

Shaping Rail's Future:

Customer Community 2024-25

Face to face workshop- March 2025

Budgeting & passenger priorities



The Customer Community: 2024-25

Following the successful community insight programme which ran from February 2023 to April 2024, this is the second community of rail users brought together by Transport Focus and Great British Railways Transition 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



12 months

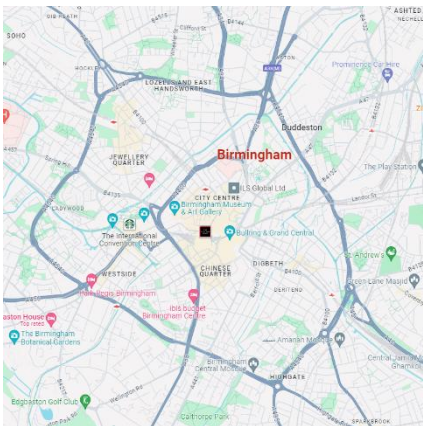
from July 2024



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 2025, participants and colleagues came together, in person, to discuss various aspects of rail experience and plans for the future



Saturday 22nd
March 2025



Central
Birmingham

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



**Detailed discussions and workshop
sessions on:**

**Payment &
fulfilment
methods**

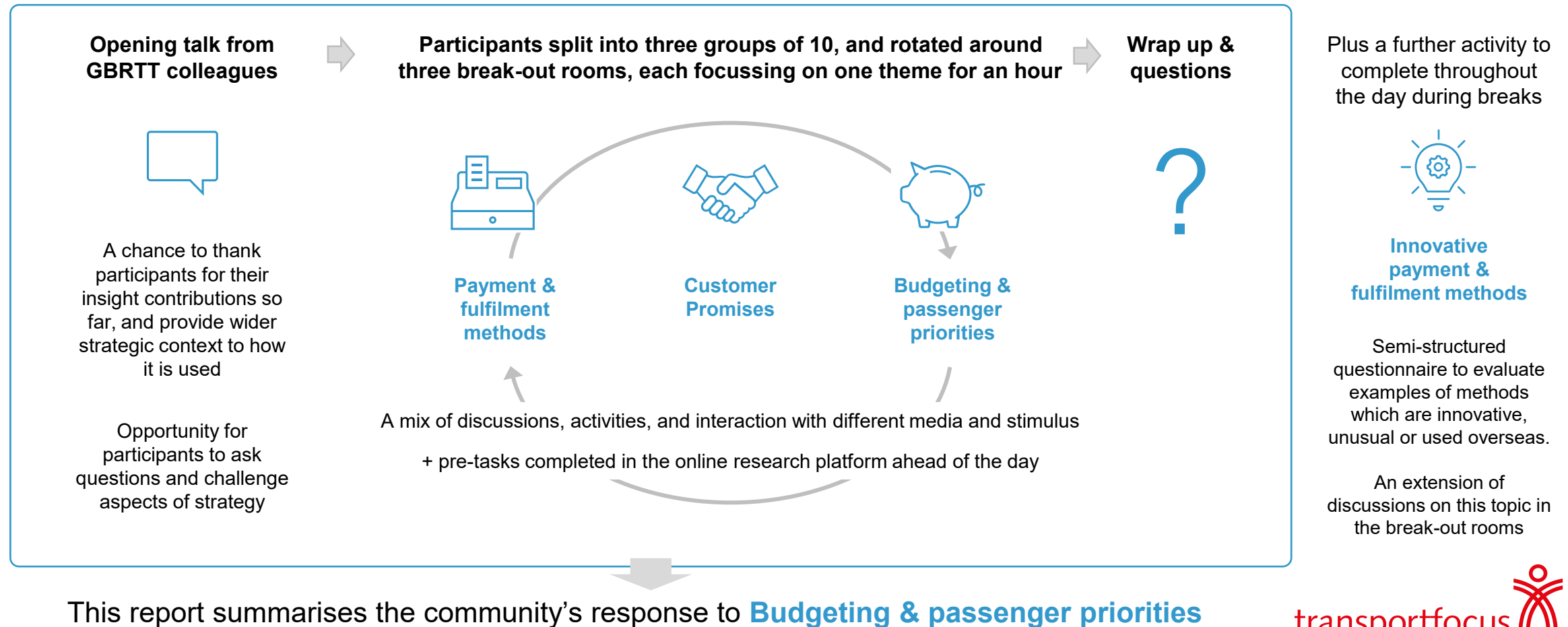
**Customer
Promises**

**Budgeting &
passenger
priorities**



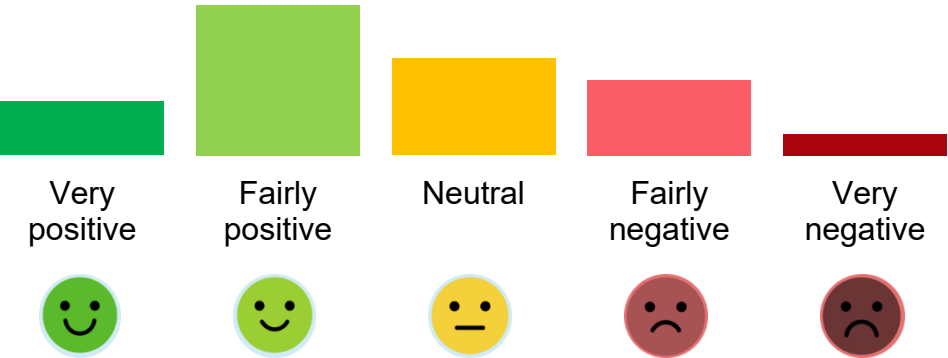
The workshop: a chance to engage face to face with the community, and hear richer discussion around customer needs to complement their online feedback

Outline of the day:

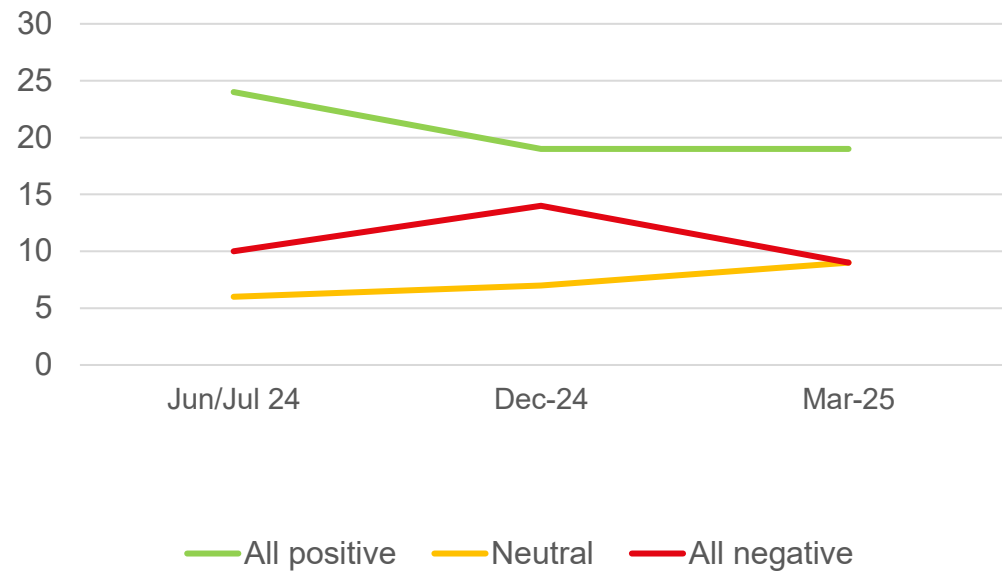


Some context: most in the community were feeling fairly positive or neutral about the railway in general at this point

How you feel about travelling by train at the moment: A snapshot
(March 2025)



Trend so far



Base: all community participants, March 2025 (37)

Budgeting & passenger priorities



Budgeting & passenger priorities



GBRTT wished to understand what passengers felt the railway should prioritise if it was to be genuinely passenger focussed.

To begin with the moderator summarised what we had heard in online tasks. This was to refresh their memories of what they had said, and to check we had interpreted it correctly – and to pre-empt the issues related to cost of tickets, so the subsequent discussion would be broader than this.



People liked the fact that rail could be very efficient – covering a long distance quickly and avoiding roadworks and traffic disruption and because you generally arrive in a city or town centre with easy onward connections (if needed) and do not have to worry about parking costs or time.



The other main attraction of rail is that it can be a comfortable / relaxing / stress-free experience involving lower effort and engagement than driving. When the experience is like this – it creates time to do other things such as work or read or watch TV/ films.



