months
from February 2023

Names have been changed throughout this report to protect anonymity

November 2023 saw the second of two in-person workshops with the participants



Saturday 4th
November 2023



Central
Birmingham

Full day workshop with
nearly all of the community,
joined by GBRTT, DfT and
Transport Focus colleagues



**Deep focus on customer experiences on
board trains:**

**Facilities &
services**

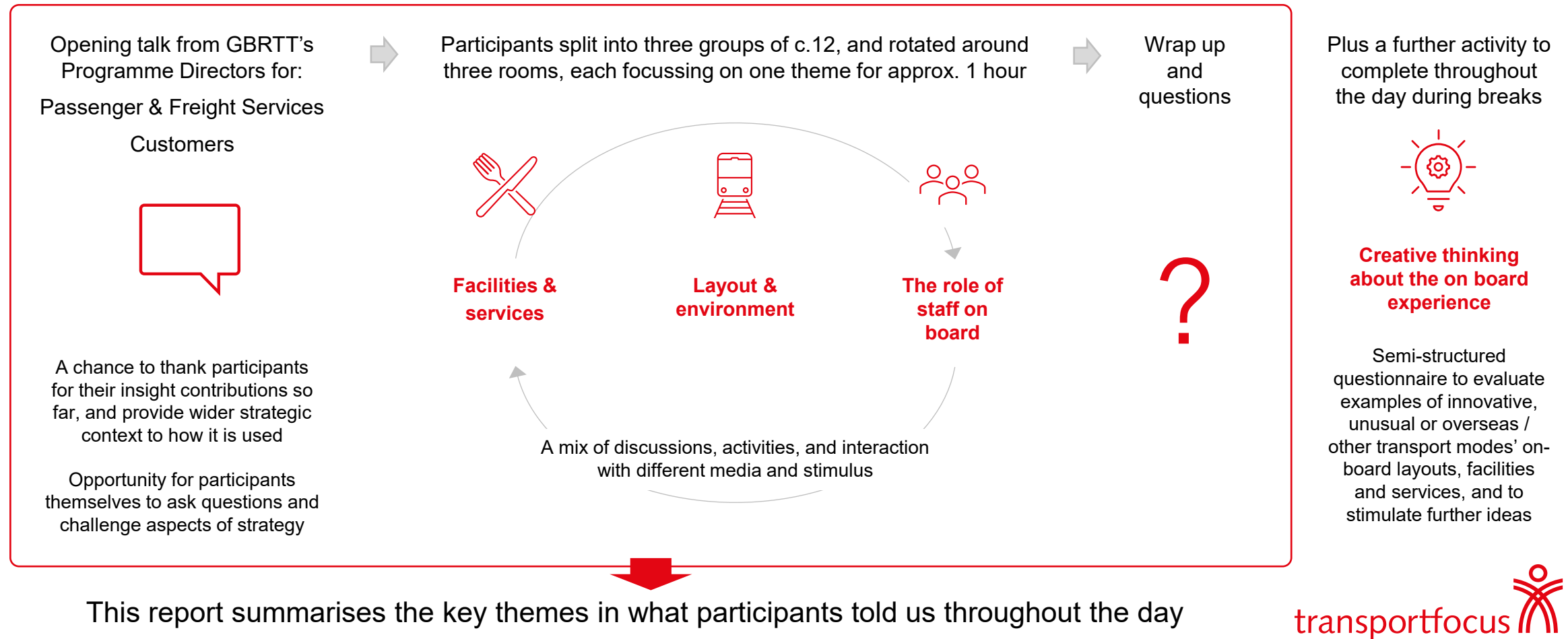
**Layout &
environment**

**The role
of staff**



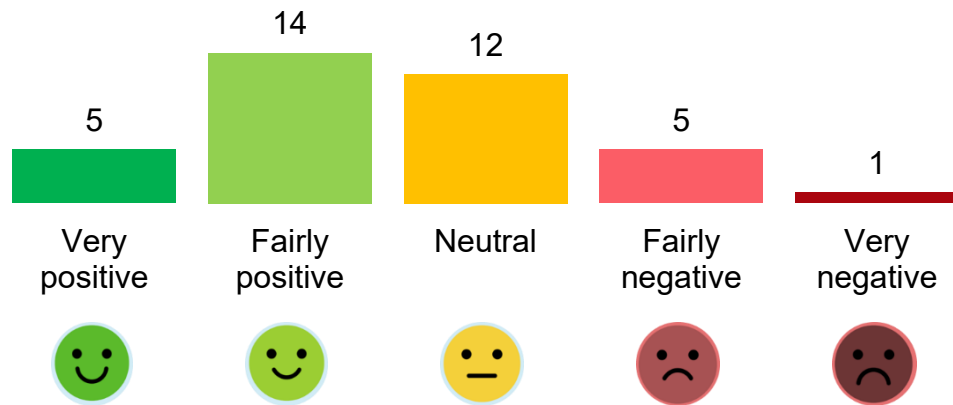
The workshop: a chance to engage face to face with the community, and hear richer discussion around customer needs to complement their online feedback

....and they worked hard!

