

Shaping Rail's Future: Customer Community

Feedback report: May 2026

Looking to the future of rail



The Customer Community: 2025-26

Following the successful community insight programme which ran from February 2023 to April 2024, and again from July 2024 to June 2025, this is the third community of rail users brought together by Transport Focus and the Customer & Revenue Growth Team to help inform the future of rail travel in Britain



A unique vehicle for engagement

- ✓ Hear users' experiences and opinions of rail travel in Britain
- ✓ Identify strengths, weaknesses, and improvements
- ✓ Involve customers in potential solutions and new ideas to help shape the future of rail



40 rail users

representing
diverse needs &
experiences



Sep 2025 to
March 2026



Using flexible, engaging research methods

- ✓ Online research platform for continuous interaction
 - Feedback on a given topic each month
 - Via activities using video, text, images, polls
 - Participants work individually, interacting with a moderator, and each other
- ✓ Face to face workshops to discuss topics further, generate ideas, and explore proposed concepts

In March 2026 the community reflected on the topics they had explored during the project, and what it all means for the railway and GBR in the near future



Their **priorities for the railway** from this point on



The **parts of the industry that they feel are worth preserving, nurturing**, even shouting about



What they had learned about the rail industry... and **what the wider public might usefully know more about** (to benefit either other passengers, or public attitudes towards railway itself)

