

Winter 2009 Issue 7

Passenger Voice

Independent national rail passenger watchdog



Record passenger numbers happy with train journey

Passenger Focus has found a record percentage of passengers across Great Britain are satisfied with their train journey

Launching the Autumn National Passenger Survey (NPS) 2008 the rail watchdog has reported that 83% of passengers are satisfied with their rail journey. This is up 2 points on the Autumn 2007 NPS findings.

The NPS results for Great Britain show passenger satisfaction with train facilities improved in several areas, including punctuality/reliability; satisfaction with the upkeep/repair of the train; provision of information during the journey; helpfulness and attitude of staff; comfort of the seating area; personal security while on board; cleanliness of the train; and the availability of staff.

Train companies with the highest percentage of satisfied passengers

were Heathrow Express (93%), while c2c, Chiltern Railways, First ScotRail and Merseyrail all received 90% satisfaction ratings.

Anthony Smith, Passenger Focus chief executive, commented: "Passengers are telling us they are broadly satisfied with their train services. Satisfaction continues to rise and some train companies, who had fallen behind, have started to get much better. However, it is clear there are important issues around fares and value for money, dealing with delays, staff availability, car parks and that perennial issue, toilets, that train companies and the Government need to think about."

Full results can be found at www.passengerfocus.org.uk



Fare fight

Passenger Focus's campaign about January fare rises has successfully attracted media attention from across Great Britain.

Passenger Focus argues that the latest round of fare rises are unjust and unacceptable.

See page 2 for more information on Passenger Focus's campaign to control fare rises.

Passenger Focus Annual Conference 2009

Passenger Focus will be holding its Annual Conference on Wednesday 22 April 2009. The event will take place at the British Library Conference Centre near St Pancras station in London and will include presentations from significant rail, bus and coach industry figures, along with

numerous workshop sessions. Speakers confirmed (when going to print) include Iain Coucher, chief executive of Network Rail, Sir Moir Lockhead, chief executive of FirstGroup and Richard Bowker CBE, chief executive of National Express. The conference will see the launch of Passenger Focus's



Sir Moir Lockhead
First Group



Richard Bowker CBE
National Express



Iain Coucher
Network Rail

new bus, coach and tram passenger representation role, and will explore key passenger issues. If you would like to register

your interest in attending the conference, please visit www.passengerfocus.org.uk/register

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Passenger Focus chairman, Colin Foxall – the year ahead



Colin Foxall

2009 is going to be an exciting and challenging year for Passenger Focus. Building on what we do to represent Britain's rail passengers we will now start to work, subject to final parliamentary approval, on behalf of England's bus, coach and tram passengers. We are going to do this by continuing to position Passenger Focus as the independent passenger watchdog: making a difference on the basis of research and evidence. The new extension to our remit will not alter our consumer focus – we exist to help passengers get the best deal.

We are going to extend our work in

stages. We must do some research to start to understand the needs and priorities of bus, coach and tram passengers. We must also work out how we can make the most difference on the ground: expanding the capacity and capability of our regionally based passenger link team. We all need to learn more about bus, coach and tram passenger issues to ensure we can bring to this sector the knowledge and expertise we have in rail. The new remit co-incides with the need for us to develop a new corporate plan. Please look at the draft plan on our website: we need to make sure

we have got our direction of travel right. Rail fare issues continue to dominate our work at present. In terms of passenger needs, punctuality is moving in the right direction. Capacity is being addressed – although we wish progress was faster. Fares will continue to rise inexorably – in the current economic climate this looks wrong. That is why we have asked Government and the industry to halt excessive fare rises and limit the amount by which individual fares can rise.

Colin Foxall

Passenger Focus criticises fare increases

Passenger Focus has criticised fare rises which came into effect on 2 January 2009. Steep rises on individual routes are masked by the average figures published by the industry.

The perpetual tinkering with ticket restrictions ensures 'back door' fare rises continue. Yet again, many passengers will be pushed into paying higher prices or locking themselves into rigid advance purchase, 'one train only' fares.

