

House of Commons Transport Committee inquiry on improving the rail passenger experience ~ Response from Campaign for Better Transport

We are pleased that the Transport Committee is investigating passenger experience. With the Shaw Review also recommending an increased focus on passenger experience, we hope this signals a turn towards passengers in a rail industry which for too long has paid insufficient attention to their needs. The rail network is a national asset. It is in the Government's and tax payers' clear interests to make best use of this resource by making rail travel as attractive as possible. Furthermore, under government plans, the railway will be self-funding by 2016. Passengers pay high fares and are entitled to ask what they get for this, and demand value.

1. Information provided to passengers

Before the journey

We warmly welcome the opening up of some rail industry data. This has already enabled developers to create journey planning apps and websites and is benefiting passengers. However, there are still a number of data sets which have not yet been released, but could help provide more and better information to passengers (see http://nrodwiki.rockshore.net/index.php/Wish_List). We'd like to see the rail industry fully commit to open data, and open up more of their information.

While online information, including Twitter feeds, is very helpful, it's important to remember that significant numbers of passengers do not own a smartphone; and the majority of the UK population do not use Twitter. Social media is no substitute for timely, accurate information in stations and on trains.

When planning and booking a journey, getting the best ticket price remains complicated. This is especially true for passengers who don't have access to the internet. Those without internet are disproportionately likely to be living on lower incomes, and so are disproportionately affected by the difficulty of finding out the best price for a journey without a website. Many passengers who don't use the internet rely on the advice of a member of staff to find the best price. Moves to close ticket offices and reduce staff make it harder for passengers to access information and plan their journeys, especially passengers without smart phones or internet access. For example, ticket machines do not offer the facility to get a better price by splitting a journey.

Disabled passengers, where they cannot use a particular station, are entitled to alternative transport (usually a taxi) to the nearest station that meets their needs (e.g. the nearest step-free or staffed station), paid for by the train company. However, this entitlement – a reasonable adjustment under the Equality Act – tends to be set out in the small print of the rail company's website, and/or in the Disabled Passenger Protection Policy. It is very little known and therefore underused. We would like to see this information set out much more visibly, for example, at posters at stations. Given the numbers of passengers who don't use rail because their nearest station is not accessible, this simple measure could do a great deal to encourage more disabled passengers to use the railway. Similarly, it is disgraceful that there is still no equivalent of Transport for London's step-free Tube map covering national rail. The Stations Made Easy website, which displays station layout and access station-by-station, is no substitute for an overview of the step-free status of the whole network, enabling passengers to plan step-free journeys much more easily. Some operators publish a step-free map of

their own network, but the Association of Train Operating Companies (ATOC) should seek to publish a step-free map of the national network as a matter of urgency.

On arrival at the station, a perennial source of passenger frustration is that display boards are often very late to display the platform number of a particular train. Only having a couple of minutes to gallop to the right platform before a train departs, and the resulting passenger stampede, is extremely stressful, and again disproportionately impacts on disabled and older passengers.

Audio announcements at stations are frequently very unclear and sometimes inaudible, meaning that passengers can miss out on vital information about platform changes or delays.

During the journey

On the train, information provided to passengers is often inadequate. Again, a reduction of on-train staff on a number of routes has meant that passengers seeking more information about their journey have no-one to turn to.

The commitment for all trains to have audio-visual information displayed by 2020 is welcome, but this is no reason for passengers to wait until then for adequate on-train information. Where trains do not have automatic audio announcements of the next station, we would like to see drivers making these announcements. In the absence of on-train audio-visual information, it can be virtually impossible to see the station name signs on the platform (especially at night) and know when one has reached one's destination.

Similarly, when there are delays, drivers need to be making announcements explaining what is going on to passengers. Transport for London (TfL) has made great progress in recent years in ensuring that, when a Tube or Overground train is stationary, drivers almost always make an announcement [within thirty seconds, explaining the reasons for the delay and the estimated time of recovery](#). In contrast, on the railway, passengers are often left waiting anxiously for several minutes with no idea how long they are likely to be waiting or the reason for the delay. On some services (e.g. Thameslink), automated announcements are often played in case of delay, but a real-time announcement from the driver is far preferable to pre-recorded generic announcements.

Given the inconsistency of information provided to rail passengers, we would like to see an industry-wide Code of Conduct, or changes to the Conditions of Carriage, setting out what information rail companies are legally required to provide to passengers before, during and after travel. This could include minimum standards on how far in advance passengers should be given information on platform numbers and on delays.

2. Ticketing

Passengers who buy a ticket for the same train at the same time should pay the same price. In contrast, our current competitive market in fares does not work, has little logic, and confuses passengers.