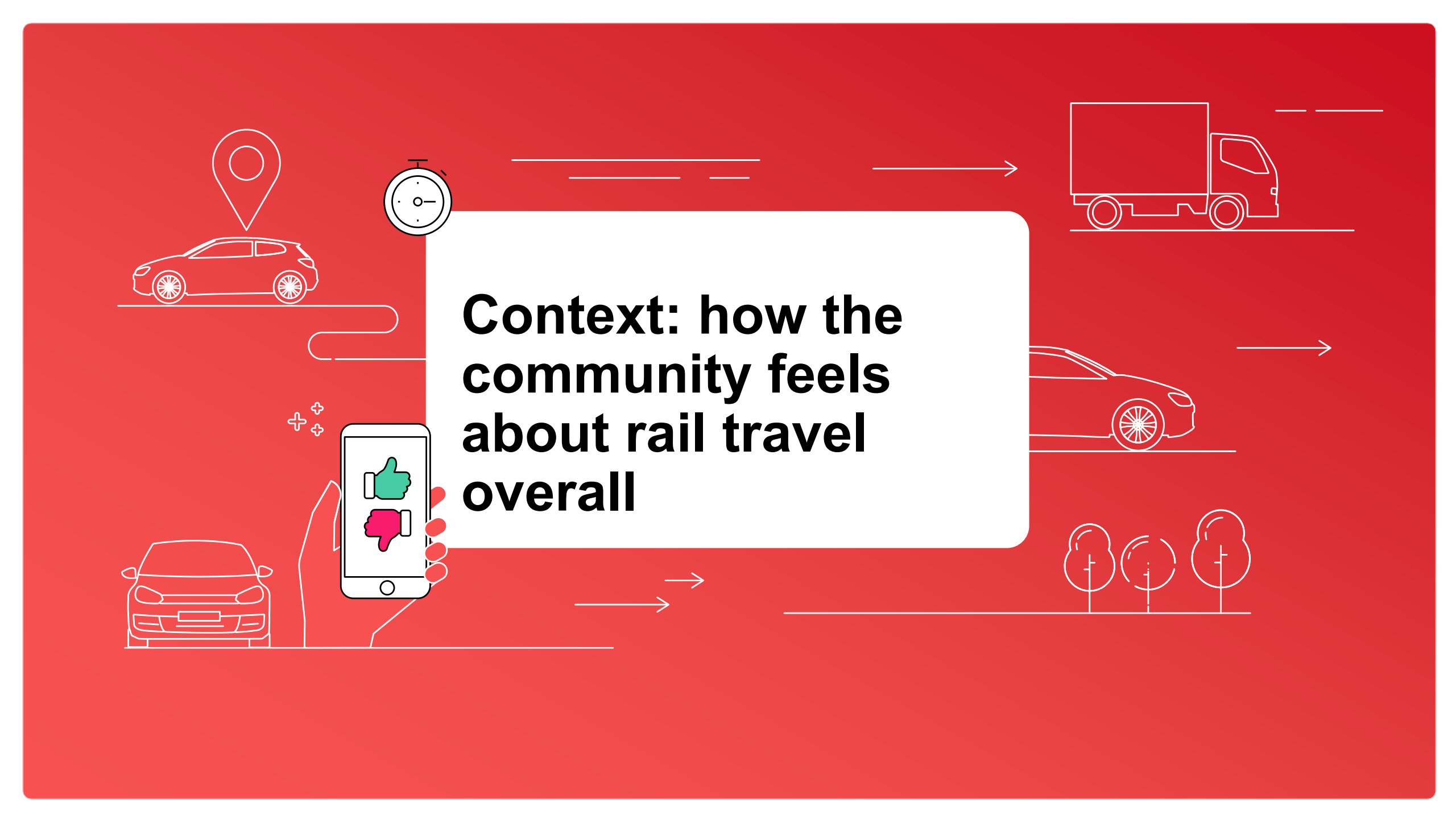


This report takes all of this feedback together to re-summarise what is important to rail users. **This is intended to inform GBR's customer-first ambitions.**

It also looks back to similar points expressed by a previous cohort of the community, reflecting on the similarities in what matters to passengers over this time.

They also fed back about their experience of being part of the community.

This is not reported on here but is used by the research team when setting up subsequent rounds of this project with different community cohorts.

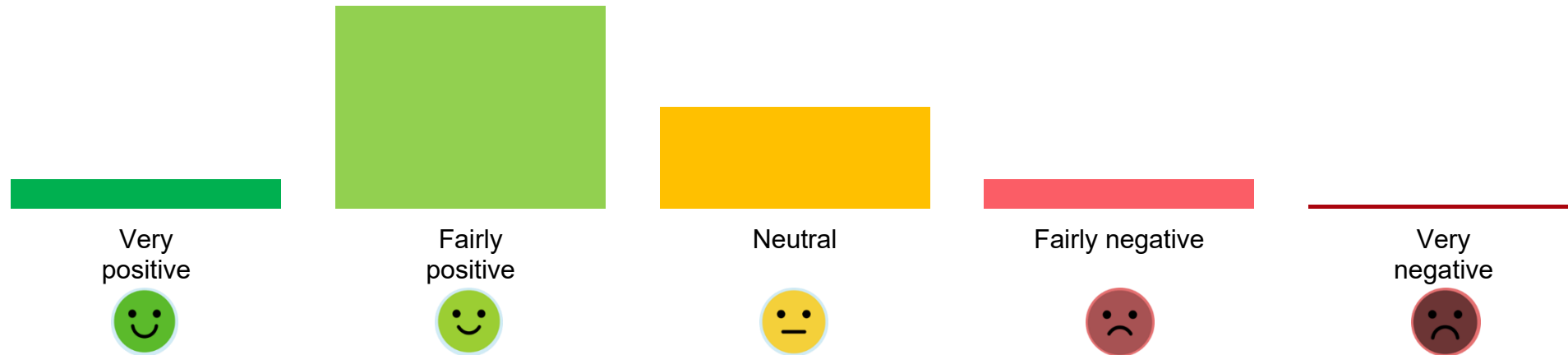


Context: how the community feels about rail travel overall

Most in the community came to the study feeling at least fairly positive about train travel overall, though there are some mixed opinions and experiences

This remained similar across the year, and similar to previous community cohorts

How you feel about travelling by train at the moment: A snapshot
(Summary 2025-26, %)



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 responses 2025-26 (80)

Note: individual participants respond once per quarter, over two quarters covered in the 2025-26 community; total number of participants in each quarter is 40