However, hurdles to using rail can be a result of a lack of convenience (routes or stations unavailable or unsuitable timetables) a distrust in the reliability of services, a lack of comfort on board trains.



And significantly impacting decisions around whether to use rail is the cost of tickets – particularly if booked at the last minute or if travelling in a group.

Spontaneously
suggested
improvements

Participants were asked for their two biggest priorities for improving the railways for them personally

- Wide range of issues came through – and even when the same topic was mentioned it was often expressed quite differently. This reinforces the importance of phrasing in customer language when communicating changes.
- Cost was most mentioned in some way – around half of participants had this in one of their priorities.
- Otherwise, themes emerged around improving the journey experience (whether punctuality, staff assistance, cleanliness, accessibility or information) and other broader issues such as around fairness of ticket pricing, expansion of routes and services, and consistency and compassion / fairness of approach.

When their individual priorities are grouped into themes, there are sixteen separate areas – with cost most commonly mentioned



Black numbers in bottom right of boxes show number of mentions around this topic

Examples of what they said

Ticket conditions – so many classes of ticket, there should be fewer classes and types of ticket and conditions should be clearer and more standardised, e.g. off-peak/peak is the same wherever you go.

We need to have more information, more people to explain to us how to make a journey, we need help.

I'm visually impaired – signage on the railway can be awful.



People there to help with luggage and with children, didn't see one railway person on my journey this morning, no one to ask me for a ticket or anything.

People need more contact on the railway, especially when there is antisocial behaviour on trains.

Prioritising improvements



Then we introduced the concept of prioritising improvements

Participants were individually given 100 points to spend on making improvements and were given a 'price list' – full version in appendix, but summarised as:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Reliability (staff)	Eliminate industrial action	Reliability (resilience)	Reliability (electrification)	Increase frequency earlier/later	Increase staff numbers – customer service	Staff training in customer service	Improve passenger assist	Improve accessibility at stations/ on board	Reduce crowding (longer / more trains)
40	40	50	50	50	30	10	10	30	40

11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
Cleanliness / upkeep on board	Safety at stations	Safety on board	Enforce comfort extras	Refurbish trains to minimum standard	Parking at stations	Reduce complexity of tickets	Upgrade compensation policy	Improve overall sustainability
10	30	30	10	40	10	30	10	50

Most people chose 3 or 4 individual items from the list

- There was little consensus on items they selected.
- All but one item (security at stations) was chosen by at least one person.
- Generally, they chose two higher value items such as network expansion or improvement in reliability along with two or three lower value items, but there were no clear combinations.
- Various combinations were chosen by different people, for different reasons, depending on their own circumstances:
 - For instance, people with accessibility requirements generally wanted improved accessibility, Passenger Assist and staff availability.
 - People who lived in less well-served locations wanted more frequent services and for the network to be expanded.
- The next slide shows profile of items chosen.

Chosen most (5-9 people)	Cleanliness (9)	Enforce comfort extras / quiet carriages etc (staff to manage)	Reliability via operational efficiency	Refurbish all trains to minimum standard of comfort, space etc	Upgrade compensation policy (generous, compensate for out of pocket expenses) (5)
Chosen by 3-4 people	Reliability (resilience) (4)	Frequency / expand network	Improve staff training (pro-active, knowledgeable, courteous)	Ticket types - reduce complexity / number	Reduce industrial action (or reliability of staff resourcing?)
	Accessibility at stations (Passenger Assist)	Reduce crowding on board (longer / more frequent trains)	Safety on board	Free / discounted parking	Overall sustainability (3)
Rarely chosen (0-2) people	Increase number of staff (2)	Accessibility	Reliability - staff (Take responsibility for when errors are made)	Safety at station (0)	