Over the last few years, the Government has promised smart ticketing, part-time season tickets, single leg ticketing and much else. But they have delivered very little. The South East Flexible Ticketing programme has now been abandoned, despite the Government's commitment to roll out smart ticketing in line with the recommendations of the 2013 Fares and Ticketing Review. Why have so many good intentions to simplify the fares system, and introduce ticketing innovations to benefit passengers, stalled? The numerous different franchise timetables in operation certainly make it more complicated to drive through change. But at root, we believe that rail companies have been less than helpful in implementing initiatives which they think will cost them money; and the Government has not been sufficiently firm in compelling them to take action. Where voluntary regulation has failed (including in smart ticketing; flexible ticketing and making the way fares are calculated more transparent), we would like the Government to use its powers to compel action.

Complexity

Rail ticketing in the UK is needlessly complicated. This leads to passengers having to spend ages negotiating a Byzantine system simply to find out the cheapest way to get from A to B. Anomalies lead to passengers paying vastly different prices for the same journey. We would like to see the Department for Transport (DfT) take action to resolve these anomalies and make sure all passengers get the cheapest ticket price available when they travel.

The Office of Rail and Road (ORR), and ATOC, have produced a 'Code of Practice on retail information for rail tickets and services'. However, the only outcome of this seems to be that Ticket Vending Machines (TVMs) now have stickers telling passengers of what tickets are and are not available. The ticketing system overall remains highly complex and its workings are still opaque. The variety of different machines at different stations further complicates the task of buying the cheapest ticket; and research from Transport Focus found that many passengers found TVMs frustrating to operate and overwhelming in the information they offered (<http://www.transportfocus.org.uk/key-issues/retailing/>).

At the moment, different train companies set their definition of peak time, and how they set peak time fares, differently. We would like DfT to include a common definition of peak time in rail franchises as they come up for renewal, and introduce a single clear formula for how peak time fares are set compared to off-peak fares. This would reduce confusion.

It is an odd anomaly that splitting a journey into individual legs can substantially reduce a fare. Split ticketing serves no purpose and unfairly advantages savvy passengers with internet access, compared to passengers using a TVM. DfT should require that the through fare never exceeds the sum of walk-on fares for individual legs of the journey.

Similarly, there is no sensible rationale for pricing a return rail ticket by only a few pence more than a single ticket to the same destination. In October 2013, as part of its response to the Fares and Ticketing Review, the Government pledged to trial a scheme to regulate longer distance, single-leg off-peak tickets, to remove this confusing aspect of rail ticketing. However, despite reletting several franchises, the Government has not yet made progress on this. We would like to see this trial go ahead. Making public the number of advance tickets released for specific time bands would also increase the transparency of the ticketing system.

We would like to see a general overhaul of ticketing to make it simpler for passengers. For example, moving to a zonal system, as operates in London and is promised in the North of England through Transport for the North, would make ticketing more straightforward. Transport devolution, and the establishment of sub-national transport bodies may offer opportunities to move towards this zonal approach.

Affordability

Rail tickets are needlessly expensive. Whilst average fares have fallen in real terms over 2015, over the last ten years they have increased by over 45 per cent.

Encouraging modal shift away from private cars and towards rail furthers many government objectives, including improving air quality; reducing carbon emissions; and improving health. Yet rail pricing compares unfavourably with car travel: fuel duty has been frozen since 2011 (when it was cut) yet the formula used to calculate regulated rail fare increases using Retail Price Index inflation means that they rise every year.

We welcome the Government's decision to cap fares at RPI + 0 for the duration of this Parliament. Furthermore we welcome the Government's decision to reduce the fares flex from 5 per cent to 2 per cent. However, transport pricing structures are still discouraging people from using the railway and encouraging them to drive.

In order to correct this perverse price incentive, we would like the Government to change the formula used to calculate fares to use instead the more widely accepted Consumer Price Index and embark on a strategy of reducing fare costs long term. Travelling at peak time, and flexibly, carries a high premium at present. This premium should be reduced; and the DfT should work with ATOC to allow passengers to pay the difference between what they have paid already for an Advance ticket, and a new ticket if they have to change their plans or they miss a train. We would also like to see DfT work with ATOC to amend the ticketing and settlement scheme, and allow advance tickets to be bought up to a few minutes before departure from the origin station. Finally, passengers in the South East are able to benefit from the Network Rail Card. We would like to see a national railcard that anyone could use.

Flexible ticketing

The days of working 9 – 5, Monday to Friday are long gone; but ticketing is still stuck in this era. Passengers who work part time, or who work from home for some of the week, or work at weekends, are discriminated against by a system which offers them either expensive daily peak-time fares, or season tickets predicated on five-day a week working. As 75 per cent of part-time workers are women, this amounts to systematic sexism.