Passenger Focus chief

executive, Anthony Smith said: "Many passengers will have shuddered and shivered when they discovered the scale of some New Year fare rises. Average rises for regulated fares are 6%, with unregulated rising by an average of 7%. Yet inflation is currently well below this. Fare rises that

hark back to a time of high inflation and spiralling energy costs look very out of kilter."

Passenger Focus has called on the Government and train companies to agree to help beleaguered passengers by halting any further excessive fare rises in 2009 and immediately limiting the range within which regulated fares are allowed to rise.

"As an immediate action we call on ministers to open discussions with the train companies to limit the range that

regulated fares can go up. Big rises simply cannot be justified in more normal times let alone the current economic climate."



Fare rises are unjust and unacceptable



New 'regional' area on Passenger Focus website

In February Passenger Focus will launch a new section on our website to show the work we are doing on behalf of passengers around the country. The new area of the site will show our work by region and nation, train operating company,

route and issues such as getting a seat or fares and ticketing. It will also feature Google Maps™ technology which will allow website users to view any Passenger Focus work with a specific geographic location.

New voice for bus passengers

Passenger Focus is progressing its bus, coach and tram work

Passenger Focus chief executive Anthony Smith has welcomed the new role: "Passenger Focus is delighted it will be representing bus, coach and tram passengers in England. Combining independent passenger research and focused advocacy on behalf of passengers will start to drive improvements in bus and coach services. Passenger Focus's experience at working on behalf of rail passengers will help England's bus and coach passengers get the best deal."

Passenger Focus manager

David Sidebottom and his colleagues have been laying the groundwork for the new role by visiting a range of national stakeholder organisations as well as local authorities, Passenger Transport Executives and bus

operators. He has sounded out their views on issues affecting passengers and the industry and what Passenger Focus's priorities should be, as well as fact finding about operations, routes and contractual arrangements.

Issues common to all are concessionary fares, punctuality and quality partnerships.

One of Passenger Focus's first tasks will be to conduct a review into how bus passengers' complaints are handled.



David Sidebottom



Anthony Smith

The way forward for accessibility issues

Passenger Focus research into accessibility issues for rail passengers looks likely to spark welcome changes in the way the industry delivers services. In particular, the research looked at the effectiveness of the Assisted Passenger Reservation Service (APRS) to help disabled passengers using the railway.

The research found that many passengers did not receive their booked assistance.

Passenger Focus welcomes the fact that so many train companies are taking action to improve APRS, but we need to be sure that we have a joined-up national service. One problem is communication, and we welcome

the lead the Association of Train Operating Companies is taking in working to try to develop new communication systems. However, until the industry consistently monitors APRS and asks passengers, 'What was good and what was not?', it won't know what it needs to put right.

We are urging the Department



for Transport (DfT) to incorporate the monitoring of passengers' satisfaction of APRS into new franchises, and plan to examine the service again in two years' time.

Passenger Focus champions passenger cases

A sample of cases that our Passenger Advice Team has dealt with recently:

- An 86-year-old woman with partial blindness and severe arthritis was left abandoned on the platform when her pre-booked journey care assistance was not awaiting her following her journey from Euston to Liverpool Lime Street. After Passenger Focus's contact, as a gesture of goodwill and to restore some faith with the passenger, Virgin agreed

to refund 50% of the ticket cost.

- Having booked two train tickets prior to his journey, a passenger's son was taken seriously ill with Legionnaires disease and was therefore unable to travel. After contacting National Express East Coast, we were able to obtain a full refund.
- On return to London, several passengers discovered that their return tickets were in the possession of another member of the group. Unable to contact him,

the passengers were made to purchase several additional tickets. After escalating the issue with Virgin Trains, we were able to obtain a refund for 50% of their total cost.



