
It may be extreme weather to you, but to us it's just winter

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1 Introduction

Transport Focus is the independent watchdog for rail passengers throughout Great Britain (as well as bus and tram users in England outside London and users of England's Strategic Road Network). Our mission is to get the best deal for passengers. With a strong emphasis on evidence-based campaigning and research, we ensure that we know what is happening on the ground. We consult more than 50,000 passengers a year to produce the National Rail Passenger Survey (NRPS) - a network-wide picture of passengers' satisfaction with rail travel. We also undertake various ad hoc research surveys to build our evidence base on topical issues of importance to rail passengers.

2 Background

2.1 Why we undertook the research

Whenever extreme weather affects train services, questions are asked about whether Britain's railways are sufficiently well prepared. Transport Focus is pleased to have worked with the rail industry, through its National Task Force, to research passengers' views about the subject. In particular we have sought to understand passengers' expectations of what the railway should deliver in these circumstances and what can be done differently to meet their needs as fully as possible. This paper aims to summarise our findings and what we believe should be done to improve the passenger experience when extreme weather events occur or are anticipated.

2.2 About the research we undertook

Transport Focus commissioned GfK UK to undertake a programme of qualitative research incorporating 12 mini-group discussions and 10 depth interviews stretching across the country from Glasgow, via Leeds and Manchester to London, Cardiff and Exeter. As such, our passengers had experience of a wide spread of train operators and were additionally recruited to reflect a spread of journey purposes (commuter, business, leisure/personal), long and short journeys, high and low frequency services, branch line and mainline services and demographics, as well as those eligible for passenger assistance (including those with mobility impairments, the elderly and those travelling with luggage or a push-chair).

The research was carried out 21-29 January 2015. It should be noted that during this time Scotland experienced heavy snow which impacted on rail services and accordingly our Glasgow passengers were able to draw on that current experience during the research sessions. Exeter passengers similarly reflected on experiences resulting from the 2014 landslip at Dawlish/Teignmouth.

3 Key findings

3.1 Defining extreme weather and perceptions of resilience in Great Britain

Passengers in this research define extreme weather as severe or excessive seasonal weather, typically associated with snow, rain, wind, ice and fog. Whilst they agree that extreme weather can usually be forecast and therefore rail companies can put plans in place to pre-empt this, passengers feel that weather forecasts are not always reliable leaving rail companies to react to unexpected extreme weather.

Overall, views regarding extreme weather rail resilience in Great Britain are strongly influenced by perceptions of how other countries cope with such events. Many feel that rail services in Great Britain are behind the curve in terms of investment in infrastructure and technology. Views regarding resilience are impacted by recent experience of extreme weather events. In Glasgow the point was made that weather differs across the country and that while it might not be unexpected for a little snow to bring London to a halt, this should not be the case where snow is a regular occurrence:

“It may be extreme weather to you, but to us it’s just winter!”

Whilst first-hand experience has made some passengers more realistic and understanding of extreme weather resilience, others express frustration with the perceived lack of resilience. Frustration is also expressed by those who experience delays due to extreme weather on a regular basis and feel that the rail industry’s response has not improved over time. In Scotland we noted a belief that the railway ‘throws in the towel’ and cancels services at the first sign of bad weather without regard for passengers’ need to go about their normal business.

Whilst there is strong agreement that resilience needs to be improved, there are mixed views on who should be responsible for supporting the financial investment required. Most passengers in this research feel that fare payers already pay for expensive rail tickets and therefore should not be burdened with any additional financial responsibility. However, there are mixed views regarding the potential role for tax payers in supporting increased resilience. Whilst some note that the rail industry is a public service and therefore feel it is acceptable for tax payers to provide some support, others firmly feel that this responsibility lies with the rail companies whose profits it was felt can provide the necessary finance.