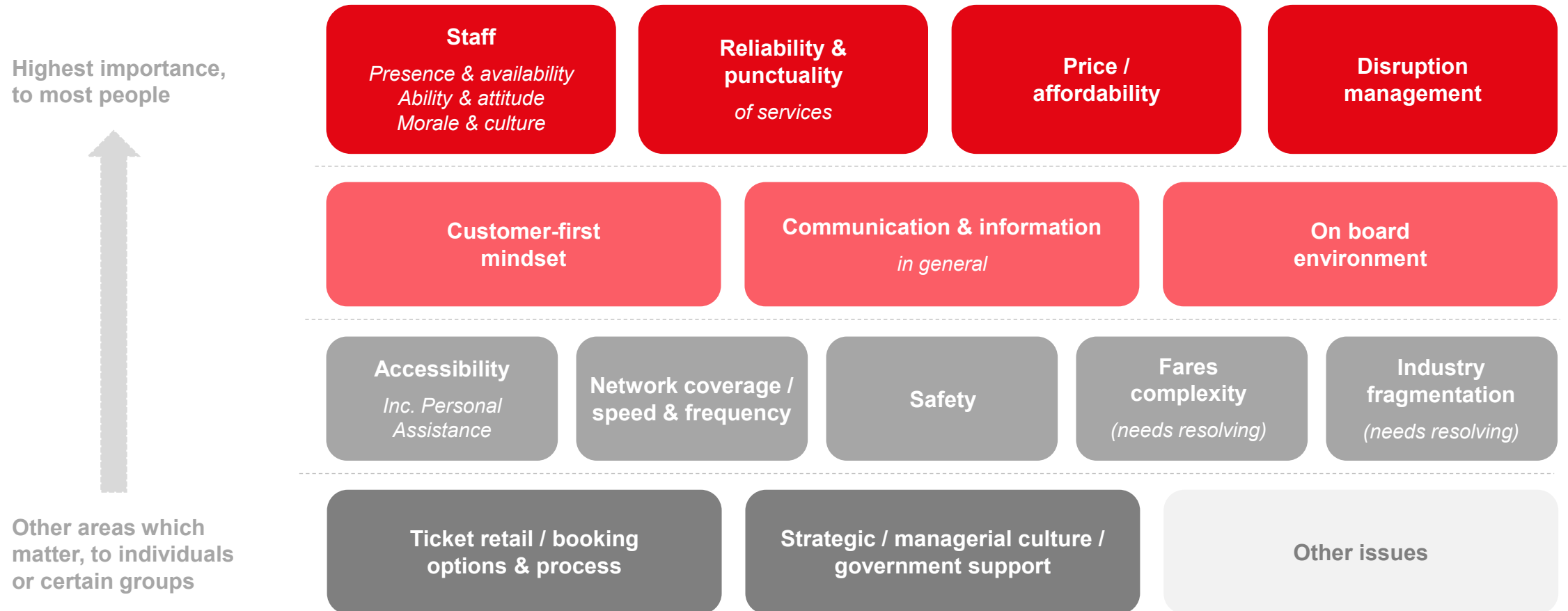


What matters most for the future of rail?

The customer perspective

A range of issues stand out as important to passengers, having an impact on their experience and perception of the railway

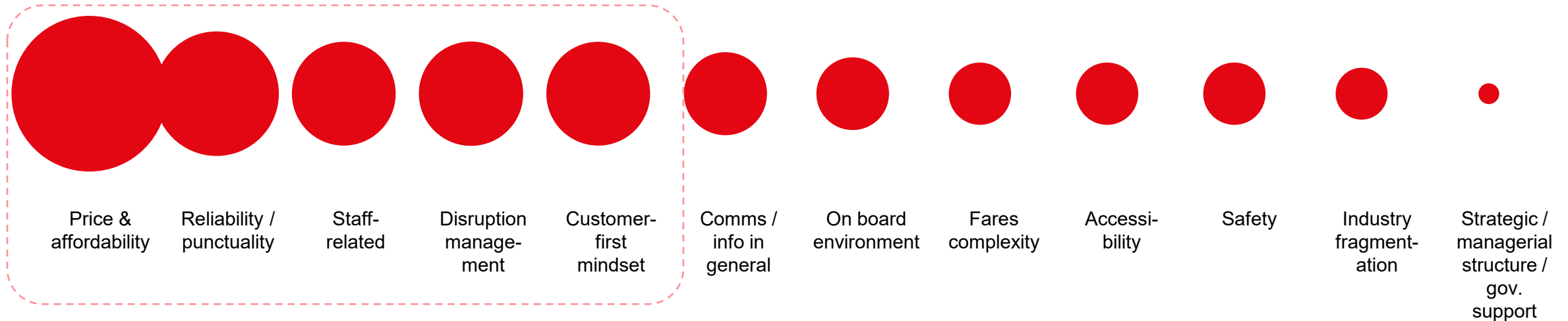
At the end of the 2025-26 programme, the community was asked about their priorities for improvement, and things they think are worth celebrating. Taken together, these can be considered the factors that matter, summarised into four tiers of importance:



Of these important issues, customers' biggest **priorities for improvement** are around the **price** of travel, **reliability & disruption management**, **staff** and a general principle of **customer-centricity**

Priorities for the industry

Bubble sizes provide an indication of the relative frequency with which key themes arose in this qualitative feedback. Note that items towards the right hand side are not unimportant, but rather they are relatively less important. There is also some overlap between themes here; for example staff presence is a priority area in its own right, but the reasons for wanting to see more staff can also be linked to needing better information, accessibility, safety perceptions, and so on.



Despite developments in plans for railway reform, and the industry's changes and activities over recent years, **these priorities have not changed from passengers' perspective.**

Very similar issues were identified and prioritised by a previous customer community cohort, in 2024.

This is demonstrated further in the second half of this report.

For some members of this community, many of these issues are rooted in (insufficient or misguided) government support, and management structures and cultures.

This more strategic perspective may be inflated among this now somewhat more enlightened group, but does also exist among the wider public (as evidenced in the fact that some of these participants had similar views at the outset of the study).

While individuals have specific areas that they praise about the railway today, three main **areas of success** are often agreed upon

Existing rail users want to see these nurtured – and even talked up in public where appropriate, to encourage rail travel



Front line staff

While there is a **strong plea from customers for the railway to employ more staff**, and to facilitate their ability to help passengers more, **many also praise the attitude and work of the staff that they do encounter today**.

Seeing or interacting with staff plays a big role when passengers experience the railway in a positive way.

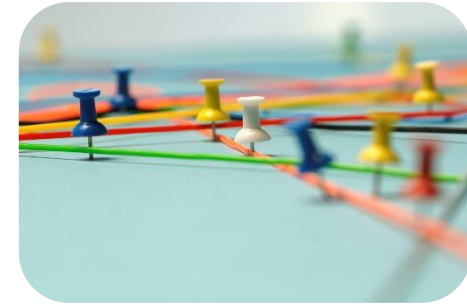


Delay Repay

Customers want to see real improvements to the communication around disruption, **and the way they are treated** when things go wrong.

However, one of the perceived (potential) strengths in handling delays is the Delay Repay scheme. It certainly has some flaws, as has been explored in detail by the customer community and other work, but the principle is strongly appreciated, and is highly praised when the process goes well.

If the Delay Repay experience can be raised and standardised, this is a highly valued feature that could strengthen rail's overall travel proposition



Facilitating travel across Britain

Network & infrastructure | Frequency & speed

A key attraction of rail travel is its **relative speed and the ease of getting to and from different parts of the country**, especially between cities and larger towns.

Many participants highlighted this, reflecting the reasons they said they are drawn to using trains, which they gave at the outset of their time on this project.

They appreciate that **the railway opens up the country, facilitating activities that are important to them** (social contact, exploration, work opportunity), **and to society**.

Long distance travel in particular also has great **potential to uses time productively** – either to relax or work.

Celebrating the successes of the railway: some of customers' own words



Front line staff

I would want to thank staff... for doing their job well, professionally and kindly. It is often not an easy job and sometimes puts them at risk. More staff would spread the load for them and improve passenger experience.

Penelope

Most staff are excellent and try to cope even when things go wrong. I hope that ...transfers [when GBR is in place] and is suitably rewarded.

Ellen

The staff ... are often some of the most helpful people I've met ...and they should get credited for this - they do good work and keep the rails running.

James

...many of the workers ...do a brilliant job; they are simply stuck between a rock and a hard place for reasons often out of their reach, late trains and frustrations about cost etc.

Matthew



Delay Repay

Delay Repay [is something that works well today]. I think it's a great system.

Isaac

The principle that passengers can claim compensation for delays is a strong, positive policy that shows accountability and should be preserved and made even easier to use.