Part-time tickets are available in most other European countries, and, through Oyster price-capping, effectively in London as well. The ORR has estimated that a part-time ticketing system could benefit up to 40 per cent of passengers, and it could also benefit rail companies as well, through increasing footfall by encouraging part-time workers to use the railway; and through helping with capacity by making it more cost effective for commuters to work from home sometimes or travel outside peak hours.

The Government promised in 2013 to introduce flexible and part-time ticketing, and the delay in introducing this has been unjustifiable. There is no need to await the roll-out of smart ticketing, as a simple carnet system is a tried-and-tested method of offering part time ticketing. We would like to see the Government use the franchise system to compel train companies to offer part time and flexible ticketing.

Smart ticketing

Smart ticketing would help deliver a number of advantages to passengers, including reducing the need for queuing at the station; automating delay repay; helping passengers pay the lowest price for a journey, and of course offering flexible and part-time ticketing. In the longer term, it could also enable multi-modal and integrated ticketing, facilitating easier door-to-door journeys.

Some train operators are experimenting with smart ticketing – for example, the 'Key' on some Southern routes and c2c's SmartCard (which offers automatic delay repay if a train is over three minutes late).

Despite spending over £37million developing the South East Flexible Ticketing programme, the Government has failed to deliver on its promises to roll out smart ticketing and indeed has now abandoned that programme. The only trial that has so far taken place was in 2014 with Southern, but just 65 people took part. Shashi Verma, head of ticketing at TfL, is on the record as having offered TfL's expertise to DfT but was refused (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b070d7zq#play>). We would like to see DfT work with TfL to learn from the success of Oyster, and use upcoming franchising to drive the introduction of smart ticketing so passengers can reap the benefits of this technology.

3. In-train facilities, including on-journey Wi-Fi and power

The recent announcement that the Consumer Rights Act will apply to transport services is good news for passengers. We expect that when this comes into force, passengers will be able to claim compensation when basic facilities (like toilets) are not working, and when their passenger experience has been below reasonable expectations (for example, through overcrowding). Train companies and

government need to work together to ensure that the process for claiming is quick and easy, and where possible, compensation is automatic.

Rolling stock

The recent decision to scrap many of the old Pacer trains in the North of England was excellent news for passengers, but a number of train companies are still using old rolling stock which is uncomfortable and unpleasant for passengers. The current electrification process creates a strong disincentive for rolling stock operating companies to invest in new diesel units. Passengers cannot wait for electrification to be complete before they can enjoy modern trains; and the Government needs to act to drive forward the replacement of old rolling stock.

The Swiss public transport company RBS recently carried out a crowd-sourcing exercise to design its new rolling stock (see <http://www.railwaygazette.com/news/traction-rolling-stock/single-view/view/rbs-orders-emus-to-crowdsourced-design.html>). In the UK, rolling stock design tends to be driven by engineers, rather than by passengers. We would like train companies to involve passengers in co-designing rolling stock, so that passengers' views are included from the outset.

Wi-Fi

We welcome the increasing availability of Wi-Fi on trains. This allows passengers with smartphones or laptops to work; to get up-to-date information about delays and service disruptions; and to while away their journey with internet browsing or streaming entertainment. Wi-Fi should be provided free of charge. Reliable Wi-Fi can increase productivity; and by attracting people to rail, can help tackle road congestion and lessen pollution. However, in most parts of the country, train Wi-Fi remains shockingly unreliable. Some trains offer power sockets for devices, which is a boon for passengers although often these do not actually work.

In February 2015, the DfT challenged rail industry operators to deliver Wi-Fi by 2017. If it is to achieve this, the Government should set out its objectives in more detail. These should include:

- All new franchise agreements to include a timetable for the availability of free on-board Wi-Fi
- All existing franchises to agree with DfT when Wi-Fi will be available, with the objective that all mainline services will offer free Wi-Fi by 2017 and all lines except rural lines by 2019.
- All new rolling stock to support on-board Wi-Fi as standard
- A timetable for existing rolling stock with a life span beyond 2019 to be fitting with on board Wi-Fi technology.
- Establish a five-year innovation fund to support the development of mobile technology for rail. Such work could be funded from fines generated by delays.

Toilets

In general, train toilets offer a very poor service. They are frequently locked, with no running water, or no paper. They are often smelly and dirty. The new Crossrail trains are planned to have no on-board toilets at all, despite the fact that journey times will be up to an hour.