Thinking further about responsibilities for rail, passengers note that there is some lack of clarity regarding who has responsibility for different aspects of the rail service (e.g. rails and rolling stock). Some cite Network Rail but query what their responsibilities are. Whilst passengers recognise this lack of knowledge, few feel that this is essential information for them suggesting that this information will only be necessary should the general public be required to provide additional financial support; in this instance greater transparency will be needed.

Overall, whilst passengers agree that rail resilience should be improved many envisage that this should be done with the aim of improving a range of service issues including signalling problems and defective trains as well as extreme weather. Many query whether extreme weather should be a priority when other service issues are experienced on a more frequent basis.

3.2 Passenger expectations for when extreme weather is forecast

Passengers were asked how they expect the rail industry to prepare for forecast extreme weather events. Spontaneous views from passengers demonstrate that their expectations are high and probably unrealistic. Passengers express a strong desire for normal service during extreme weather and, indeed, feel that train operators should put in place enhanced measures to ensure this. However,

once made aware of the types of safety and operational considerations that need to be taken into account by Train Operating Companies (TOCs), passengers become more tolerant of the idea that normal service may not be possible.

Across the research it is clear that these expectations are driven and influenced by a range of factors. Figure 1 summarises these and they are discussed in turn below.



Figure 1: Factors influencing passenger expectations

3.2.1 Drivers of expectations

Passengers' expectations are driven by three factors:

i) Passenger type

Two passenger types emerge across the research. The first type are those who *always try to travel*. These passengers often feel work-related pressures to show a physical presence at work. This pressure is amplified where passengers, typically commuters, feel they risk loss of pay, enforced annual leave or creating a poor impression of their commitment to their employer. These passengers will always attempt to travel if train services are running and they consider their journeys to be essential. Other essential journeys that would result in an attempt to travel include travel for a hospital appointment, special occasions (e.g. Christmas) and travel for a pre-booked event such as a theatre performance or flight. Other reasons for always attempting to travel include: a desire to seek clarification that a pre-booked ticket can be used on an alternative day; those for whom seeing if it is possible to travel is simply convenient (e.g. they live close to the station or are able to easily use an alternative mode should train travel not be possible); those who have previously attempted to travel during extreme weather and been successful so are optimistic that travel will be possible; and those who strongly dislike alternative modes so will always attempt to complete their journey by rail if possible. When combined with low awareness of operational and safety factors, expectations for rail travel during extreme weather are very high for this passenger type.

The second type of passenger identified is those who will *decide not to travel*. This includes those who can work from home, those whose journey is local or social and can easily be rescheduled and those who are simply unable to get to the station safely. Those who have concerns about travelling during extreme weather are also likely to decide not to travel. This includes those who have previously been unable to get home due to extreme weather, those who are concerned that they will be unable to get a seat (a particular concern for mobility impaired passengers) and those who are concerned that changes to services will mean that they will be required to make a change between trains or modes (this is a particular concern for mobility impaired passengers and those who are less confident with rail travel). Whilst these passengers are less likely to consider their journey essential, they still have high expectations of rail travel during extreme weather based on their perceptions and limited knowledge of operational and safety factors.

ii) Operational factors

Tolerance for delays to services and any impact on the timetable is much greater for unplanned extreme weather events; passengers expect that train operators will need time to put appropriate measures in place. Additionally, passengers have very low spontaneous knowledge and awareness of any operational factors taken into consideration by TOCs when planning for extreme weather. On this basis, passengers express low tolerance for delays to services and any impact on the timetable when extreme weather is forecast. Passengers expect that advance warning of weather events means that TOCs easily have time to put measures in place and to action protocols and strategies. Passengers envisage a range of measures which might be implemented including:

- **Measures to support the provision of normal service:** mobilisation of additional staff and maintenance teams; use of snow ploughs; use of overnight depots to avoid snow and ice damage to trains; use of information systems to ensure quick dissemination of information to stations; provision of replacement bus services; allowing tickets to be used on any service; and identification of hub stations leaving smaller stations unserved
- **Measures to provide an enhanced service:** run services earlier in the day; run services later in the day; extend peak hour services; put spare trains/carriages into service; and run longer trains with more carriages
- **Measures to reduce over-crowding** (which could be applicable to other situations where service disruption/delays are experienced): declassify first class carriages; provide standing only carriages; and remove refreshments carriages replacing them with seating carriages.