Thameslink

Passengers' views at the heart of decision making

Passenger Focus has worked with the Department for Transport (DfT) and London TravelWatch to ensure that passengers' views are at the heart of the decisions made about new trains to run on Thameslink routes. Passenger Focus manager

Guy Dangerfield said: "In the research, passengers told us they want a spacious train that they can get in and out of easily, unlike the existing Thameslink rolling stock. They also want a step change in passenger information, going well beyond the destination and calling

pattern now standard on new trains." Passenger Focus is pleased that these, and a number of other points made to the DfT following the research, have been reflected in the specification.

Passenger Focus has also published another major report, 'Passenger needs during Thameslink Programme construction: findings of qualitative research', which looks at what passengers are concerned about and how the rail industry can minimise disruption to best maintain passenger satisfaction

while works are going on. Mr Dangerfield said: "Shining through was the message that passenger communication has a vital role to play in delivery of the Thameslink Programme. Getting the communications right, so that passengers do not feel that they are being kept in the dark, will be key to the rail industry meeting passengers' expectations during Thameslink construction." The research was carried out jointly with First Capital Connect and Southeastern, and is available at www.passengerfocus.org.uk.

Decision to save ticket offices

Passenger Focus has welcomed the Department for Transport's (DfT) decision to reject many of South West Train's (SWT) revised ticket office opening hours.

After representation from Passenger Focus and London TravelWatch, the Government has told SWT it can reduce ticket office opening hours only where it has less than 12 sales an hour. In instances where understaffing had reduced ticket sales to date, the

DfT has rejected proposals to reduce opening hours.

Passenger Focus received thousands of objections from passengers to SWT plans to slash its ticket office opening hours. Initial analysis shows that the DfT has significantly reduced the number of offices that SWT can close completely over the weekend.

Anthony Smith, Passenger Focus chief executive, said: "This is a victory for the thousands of passengers who

stood up and told the Government they didn't want to lose their ticket office staff. The Government has listened to passengers' concerns and has saved those ticket offices which are currently well used. The DfT has supported our call that train companies can't get away with blanket closures as passengers tell us they need staff for security, journey advice and ticket sales."

Jocelyn Pearson, Passenger Focus manager covering SWT, acknowledged that some passengers would lose out under the plan and called for improved access to journey and fare advice at stations.

Virgin high-frequency timetable begins

Passenger Focus has criticised new year problems on the West Coast Main Line (WCML).

Anthony Smith, chief executive for the national rail watchdog Passenger Focus, said: "The upheaval caused by a horrific air accident and overhead line failures within days of each other are a double whammy for WCML passengers. This is not the best start to the new year for passengers and we

hope that a normal service will resume as soon as possible – especially since passengers are now paying more to use the train. Furthermore, with the major investment the WCML has undergone, passengers would expect to see a greater resilience and a reduction of infrastructure problems."

Passenger Focus will continue to monitor performance on the WCML, and in particular

the launch of the Virgin high-frequency service.

All the work on the WCML has been geared towards the new timetable that came into operation on 14 December, which sees three trains an hour each way between Manchester and London, Birmingham and London, and hourly services between Liverpool, Preston and Euston. The six-year upgrade will result in 30 per

cent more Virgin Train services on the route every day.

However, there is still concern about continuing weekend engineering works to improve line speed and capacity on the northern part of the route from 31 January to 22 March. Passenger Focus will be keeping a close eye on the new timetable, together with how well Network Rail and Virgin Trains handle alternative services during the line closures.

West Coast RUS work kicks off

The Stakeholder Management Group for the Network Rail (NR) West Coast Route Utilisation Strategy (RUS) has met for the first time. This is the final RUS for the network and the process will last for around 20 months. It will look at a variety of issues on the

West Coast Main Line, including evaluating how the December 2008 timetables are working in practice. Passenger Focus plans to undertake research in late Summer 2009 with passengers at various points along the route. In addition, we plan to hold meetings between NR and Rail User Groups to find out what local groups believe the priorities for action should be.