Aria

[There is] Good communication most of the time, and in the most part the apps are easy to use and it can be straightforward enough to get a refund for delays/cancellations.

Wyatt



Facilitating travel across Britain

When it works well, it works really well. Fast, direct routes between major cities are a big strength and make train travel one of the easiest options. The overall coverage of the network is strong. You can get to most places without too much difficulty, which is something that should definitely be protected.

Arjun

England has a good rail network, and it is easy to get around from hubs like London.

Alexander

...the modernisation of the South Wales transport system has been a generation in planning and is coming along very nicely; the growth in passenger number post-covid; the electric trains on the network.

Lucas

Participants' reflections on what they had learned throughout the project reinforce that there may be merit in sharing some of rail's successes and challenges, publicly



Feedback from the community indicates that **there is a well of public interest in how things work on the railway**, and what goes on behind the scenes.

Exposure to things like the challenges and considerations behind ticketing systems, customer service provision, and what different staff roles exist, was **fascinating** to many – and **created a stronger appreciation for the railway** than individuals had felt previously.

Of course, this will not be true for everyone*. Nevertheless, there are certainly some – even many – rail users out there who might be open to having some increased consciousness around what is involved.



Comms will need to be appropriate, relevant and carefully planned, but it may be beneficial in some circumstances for the industry to draw attention to its work and its challenges, to help create connection with customers and the wider public.

*I have... been unaware of the difficulties and complexities of running trains. ...I've become much more alert to the good, not so good, and also the excellent aspects of ...railway management... **Sometimes the public needs reminding of the benefits of train travel.***

Penelope

*I couldn't believe that **the train system was so subsidised by the government! It completely changed my mind** about the ticket prices.*

Matthew

*I was pleasantly surprised by GBR in **how willing they are to change the services for the better... Fingers crossed for a brighter future.***

Michael

*How different people's experiences are of trains. **As an able-bodied person you don't always realise the difficulties other people can have with ordinary tasks like commuting.***

Grace

***Not enough is done to celebrate the ...rail system** ...the negative keyboard warriors shine a negative light but the reality is that we have a highly reliable network.*

Liam

*What struck me most is that the railway is like a living system: all the moving parts – people, machines, technology, schedules – have to work in harmony. **It's impressive how much goes on "invisible to the public"** to make the service feel smooth and reliable.*

John

*...how companies approach behind the scenes was interesting; like **they actually have plans/procedures even though it doesn't seem it or a lot of it is hidden.***

James

*This is a group of people who have explored aspects of the railway for six months, and so may have a heightened level of engagement. By nature, they are also people who want to share their views and so are likely to also be interested in where their feedback is going. However, they joined the community as representative cross-section of rail users, had no special prior knowledge, and included a mix of people with more positive and negative attitudes towards rail travel.

The areas that the community feels would be worthwhile for the railway to talk about in public fall into three main themes



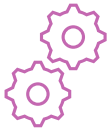
Most important is to talk about the **services and initiatives which are (already) set up to benefit passengers**



- ✓ Passenger rights & what they are entitled to or can be offered
- ✓ (especially during disruption, e.g. options for ticket acceptance elsewhere, eligibility to use a taxi, etc.)
- ✓ The existence of initiatives like Railcards, discounts & cheaper ticket options, Passenger Assistance, Delay Repay, etc.

Inform passengers effectively so that they can get the best out of the railway.

In addition to benefiting passengers in a practical way when they need it, a better understanding of these points has potential to support overall trust in the railway, and improve perceptions of fairness and inclusiveness.



Also of interest to many is the **work that the industry is doing to run an effective service, and to improve**



- ✓ Safety management, reliability, timetabling, new infrastructure & maintenance work being done, and tech & innovations being explored and developed, both behind the scenes and in view
- ✓ The staff and roles involved
- ✓ Where appropriate, letting people understand why decisions are made (e.g. during disruption), and how investment is spent

Demonstrate that the railway is not complacent and is not “simply” about generating income and profit.