It was clear across the research that passengers' expectations often contradict the types of measures that in reality TOCs will be likely to put in place. When passengers are informed of the types of measure that might realistically be put in place they express some frustration, but also acquire greater awareness of and tolerance for why normal service might not always be maintained. Whilst there is still a desire for a normal service, where this is not possible passengers seek reassurance that they will be able to make a journey within a reasonable timeframe, in reasonable comfort. With this in mind, passengers cite the following preferences for TOC priorities when planning for extreme weather:

- **Providing a frequent service.** Most passengers feel that provision of a frequent service is more important than punctuality of services. They envisage that a frequent service will increase the likelihood of being able to board a train within a reasonable timeframe and with the possibility of getting a seat. Punctuality of services is cited as most important by those who like to plan to specific train times – these are often passengers who currently work to specific low frequency train times and are used to planning their day around specific train times (and not a turn up and go service).
- **Running the full timetable with extended journey times.** Passengers are keen to see measures put in place that aim to be as similar as possible to normal service. With this in mind they are keen to see a full timetable and are tolerant of extended journey times (assuming these are reasonable) as they are keen to progress their journey as soon as possible. Passengers dislike the idea of a reduced timetable expressing concerns that this option will be less comfortable (with increased overcrowding) and feels less reliable. Reflecting this preference, passengers often react negatively to the idea of last trains running earlier than usual, and first trains starting later than usual. With a particular focus on the latter, commuters feel strongly that this will negatively impact their journeys and express concern regarding employment pressures. Even when provided with the rationale for starting first trains later, commuters feel that a significantly later time (e.g. after 7am) is not reasonable and in some cases, scepticism is voiced suggesting that later times are a result of prioritisation of main lines and London routes.

- **Avoidance of overcrowding.** Passengers express concern that overcrowding might lead to passengers becoming agitated which would directly impact on fellow passengers and staff. With this in mind they react negatively to the idea of shorter trains as they envisage this will only result in overcrowding.
- **Being able to get a seat.** Whilst typically considered a lower priority by many commuters, getting a seat does emerge as important for those making longer journeys and those with mobility impairments or travelling with children. Those with a strong dislike for overcrowding also express a preference for getting a seat during extreme weather.
- **Support in continuing journeys.** Passengers have mixed views regarding potential measures for leaving smaller stations unserved and stopping trains short of their destination. Overall, these measures are less popular amongst those living on a branch line, those who have limited confidence in navigating unknown journeys or mobility impaired passengers who seek to avoid unexpected interchanges and to keep journeys simple. Should these measures be necessary the suggested steps to support people in continuing their journeys are mixed with some feeling that given enough advance notice passengers should be personally responsible for arranging continuation of their journey whilst others suggest a bus replacement service or sign-posting to relevant scheduled bus services.

iii) Safety

Passengers spontaneously cite a limited number of safety issues relating to extreme weather. These tend to include factors such as overcrowding, falling in icy station/platform conditions and irate passengers. Overall there are very few mentions of wider safety issues such as derailment, landslips and trees on the line. Passengers feel that trains are a safe mode of transport during extreme weather noting that they rarely hear otherwise in the media. At a spontaneous level it is clear that safety of trains during extreme weather is not factored into passenger expectations for service delivery during extreme weather. Once made aware of the range of safety considerations passengers express mixed reactions. Whilst passengers trust that train operators will only run trains if safe to do so, some query whether all decisions made by TOCs are driven by safety. The most sceptical passengers query whether some decisions are actually driven by prioritisation of main line and London lines or choosing options that require least short and long term financial investment. With this in mind the research suggests that any measures planned for extreme weather need to be justified to passengers to help overcome any scepticism.