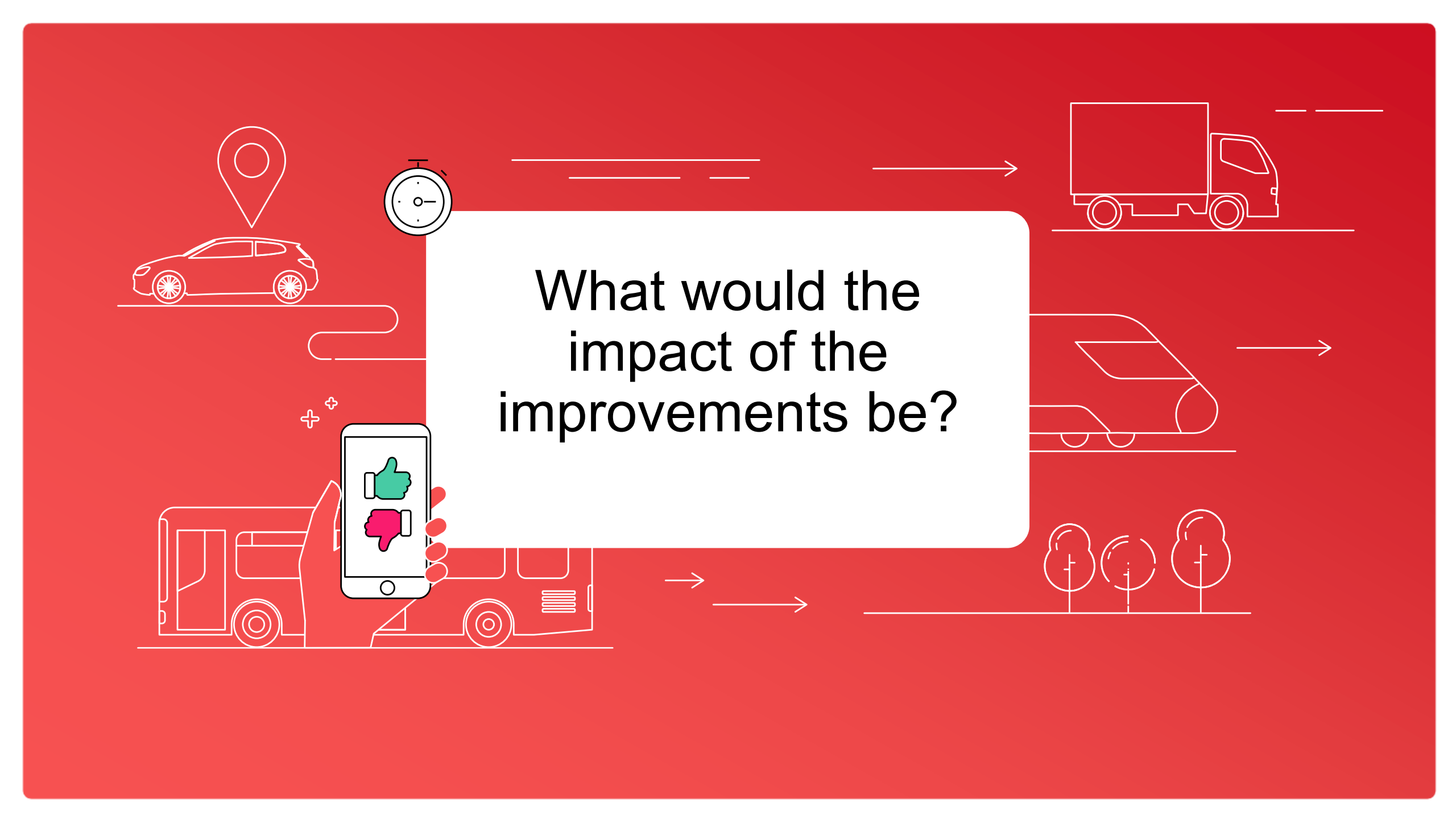
Note that this summary shows the relative priority of various ideas. It does not suggest that items at the lower end are unimportant, rather that they are relative priorities to a smaller number of people – indeed they may be absolutely critical to a relatively smaller group.

Items related to ticket cost and value for money

- There were discussions around fairness and consistency of fares as well as absolute prices.
- Feelings of unfairness when ticket prices are 'hiked up' close to travel time, and queries why the cost increases so much close to travel, especially if there are seats available.
- There is widely felt to be little compassion and understanding around ticket purchasing. It can feel particularly unfair when people have to pay exceptionally high fares to travel at the last minute such as when a relative is very ill or dies and then can't really afford the fare but have to pay it to be where they need to be – exacerbated when conditions on board aren't pleasant (e.g. no seat reservation).
- Some talked about a lack of flexibility or compassion or understanding when using their tickets in exceptional circumstances .
 - One person travelling in a group was taken ill and needed to get home, but was made to wait seven hours to get their booked train home, rather than being able to get an earlier one. Although there was some recognition that this could be open to abuse by some passengers.
- They queried the cost of rail fares compared with the cost of a flight 'to a better destination'.
- The value for money point is illustrated by examples such as services that are always overcrowded "Unfair to have someone sat on the floor who paid the same as someone sitting on a chair".