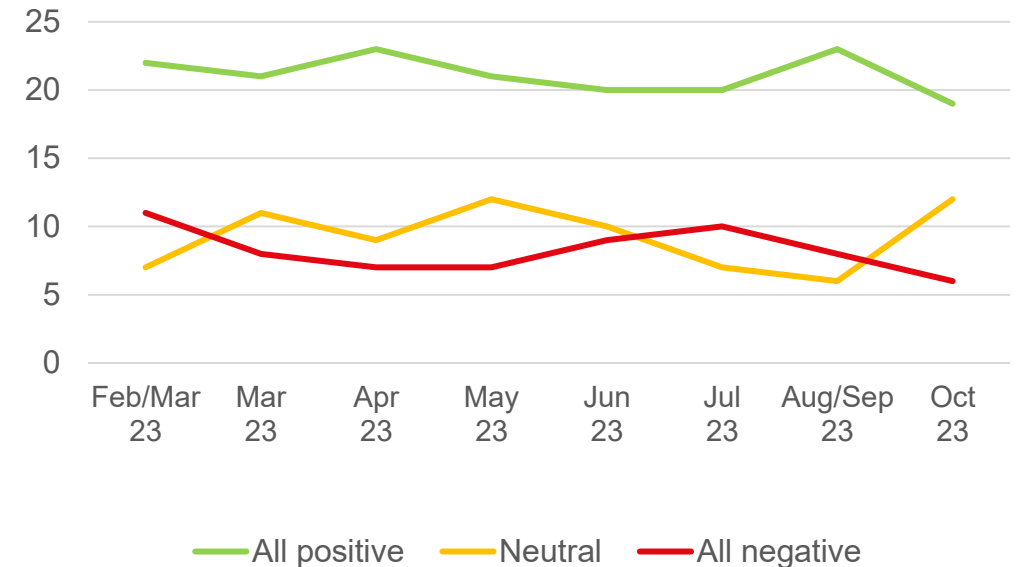


Some context: most were feeling fairly positive or neutral about the railway in general at this point

How you feel about travelling by train at the moment: A snapshot
(Task 52, October 2023)



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, Oct 2023 (37); figures shown are absolute number of people



The customer perspective on the role of staff on board

The workshop emphasised the significance of staff in shaping the overall on-board experience. Currently, this is not delivered consistently well.



Staff really do make or break the experience of travelling by train



Multiple workshop participants



A fundamental principle in the way passengers want the railway to be run, and to improve, is to truly become **a service for facilitating people's journeys, rather than a logistics industry.**

Underpinning all of the community's feedback during their year of engagement so far, is **a need for a more genuinely customer-first mindset**

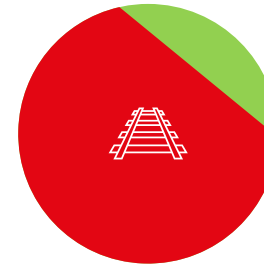


Human interaction between operators and passengers is a crucial element in this: customers feel strongly that they want a genuine acknowledgement of their existence from the operator, in order to feel they are valued.

For most people, most of the time, seeing and / or simply being acknowledged by **a member of staff is the most obvious expression of this.**



But the current experience is very mixed



Participants described customer service during a recent journey.

"Traffic light" colours here are a qualitative indication of how often their examples were positive or negative (or mixed), specifically while they were on board (including where they needed some assistance but could not find or access it).