This is not about providing excuses for what might appear to be compromises, but about transparency, reassurance, humanising the industry, and showing that it is relevant, up to date and has the right focus



Some feel it is worthwhile to talk up **the value & enjoyment of rail as a mode of transport**



- ✓ Environmental benefits (over car, air, etc.)
- ✓ Opportunity for relaxed / productive time spent
- ✓ Exploration, connectivity & travel

Give people a reason to use the railway, and to feel positive about doing so



In addition, some also want to see more education on **how the railway is funded, and the implications of travelling without the correct ticket**



Feedback from this community indicates that this is undeniably important, but its relative importance may be somewhat inflated among this group, which had very recently discussed revenue protection issues in detail at a full-day workshop.

The full report on their feedback about dealing with ticketless travel, including more detail on educating the public, is available separately.



**Consistent
feedback and
priorities from rail
users over time**

To end the **2023-24** community, members had reflected on rail's future in a similar way. As part of this they gave their expectations about the impact of GBR specifically.

With exposure to some of GBR ideas, most were tentatively optimistic about rail travel in the future



It is good to see that the industry is moving in the right direction and that it recognises the importance of happy customers. I anticipate using the train more often in the future

Clive, 2023-24



*[This is] an oak tree growing from an acorn... [to] signify the railway... Since the start of rail travel, the system became great – represented by a great oak tree. Then it declined for various reasons... Beeching ... 80's industrial unrest... Now it's at the start of a new growth – the acorn that fell from the original tree. **The future is bright, but we're only at the start of that journey.***

Simon, 2023-24

Participants were asked to provide an image to represent how they feel about the future of rail travel



Where there is optimism, the causes of this are similar to the areas that the 2025-26 community cohort highlighted as worth celebrating:

Acknowledgement that things need to improve

I'm happy that problems that exist are [being] looked into and discussed, to find ways of solving [them].

Anne, 2023-24

Customer-centric attitude

...there is need for a wholesale culture change that the passenger is at the center of services, not the profit motive.

Gavin, 2023-24

Emphasis on staff

I think if the price is right for trains and there is more visibility from staff ...this can only be a positive thing.

Marie, 2023-24

Standardisation and consistency

I really like the idea of consistent standards... the public ...lack faith in the disjointed ...rail system.

Simon, 2023-24

These points might be taken as key ideas for the railway to talk about, and to inform strategy – providing this is credibly backed up in practice

Inevitably, participation in this study may have influenced positive outlooks like this, with some heightened awareness of GBR's existence and some of its plans and ideas.

Nevertheless, the industry will now need to **use the learnings here about what matters to customers, to drive wider public perceptions and build enthusiasm for rail travel...** and to deliver on the expectations that reform will rightly raise

“

We are finally admitting there are issues and addressing them, it gives me hope.

Feels like a new dawn, if things are implemented correctly.

Please don't prove me wrong.

”

Rob, 2023-24 customer community cohort

Despite their tentative optimism around GBR, rail users are naturally, understandably hesitant, keen to see improvements in practice

Optimism triggered by the potential of rail reform is often tempered with trepidation until ambitions are borne out in practice



I see that there are good intentions and willingness to improve the industry, but I am skeptical about implementation

Anna, 2023-24

I feel positive that [the industry is] taking steps in the right direction to improve services. Time will tell how the measures are implemented in practice and how effective they are in reality

Jay, 2023-24



And their priorities for the railway in the short (and longer) term future remain strikingly similar over the course of this community research programme to date, despite government and industry changes....

Current experience and wider public discourse mean some remain cynical

This sentiment grows when there are salient negative headlines, e.g. around industrial action, changes to infrastructure plans (e.g. 2023's curtailment of HS2), etc.



The rail system seems to be going backwards, [with] more strikes pending, less trains, less carriages, higher prices!... [The] railways [are] as predictable as the weather.

Colin, 2023-24



“

Priorities are what they
have always been.

Reliability, efficiency and
cost effectiveness of the
service.