Cleanliness was most commonly chosen as a priority item and prompted much discussion

- It was a relatively low cost (10 points) item, so was frequently picked as a balancing item to spend the 100 points in total.
- For a couple of people, it was so important to them that they asked to spend two portions of 10 points to get extra cleanliness.
- In discussion, some chose it because it would be quick and easy to implement and could be very noticeable for every single journey. Some said that it would be a way to quickly show improvements could be made and would also demonstrate that passengers and their comfort matter.
- They talked about examples of being on trains where cleanliness had fallen short and the impact it had on their journeys.
- In view of the ticket prices, they talked about basic cleanliness being a minimum expectation – and how they wouldn't tolerate awful conditions in other sectors. Although they recognised that passengers also have a responsibility here, which should not be forgotten.
- For some, there was a tie-in with age and quality of rolling stock – but the comparison with hotels was discussed – would rather 'slightly faded and super-clean' than 'dirty but recently refurbished'.



What would the
impact of the
improvements be?

If their improvements were made, it opened up possibilities of making more journeys by rail

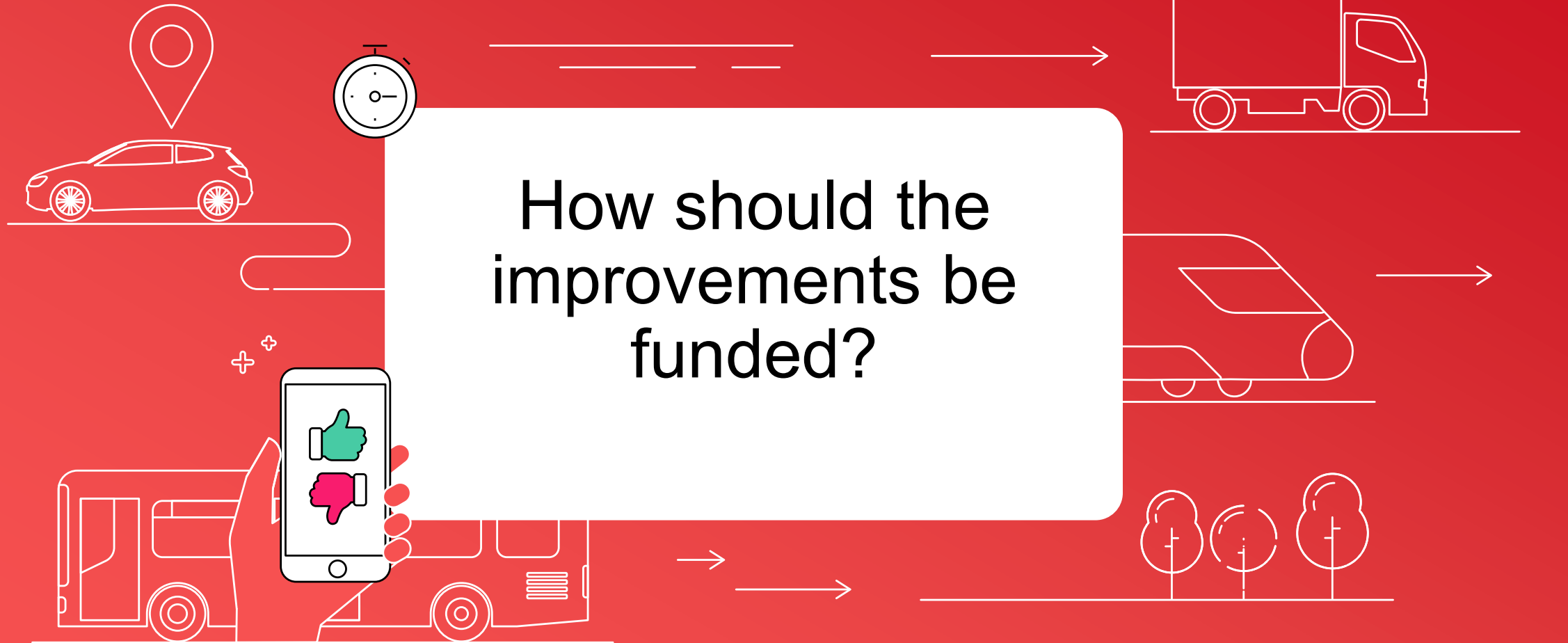
- Most agreed that if their chosen improvements were made, it would make the railway better for them personally, which would make them use it more and encourage others to use.
- Acknowledgement that after Covid, there is a need to encourage more people to use rail to increase revenues. But showing a passenger focus and real examples of improvements would help to achieve this.
- Even if their own chosen improvements weren't made, there was agreement that any improvements would be beneficial to all passengers.