This is largely due to a **lack of staff presence**, rather than the way staff act and the roles they perform – though this was not without criticism in places, and **workshop discussions highlighted particular areas of staff responsibility which need more attention, and ways to improve**

Customers value several tasks and responsibilities for on-board staff: highlighting the importance of a visible, in-person service, as well as guiding priorities for improvement

Essential			Important, on certain services, or at certain times			Important, if not a deal-breaker		Important on many but not all services*
Safety / security	Ticketing	Everyday information	"Hosting" / cust. service	Support during disruption	Special assistance	Basic cleaning / tidying	Basic first aid	Catering
Visible staff ideal in most cases, plus tools & tech to support them	Visible staff required	Visible staff ideal in most cases, plus tools & tech to support them	Visible staff ideal in most cases, plus tools & tech to support them Mainly longer distance services	Visible staff required	Visible staff required	Visible staff required Mainly on longer distance services	Visible staff required	Visible staff required
(Safety from other people rather than from machinery / tracks, etc.) Staff presence = deterrent to crime / AS behaviour Staff should step in more for low-level poor behaviour, and diffuse unsafe situations – and contact police where needed	Compliance Queries & info On-board purchase	Information on: - The route, stops, timings, etc. - Useful info. on passengers' stops; external issues that may immediately affect customers - On-board services and facilities Queries from passengers	Acknowledging passengers' presence / making passengers aware there is someone available in case of queries or need Getting people settled: assisting with capacity management and where people sit in each carriage, incl. seat reservations and luggage storage	Providing information Supporting with queries and assistance needs Co-ordinating and directing passengers to assistance when disembarking Informing customers about compensation rights and process	Helping passengers on and off, helping with luggage Being alert to passengers who may have other needs for assistance, and delivering this Delivering pre-booked Passenger Assistance	Regular checks and re-stocking of toilets Periodic litter collections	Ability to help in emergencies and with minor health issues – but call for expertise as needed	Providing food & drink according to operator set-up on given service

All of this raises important themes for the management and deployment of staff on board trains*

Customers want to see more visible staff on more train services, but they are also pragmatic about potential limitations: **they don't expect to see large numbers of staff on board trains, but feel that staffing can be improved and optimised, often using existing resource. In particular staff should be:**

Accessible to customers

Visible, approachable, reachable

Or as a minimum, in some limited scenarios (usually local services typically serving "low stakes" journeys) it can be acceptable to engage with customers via audio or other channels. However, even on these services, visible staff are appreciated in the evening / night, for security

This means:

- **Knowing staff are there, and how to contact them**
- **At least one member of staff on board**, plus the driver (more on long distance / multiple carriage services)
- **Physically seeing staff at least once during a journey** (more often on longer journeys, and can be acceptable to hear from staff on very busy, local and familiar services)

Connected

This means staff being connected:

- **To customers on board** – i.e. visible as much as possible, but otherwise reachable (for two-way interaction, not just one-way relaying of information), in a stated area or the train, and potentially using technology
- **To the wider rail network**, including other staff en route (regardless of operator) and operation controllers, in order that information is relayed both to and from the train, relevant to passenger needs
- **To other external expert support, when needed:** e.g. police, medical assistance

Customer focussed

In terms of both:

- The **functions** they perform – nine areas of responsibility identified as important to customers
- The **way they perform them**, prioritising soft skills – for all staff including drivers

Broad in terms of responsibility & knowledge, and working as a team

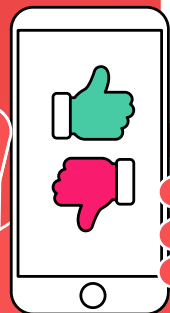
A holistic approach to delivering customer journeys. **Staff on board should:**

- **Be able to help (regardless of specific function or employer)**, or at least to set customers on the right path
- **Work as a team, with a collective purpose to deliver customer journeys**, rather than in separate silos, with individual, more functional / operational tasks

Some will have specific or technical focus (e.g. tickets, catering), but all should be prepared to provide customer service, with consideration for the key functions identified as important to customers

This means establishing the **recruitment criteria, training and ongoing management principles** that will facilitate a staff force with the ability, agency and flexibility to do **what customers need, rather than limited by systemic (or job title) constraints**

*There are also many direct parallels here with the themes identified in an earlier workshop, for staff at stations



The customer
perspective on the
**space and
environment on board**

Customers' feedback about on-board cleanliness

A priority element in providing a suitable, comfortable environment

✓ **Necessary for practical and health reasons**

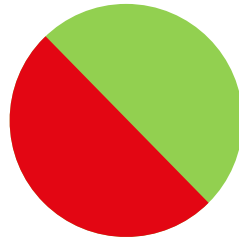
✓ **The broken window effect:**

Passengers themselves admit that they are more likely to contribute to keeping their area clean if it already appears so (taking their litter away, keeping feet off seats, etc.), and vice versa

✓ **Broader perceptions of the industry**

Poor cleanliness and maintenance can imply (and / or confirm perceptions of) a lack of care for customers in general