”

Riz, travels for business & leisure

2023-24 customer community cohort

Improvement priorities in customers' own words: the price of tickets

Examples of customer attitudes, from the 2025-26 community

...provide a "you get what you pay for" service. **Either lower the price and remain inefficient or raise prices and service...**

Isaac, 2025-26

The prices of tickets have to be reduced. **It's absurd that an internal flight from London to the north of England can be much cheaper than a train ticket.**

Ava, 2025-26

I would say the pricing needs to be looked into and **improved to suit all sorts of different passengers.**

Emily, 2025-26

Reflecting similar sentiments given by a separate group of customers from the 2023-24 community

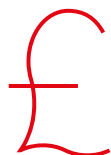
Keeping costs down to help with the cost of living crisis as everyone is struggling now. And **those of us who take the train for pleasure and not work will have to start cutting back if things don't get better any time soon.**

Claire, 2023-24

Despite all the carefully thought-out changes, the elephant in the room is the cost of travel... I don't see how this can change when the key objective is to make profit... **It looks like there will be some positive changes... [but] unfortunately the cost of train travel puts me off ...and I usually only travel this way when arranged through work.**

This is a shame as I would like to use my car less.

Rachel, 2023-24



Complexity and variability in pricing is also a big issue for customers, as seen throughout this study across the three years it has run so far, but overall, the **absolute cost is a major concern, and a priority for many**

Improvement priorities in customers' own words: reliable journeys

Examples of customer attitudes, from the 2025-26 community

Better day-to-day reliability.
Fewer last-minute cancellations, more realistic timetables, and consistent staffing at key stations.

Aria, 2025-26

Make trains run on time so people can rely on them.

Omar, 2025-26

If I worked in the rail industry, my top priorities would be improving communication, reliability, and customer support. Delays often leave passengers confused, so I would ensure clear, regular updates. **I would also focus on reducing cancellations and improving punctuality, as this affects daily life.** Lastly, I would make sure staff are always available to help.

Maulika, 2025-26

Reflecting similar sentiments given by a separate group of customers from the 2023-24 community

I even consider coach to travel in the UK now, as it is much cheaper, **more reliable & sometimes quicker**

Colin, 2023-24

...**disruptions and delays... is the most important thing** to most customers

Anna, 2023-24

Better accountability and transparency over who is getting contracts, **better public scrutiny on those choices and their performance**, especially around delays which are becoming laughable.

Mike, 2023-24

They need to prioritise reliability..., by ensuring drivers get their raises, the train stock aren't ancient ...on the whole **rail is underfunded, not enough government support is given to improve services, trains are old and delays are inevitable**

David, 2023-24

Improvement priorities in customers' own words: managing disruption when it does happen

(This is where a **customer-first mindset** is most needed, and most sharply missed when it is lacking).

Examples of customer attitudes, from the 2025-26 community

...my top priorities would be **improving communication during delays** and making services more reliable...
[and] **making the compensation process quicker and easier...**
Passengers should feel informed and supported, especially when things don't go to plan.

Savannah, 2025-26

Proactive messaging - let me know about updates to my journey before I am at the station/on the train
...**Clear, and consistent approach to... compensation,** each provider is different and follows a different process, different thresholds etc.

Luke, 2025-26

The first thing would be **fixing communication during disruption. Not just more updates, but better ones.** Clear, timely, and actually telling people what to do next.
...**Delays will happen, but there needs to be more ownership when they do.** That means **clearer responsibility, quicker decisions, and making sure passengers are properly supported** without having to push for it.

Arjun, 2025-26

Consistency in delivering on-time services with acceptable levels of customer interaction; **ensuring when things go wrong the customers are updated regularly** with an appropriate level of information...

Benjamin, 2025-26

Reflecting similar sentiments given by a separate group of customers from the 2023-24 community

Delays should be a big priority and helping people when things go wrong especially people on long journeys who may be stranded and [have] no idea of possible delays which could affect plans. Keeping people informed is key

Katherine, 2023-24

Improvement priorities in customers' own words: the role of staff

Participants' priorities relating to staff are focussed in three areas:

Presence, effectiveness (their ability, knowledge and attitude), and employment culture

Examples of customer attitudes, from the 2025-26 community

*Have the counters open and **manned by humans**. Have **staff on the platforms helping customers**.*

Anaya, 2025-26

*More **accessible staff** at smaller stations...*

Michael, 2025-26

***Neuro-divergency training** for all staff...*

Lucas, 2025-26

*...making sure employees had on-going **training in the customer care area - that they were well versed enough to understand and handle situations**.*