“If it was more affordable I’d use it a hell of a lot more”

But the exercise was challenging

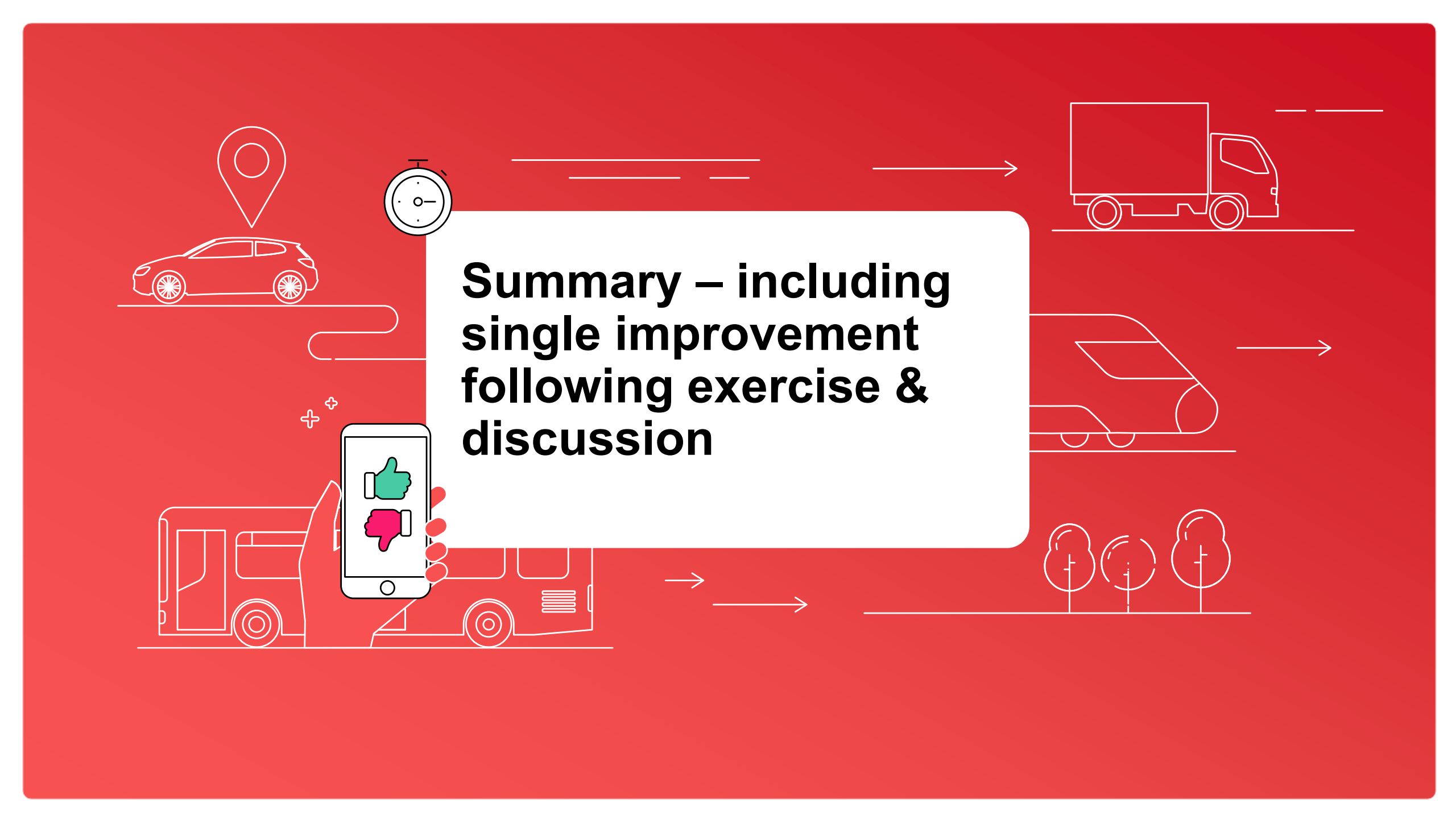
- Some assumed that by choosing one improvement from the list, there would inevitably be associated improvements elsewhere – so there was some creativity in choosing different items. For instance, there would be less crowding and probably better reliability if there were more services.
- In choosing their priorities, there was also a realisation that to achieve the outcome they wanted, such as more reliable services, was perhaps more complicated than they had imagined and would need investment in several ways.
- Choosing their own and then discussing with others crystallised the scale of the task and the complexity of delivering some of them across the entire network.