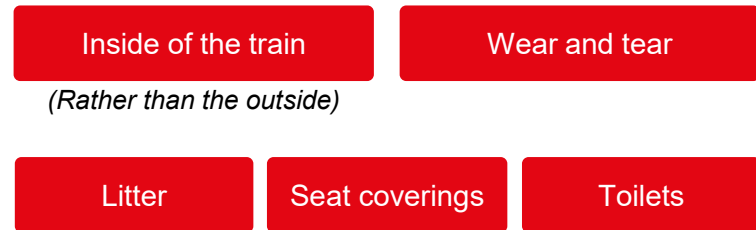
Current satisfaction is mixed and varies by operator, time of day, and rolling stock



...there was a very helpful guard ...the train was clean and on time. An all round excellent service.
(William, business, urban)

The older trains' seats are often dirty, stained, chewing gum stuck in them, falling apart, etc. The new trains seats are more comfortable.
(Fiona, leisure, suburban)

While the industry should rightly have standards covering a wide set of detailed cleaning requirements, **the biggest factors influencing customer perceptions are:**



Overall, there is a **lack of trust** around what cleaning happens, when, and how rigorous it is.

So **there will be value in perception management more broadly, and making cleaning more visible**, especially via:



Staff: enforcing feet being kept off seats, visibly undertaking cleaning / litter collection



Information and communication: signage and announcements about what cleaning practices are in place, reminders to act responsibly

Accommodating and providing well for customers in terms of...

Luggage space

- ✓ Important to for **all types of journeys** and services
- ✓ Potential **advantage of rail** over flying

 Satisfaction is mixed, with key factors being:

- **Size** of the space
- **Security**
- **Proximity** to seat



Rail users feel that **many trains are already suitably equipped, but could be optimised**, with better use of space, and additional support measures to help realise this for customers

Other larger items and dogs

Rail feel that trains should accommodate these items, as part of:

- ✓ **Facilitating greener modes of travel** (i.e. using bikes)
- ✓ **Being inclusive**
- ✓ And again, as an **advantage over flying**



This does not happen in practice, for all these passenger groups equally, especially for young families



Those with reduced mobility

 As for all passengers, these customers have mixed experiences of on board space

Priorities for optimising this are:

- ✓ Being made to feel a **part of the carriage**, not separated from it
- ✓ Having **the same facilities and experience as others**, including tables, sockets, access to luggage, toilets, catering, etc., and the option to transfer to a seat
- ✓ **Improving in-person passenger assistance** (whether booked or un-booked)

Seating

Generally **felt to be reasonable**, not a common “complaint”

There is inconsistency by operator, however

And participants identified **principles in their needs for seating layout**, highlighting some which are currently delivered on better than others:

-  Personal space
-  Choice of seat configuration (*airline and 4-seat + table most popular*)
-  Practical for on board activity (*eating, working, charging devices*)
-  Visible cleanliness
-  Comfort

Zones and reservations:

- Appealing in principle, but **not reliably effective**
- Customers do not want resource used here unless these services are executed really well.

Again this means staff to manage and enforce, and information – plus better ability for customers to manage (including give up) their reservations

In addition to physical layout and provision of facilities, workshop participants stressed the **importance of staff to help manage and facilitate** their use (assisting with luggage, helping people to appropriate space, etc.) and **information, both in advance and on board**, about what space and facilities are available, and any restrictions

“

I am comfortable enough with the seats but would appreciate more cleanliness....

The main issue on a busy route is finding a seat.

”