Simon, 2025-26

*...Set up programmes of staff training to **ensure that staff are aware of what is expected of them and that they have adequate backup and support** to achieve these objectives.*

Elijah, 2025-26

Reflecting similar sentiments given by a separate group of customers from the 2023-24 community

*I think the main priorities are to knuckle down on customer service and **making sure that staff members are available at all times** - this seems rare in this day and age.*

Michelle, 2023-24

*...recognise that happy customers are at the heart of any business proposition... [and] available staff at key areas and happy staff on board the train would make a huge difference... **attitude is important to me***

Clive, 2023-24

*...sort staff out first so that there are no more strikes ... **If staff are happy and ...proud to work for GBRTT, then providing a better service to customers will usually follow** through and will be easier to achieve.*

Sarah, 2023-24

(Specific feedback in 2024 on the concept of GBR also highlighted the importance of getting the public perception right)

Ultimately, when they understand the role of GBR (or at least are exposed to some of its ideas), members of the public have a positive impression of its concept and purpose. But be aware of the way this can be interpreted....

GBR should aim to avoid this:

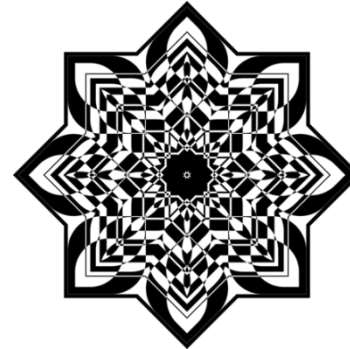


“Driving forth ...with clouds of hot air but strands of intention and substance following on”

There are a lot of good intentions...
The management structure, staffing and training need to be right in order to be able to deliver this, and **I was not always convinced that beneath the gloss there was adequate substance.** It remains to be seen.....

Fiona, 2023-24

And instead seek to position the railways more like this:



I feel there has been a serious look at train travel - root and branch ...and some of the initiatives look ...exciting ...I believe [rail travel] is needed for environmental reasons...[but it] can only happen when train travel is made attractive enough.

...[when well run] it is complex but structured, creative and well considered. It is understated and methodical. It is not flashy with bells and whistles but just focused.

Riz, 2023-24

(Or this): *Reliably transporting people from A to B as is likely for most everyday rail users, beyond this study*



*[Rail] does a job, getting me from A to B. **I just need the functionality of that, nothing more, nothing less.***

Nigel, 2023-24

In summary



Customer perspectives on rail travel for the future: summary

- Many of the ideas discussed through the study to date contribute to the overall experience and perception of rail travel, but **the most important things to customers are:**
 - ✓ **The reliability of services and what happens when things go wrong**
 - ✓ **Affordability**
 - ✓ **A demonstrably customer-first** (rather than logistics or profit) **mindset and behaviour**. As part of this, customers strongly prioritise the **effective deployment of staff** to aid all aspects of their experience.
 - ✓ (And underpinning all of this, is **government-level commitment** to driving and facilitating a better railway)
 - **These priorities have not changed** over the last three years of this research programme, despite changes (or re-commitments) in government ambitions, the publication of rail reform plans, and the start of industry change in practice.
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- In addition to these ultimate priorities from a customer perspective, the industry should **recognise the strong benefits that existing passengers see in rail, and seek to protect, build and capitalise on these**. This could directly benefit passengers themselves, as well as improving attitudes towards rail travel more generally, and includes:
 - ✓ Celebrating, nurturing (and ideally increasing) **the contribution that front line staff make**
 - ✓ Making people aware of the **existing services and initiatives that passengers can benefit from** (Delay Repay, Railcards, Passenger Assistance, etc. – albeit that all of these initiatives do have flaws and are not delivered consistently today)
 - ✓ Consider drawing attention, in a relevant way, to the **possibilities opened up by rail**, as well as to the complex, rigorous and continuous **(team)work that goes on behind the scenes**, to deliver this
-
- From a user perspective, **the plans for GBR can make the future of rail feel cautiously bright** – where they have some exposure to ideas and ambitions, and are given credible reason to have faith in its good intentions
 - **But current experience and perceptions of the railway mean that there is also much cynicism and reserved judgement: the industry and GBR will need to work hard to prove itself, both in practice and in perception.**

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.