How should the
improvements be
funded?



General feeling that improvements should be funded by government / taxpayers rather than through increased fares

- Almost all the community (remember they are all rail users) see rail and public transport more generally as a social asset which should be available to all.
- It is important that there is a railway that the whole population can rely on and that people who need to use it aren't priced out of being able to do so.
- Analogous with the NHS – 'I put money from my taxes into that whether I use it or not.'
- It is important from an environmental / sustainability perspective that there's an alternative to using cars.
- Improved services will lead to greater usage which will bring in more revenue for further investment.
- But it is important that costs are kept under control (HS2 example) and that the money is spent on the right things which will achieve the right outcomes for users.



**Summary – including
single improvement
following exercise &
discussion**

Choosing one single priority for improvement shows that cost and reliability are key factors

- To wrap up, following the discussions and points exercise, participants were asked to write down their '**one top priority for the railway, that would make it genuinely customer focussed**'. Some changed their mind while others stuck to one of their original priority items.
- Following the discussions, it became more evenly balanced between cost-related and reliability-related priorities, which were suggested most often.
- As in the initial exercise – some people's individual circumstances, such as where they live or their disabilities or their environmental principles drove them to choose the same priority as before, despite the discussions.



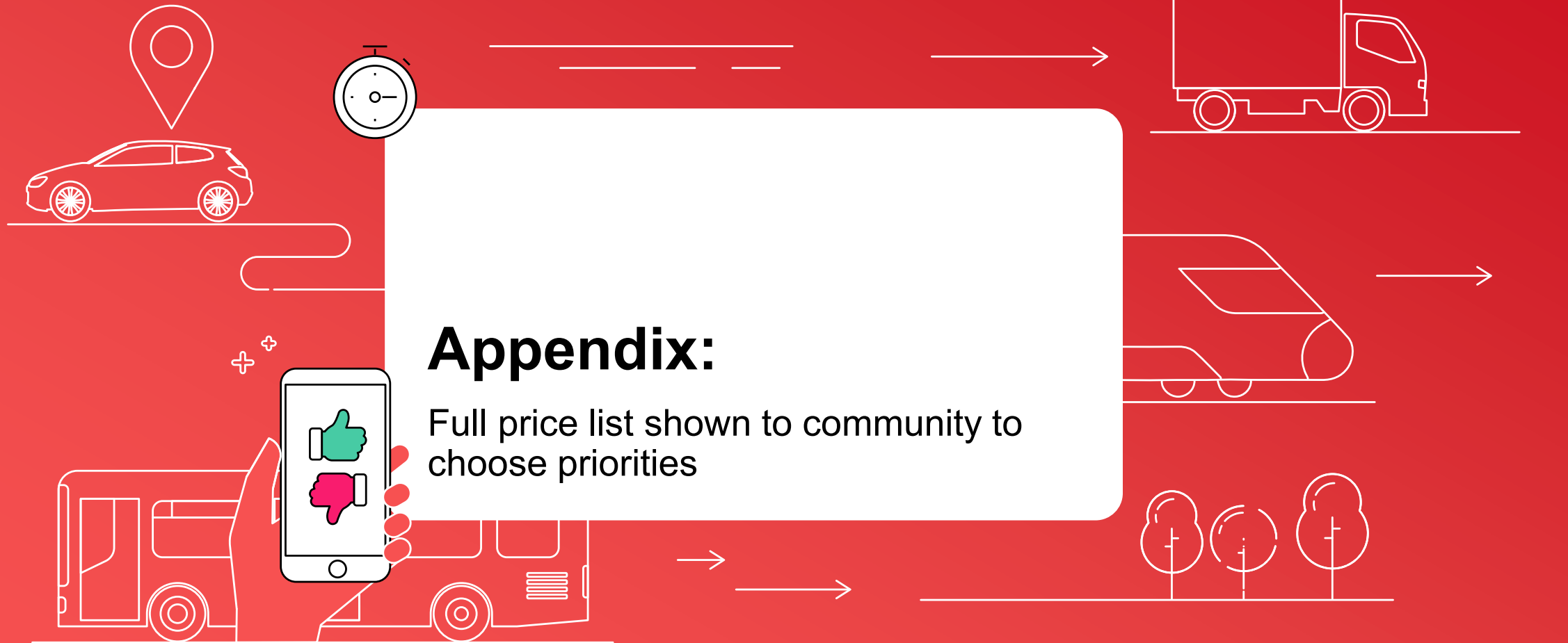
Need to get cost and reliability right, otherwise you can do all of these things and the rest doesn't matter.