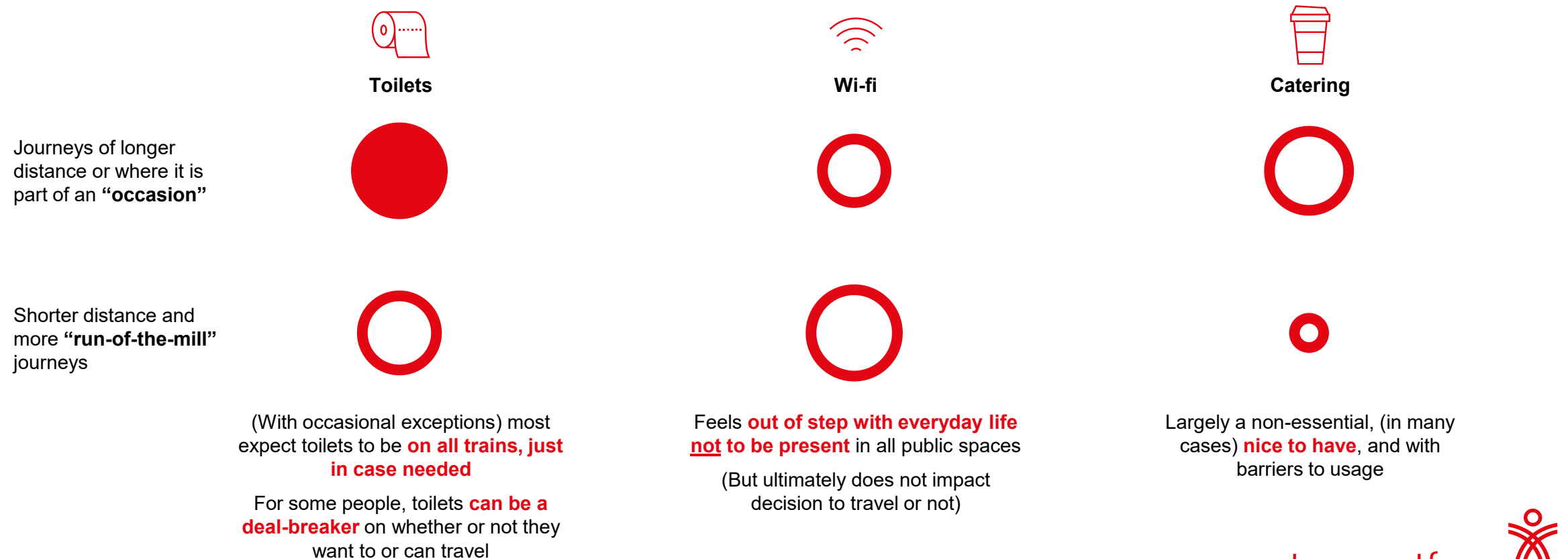
Riz, 60, travels mainly for leisure, urban

The customer
perspective on
**facilities and
services on board**

Wi-fi and especially toilets are felt to be essential on board; catering a lower priority for rail users overall – though this varies by journey context

Relative importance of these three on-board facilities and services

Bubble sizes provide a qualitative indication of the relative importance of each. This is partly based on the proportion of individuals who talked about each, as part of a pre-workshop warm-up activity – either to comment on their presence / absence, their quality, or something else – and partly on their more detailed discussions in the workshop itself



There are examples of good experience, but current overall opinion of these on-board services are more often negative – especially for wi-fi

Overview of top-of-mind sentiment towards on-board facilities and services

Participants' feedback provides a qualitative understanding of how they perceive and remember these services to be at the overall, industry level. Graphs here provide an overview of what proportion of all the feedback was positive, negative, or mixed / neutral, rather than a fully quantified assessment.



Toilets

The issues, in customers' view:

- Poor perceptions of **cleanliness** – often confirmed in practice
- **Inconsistency of availability and access**

Some of this sentiment is based on misconceptions – but toilets can really make a difference to people when they are fit for purpose



Toilets are guilty until proven innocent: Consider allaying fears by informing passengers about toilet cleanliness, so that more people take advantage of facilities, to enjoy their journeys more fully

Some features which are popular or appreciated:

- Non-touch amenities (flush button, taps, soap, etc.)
- Signage for location and occupancy
- Facility to book a seat close to toilet if wished

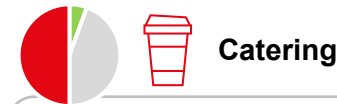


Wi-fi

The issues, in customers' view:

- **Not reliably available**
- Sometimes **apparently not working at all**, despite being advertised
- Insufficient or patchy in terms of **speed or capacity**

...all feels **unacceptable** "in this day and age"



Catering

Two distinct categories in customer needs:

- Basic refreshment / small added journey comfort (*tea, coffee, snacks*)
Relevant on longer distance or "occasion" journeys, and during disruption
- A more substantial (but still "on the go") meal:
Relevant mainly on (fewer) longer distance journeys

The issues, in customers' view: Perceived as **unreliable**, inconsistent, **poor value for money**, and with **limited, insubstantial offer**



Optimisations like remote / advance ordering may enhance appeal but only once these issues are resolved, consistently, across operators