4. Performance measures in relation to passenger experience, including passenger survey methodologies

Overcrowding

Reducing overcrowding on trains is one of the highest priorities for passengers: the daily stress of having to stand pressed up against others is considerable. In order to avoid overcrowded trains at peak times, some passengers deliberately linger at work and return late to their families (see <http://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/sardine-express-train-manchester-one-5318256>). Others rise very early to get a train before the morning peak: one woman at a passenger group I attended described how she was no longer able to get sufficient sleep because her

line was so over capacity, she had to be at the platform several trains before the train she wanted to catch in order to board, and the effect this had had on her health and relationships. A troubling number of services are operating at almost double recommended capacity (see <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/sep/09/government-names-overcrowded-train-journeys-rmt>).

However, with the exception of the top ten most overcrowded lines, the Government does not publish the data on overcrowding across different lines, claiming it is 'commercially confidential'. Given the importance of overcrowding for passengers, we would like to see this data published.

We welcome the Government's use of franchising to mandate the purchase of new rolling stock, for example in the recent Trans Pennine Express franchise, and urge the Government to invest in new trains for the most overcrowded routes. The Government must not shy away from setting clear targets within franchises for the replacement of rolling stock, rather than leaving it for bidders to come forward with their own targets. The roll-out of electrification has meant that there is very little incentive for rolling stock operating companies to invest in new diesel rolling stock which will only have a short life. We urge Network Rail to increase the pace of the electrification programme so that new rolling stock can be introduced.

One of the most frustrating experiences for passengers is to cram onto a crowded train, only to see that the first class carriages, forbidden to most, are almost empty. We would like to see train capacity used more flexibly, by allowing standard ticket holders to use first class carriages on shorter distance journeys if Standard is full; and, where first-class carriages are consistently under-used, a requirement in new franchises that First Class should be reallocated to Standard.

In addition, we would like to see incentives introduced for operators to meet the requirement of providing peak time passengers with a seat within 20 minutes of boarding.

In individual franchises, the DfT should increase the weight given to punctuality and reliability proposals in assessing bids, and should maintain train frequency and first/last train specifications in new franchises.

Passenger survey methodologies

We have a number of comments about the survey questions asked in the National Rail Passenger Satisfaction Survey. We would like to see more questions about whether passengers feel they get value for money on their train tickets. Value for money is obviously an issue that passengers care about deeply and so this needs to be given clearer and higher priority in the questionnaire.

We'd also like to see passengers questioned on how confident or happy they are that they've been sold the right ticket; and, if they used a machine, whether they felt they fully understood the ticketing options available. Finally, we'd like the passenger survey to give more detail and regional breakdown: at the moment, answers are categorised as 'London and the South East', 'long distance' and 'regional' but more granular detail would be helpful, if possible, route by route.

5. Mechanisms to hold operators to account for poor performance and spread best practice across the industry

The Shaw Review's emphasis on passenger experience and passenger-facing metrics in Network Rail is very positive. We hope that the industry will heed the Review's recommendations to focus more on the needs of passengers. We see a role for the Consumer Rights Act in holding operators to account on poor performance.

At the moment, franchises remain the most important tool with which government can drive change within the industry and incentivise good performance; and there are limited options for penalising poor performance during the course of a franchise. For this reason, we support rail devolution, which through Mayoral / local authority accountability (including elections) will provide more mechanisms to hold operators to account. TfL's generally high levels of passenger satisfaction no doubt are partly due to the oversight of the Mayor and London Assembly, and the scrutiny this provides.

In addition, independent passenger panels and passenger stakeholder groups have a vital part to play in holding train operators to account. There is a great deal of variance in how these operate and how effective, representative, and independent, they are. Members of South West Trains passenger panel all receive free season tickets, which calls their independence into question. Setting out the parameters of good passenger representation is beyond the scope of this submission, but key considerations are ensuring that the group is truly representative (including passengers of different ages; both leisure and commuter passengers, at least one disabled passenger; and passengers from different parts of a route), accountability mechanisms such as publishing minutes, and publishing contact details of passenger representatives so that passengers can contact them. Regular public meetings can also be effective in holding operators to account. The Government should include weighted performance measures for passenger representation in new franchises.

Finally, if best practice on ticketing is to spread throughout the industry, it's important that the Government is accountable for the promises it has made from the Fares and Ticketing Review and elsewhere.

6. Performance measures

Franchises should include performance measures for:

- per cent of stations with basic facilities (staffed, waiting room, accessible toilet, onward bus connections etc.)
- per cent journeys offering useable free Wi-Fi
- per cent passengers claiming due compensation
- per cent journeys where toilets are unavailable

We would also like to see a requirement for train companies to publish these figures on an annual basis.

May 2016

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Campaign for Better Transport's vision is a country where communities have affordable transport that improves quality of life and protects the environment. Achieving our vision requires substantial changes to UK transport policy which we aim to achieve by providing well-researched, practical solutions that gain support from both decision-makers and the public.

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