Key takeaways

- It was difficult for the community to identify single items for improvement. Often an immediate response is to 'make everything better', which means cheaper, more reliable, more comfortable.
- It became clear that they often were focusing on outcomes such as better reliability, better support from staff, fares being fairer or cheaper.
 - They then asked how this outcome could be achieved. 'Which item from the 'pricelist' would get that result?' was often asked.
 - Often there was an assumption that certain outcomes would naturally occur from investment in other areas, which may or may not be true.

Key takeaways

- The reaction to the exercise suggests that in communicating improvements that are planned or coming, there is a need to spell out the benefits as well as the actions. That is, focusing on what the investment will achieve as well as what the investment is.
- Not only will spelling out both the action and the outcomes have more impact – including among passengers who are less engaged - it will also demonstrate the focus on and understanding of passengers.
 - E.g. We know trains can be unreliable and sometimes aren't as clean as they should be, so we're making sure that trains will be cleaner and more punctual by cleaning every service and improving signaling.
- There was a very realistic attitude that everything couldn't be fixed at once, but doing anything and listening to passengers to prioritise them is valuable.
- Some improvements such as cleanliness or customer service improvements could be seen as quick wins – every passenger sees whether a train is clean or not on every journey and doesn't require capex.



Full pricelist of improvements – each participant had 100 points to spend

	Improvement priority	Points
1	Improve reliability – by improving day to day driver/conductor/operating staff resourcing (e.g. reduce risk of driver unavailability)	40
2	Reduce / eliminate industrial action – e.g. by meeting staff requirements	40
3	Improve reliability – by improving resilience to weather / natural events (e.g. temperature impacts on, ability to prevent / resolve landslips, ability to deal with fallen trees.)	50
4	Improve reliability –electrification and other technology to improve operational efficiency	50
5	Increase frequency and/or run trains earlier/later from given locations	50
6	Increase number of staff available for customer service at stations	30
7	Improve staff training – greater focus on customer service, not operations	10
8	Improve Passenger Assistance – more, more reliable, less requirement to book ahead	10
9	Improve accessibility around / into stations and on board (working lifts, design of space)	30

10	Reduce crowding on board – longer, or more frequent trains	40
11	Improve cleanliness and upkeep on board	10
12	Improve safety at stations – lighting, cameras, staff presence, etc.	30
13	Improve safety on board – cameras, staff / security personnel presence	30
14	Enforce comfort extras like seat reservations / quiet coaches, with staff to manage use where needed	10
15	Refurbish all trains to a minimum standard of comfort, space, etc.	40
16	Allow free / discounted, reliably available parking at stations	10
17	Reduce complexity of tickets by having 4-5 ticket types only	30
18	Upgrade compensation policy – more generous, no questions asked, compensate for other losses beyond the journey cost	10
19	Improve overall sustainability e.g. remove diesel fuel	50

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).

Any enquiries about this report should be addressed to:

Louise Coward – Head of Insights
Louise.coward@transportfocus.org.uk

Transport Focus
10th Floor, 25 Cabot Square, London
E14 4QZ

www.transportfocus.org.uk

Transport Focus is the operating name of the Passengers' Council

We work to make a difference for all transport users.