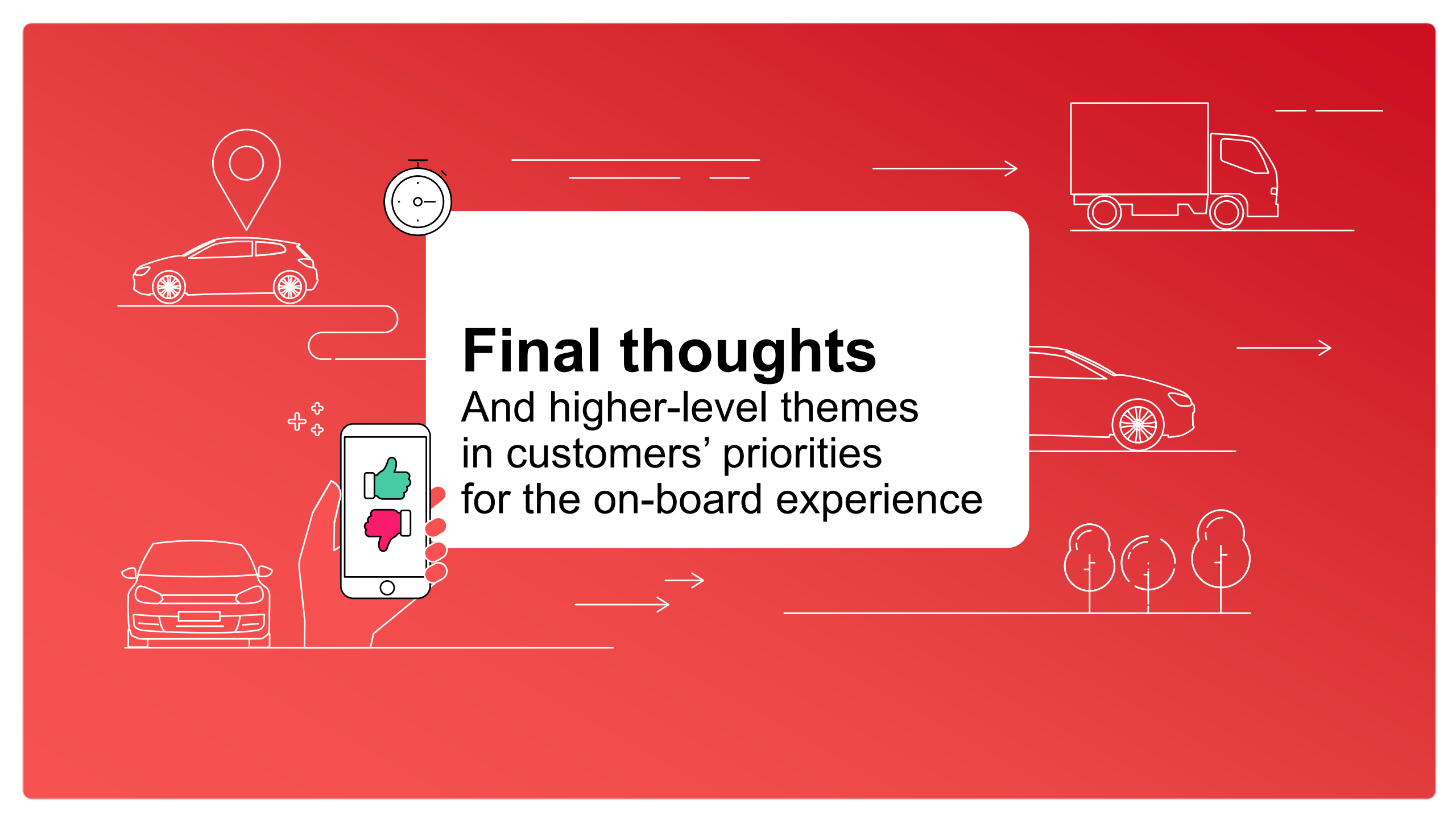
Instead, **alongside establishing a consistent, solid offer, customers want information** about what catering will be present. This is needed on booking, with any changes communicated as soon as possible.

“

If I was on a five-hour journey and heard beforehand that there wasn't going to be catering, I would take my own [food]. If I heard there wasn't going to be a toilet, I would not travel.

”

Workshop participant, long distance leisure journey

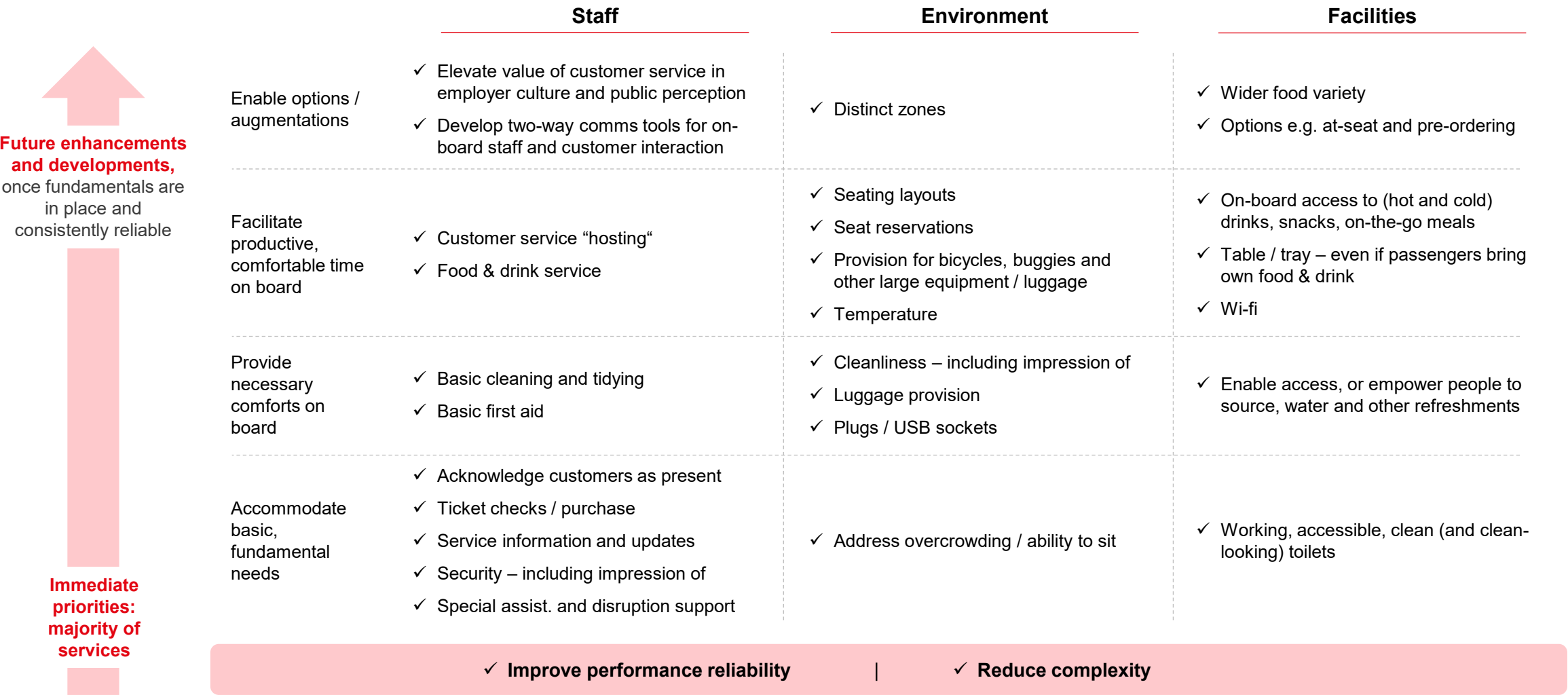


Final thoughts

And higher-level themes
in customers' priorities
for the on-board experience

Current expectations for the on-board experience are quite basic (and low): rail users feel that **industry must get the basics right, before enhancements / innovations**

...and their priorities hierarchy is:



Some key themes ran through all the topics discussed in the workshop, as critical in making the on board experience work well for customers

Public perception and rail reform

Rail users and employees have had a turbulent relationship with the industry during 2023: through multiple instances of industrial action, a long consultation around ticket offices, and a major government decision on HS2.

All of these have held a high public profile, and have affected public perceptions of rail. This is all on top of already very **mixed impressions, especially around reliability, complexity and capacity**, and follows a difficult period for everyone during the pandemic.

This community, representing **users broadly, are ready for a change.**

Where they are aware of the planned industry transition to **Great British Railways, customers see this as a real opportunity, want to see noticeable improvements to service overall**

This comes in the context that current expectations for journeys are often fairly basic. As part of transitioning and improving for the long term, customers want to see the fundamentals improved, consistently, before many “enhancements” are introduced.

Presence of staff

This community of **rail users cannot emphasise strongly enough how important staff are to them**, at all stages of a train journey.

To customers, helpful, available, accessible staff are a cornerstone in providing a safe, informed, comfortable journey, as well as facilitating key practical tasks like ticket compliance and catering where this is provided.

Face to face, visible staff may not be needed in practice by most passengers, most of the time, but **there is a strong desire to know that staff are physically present nearby, and are contactable and capable, for a variety of important needs.**

Consistency across the network

Where there is negative sentiment about the on-board experience (and other aspects of rail travel), this is often caused or exacerbated by variations at different times of day, on different types of service, and with different operators.

Customers feel they do not reliably know what to expect – so they can’t plan (for toilets, food, etc.), and that when parts of the experience do go wrong, this is handled differently in different scenarios.

Having multiple operators is not necessarily an inherent issue, but **more standardisation, minimum levels of accountability, and better integration and communication across different operators would make a real difference to rail users.**

Wider social context

Consider that **some of the issues raised** (e.g. toilet provision, luggage storage, accessibility generally) **are likely to become more salient as the population continues to age.**

Accommodating these needs now will ideally also allow for some future expansion.

(Feedback for a number of topics indicated that **First Class may have had its day** on many types of train service)



Participants in this community rarely use First Class and question its relevance

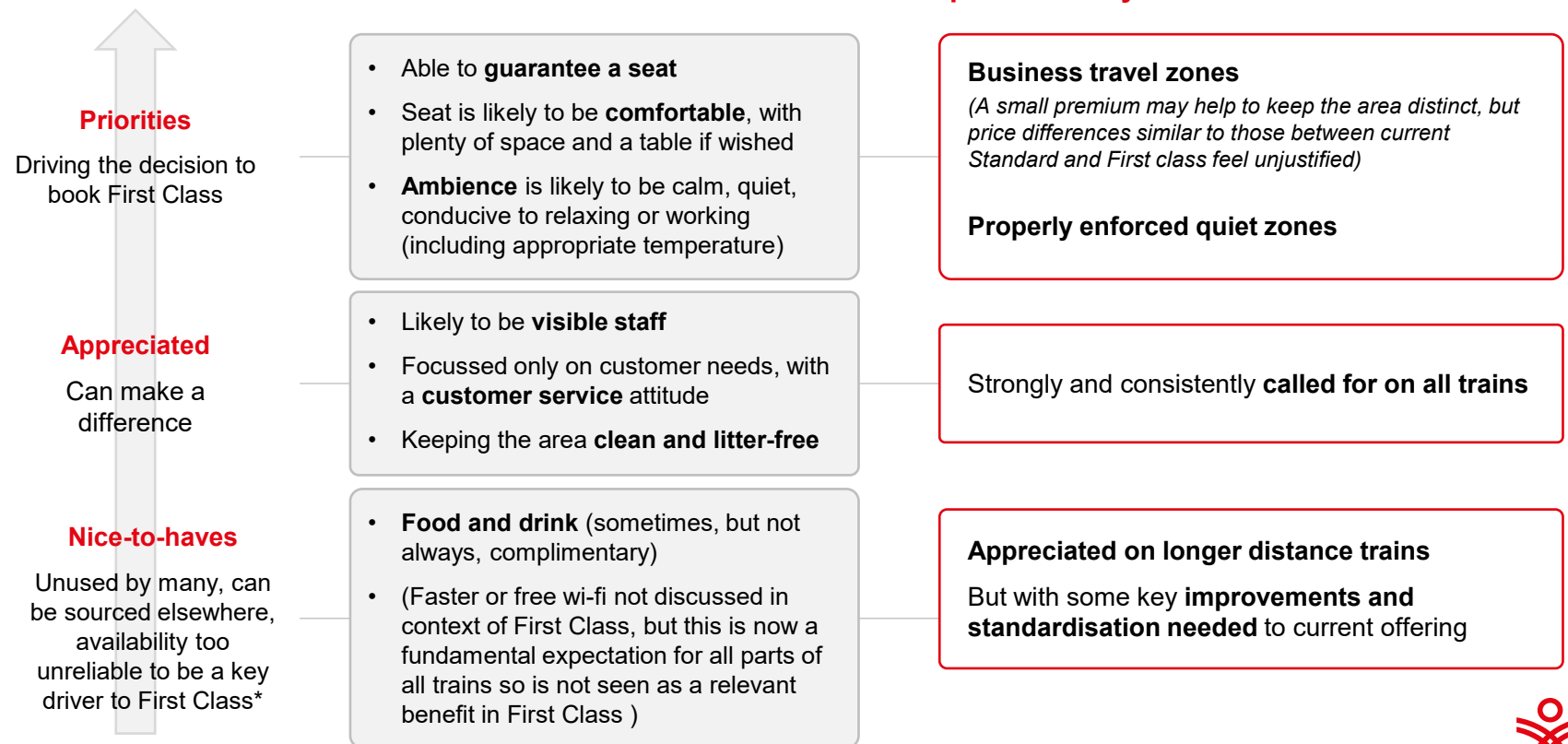
When they do, it is **appreciated and enjoyed**

...but it is commonly entered into as a **novelty**, often where a cheaper ticket has been secured, and with little intention of repeating it often

For most, **drawbacks of First Class outweigh potential benefits**

- Seen as **outdated and elitist**
- Big on-board priorities for customers are having sufficient seating capacity, and visible, accessible staff – First Class is seen as **turning these fundamentals into a luxury**, which feels unacceptable

When people do book First Class, the factors in this decision are typically:



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).

We work to make a difference for all transport users.

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