3.2.2 Influencing expectations

Across the research it was clear that both improving passengers' relationship with train operators and improving information provision will help manage expectations for measures put in place for extreme weather.

i) Relationship with train operators

Most passengers were thinking about their local TOC when discussing measures taken for extreme weather although it should be noted that some did not explicitly mention their operator's name, and some displayed a lack of clarity regarding the role of bodies such as Network Rail.

The mix of trust and scepticism felt by passengers regarding decisions made by TOCs when planning for extreme weather results in a range of attitudes towards such measures. Whilst a few cite a sense of 'community spirit' when facing extreme weather and the need to pull together to make a positive experience, many passengers express frustration. These frustrated passengers comment on a perceived lack of improvement over time to their experience of delays and disruption caused by extreme weather and other events/issues. These passengers are very focused on their individual needs and quickly become frustrated, displaying limited tolerance for situations where their individual journeys are impacted. Whilst a sense of cynicism is prevalent amongst this group this was often due

to dissatisfaction generated over time regarding delays and poor information provision during times of disruption. However, the most cynical are typically the most politicised passengers, citing concerns with profiteering and general management within the rail industry. These views are often driven by media coverage which fuels the perceived lack of focus on the passenger - these passengers often feel that decisions made within the rail industry are based on the easiest and most cost effective options.

With these varied views in mind, it is clear that any communications with passengers regarding steps taken to prepare for extreme weather should detail a clear rationale enabling passengers to believe in the decisions made, and should demonstrate that TOCs put the interest of passengers at the heart of decision making.

ii) Information provision

Passenger information needs reflect findings from previous Passenger Focus research¹. As shown in figure 2, the core information need is detail regarding impact on journey followed by information regarding the problem and advice for how passengers might continue their journeys.

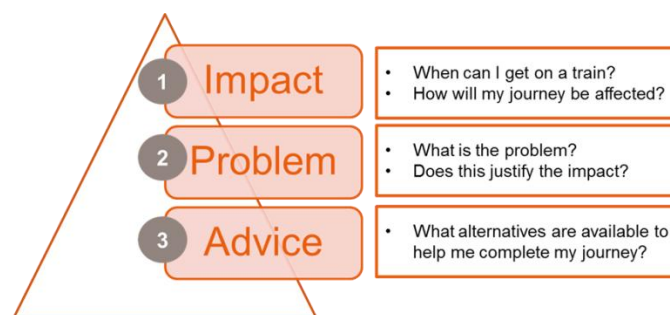


Figure 2: Hierarchy of passenger information needs

Passengers agree that lack of clear and consistent communications results in frustration. With this in mind, the following attributes emerge as important to passengers' experiences:

- Accurate, up to date communications with consistency across all channels
- Believable communications that provide a rationale for decisions made when planning for extreme weather - to drive greater tolerance and understanding for measures taken
- Images of steps being taken (as shown, for example, in figure 3) are suggested as a good way to communicate to passengers but these should be used cautiously to avoid generating fear for safety of services. It is further noted that over-promising services or adopting a worst case scenario approach can drive cynicism when not realised
- Informative communications providing pertinent and concise information with the option to access more detail if required, for example, via a hyperlink
- Timely information that gives as much pre-warning and time specific information as possible to help passengers make an informed decision about whether to use train services
- A tailored approach to communications, using text, app and email alerts to directly provide relevant information to passengers. This is considered a particularly good way of letting those with booked assistance know how their journey/booked assistance will be affected by extreme weather measures
- In the context of a PDF on a train company website and for a relatively short journey, clear emergency timetable information provided to passengers well in advance, detailing only the services running (not cancelled services) and with extended journey times built into the new times shown

- In the context of station displays and long-distance journeys, it appears that passengers' preference is for the normal timetable to be displayed with any delay shown (rather than an emergency timetable with extra running time built in). Passengers envisage this will be most useful as passengers will be likely to look for normal running times as it could not be guaranteed that all would be aware of the emergency timetable before arriving at the station.

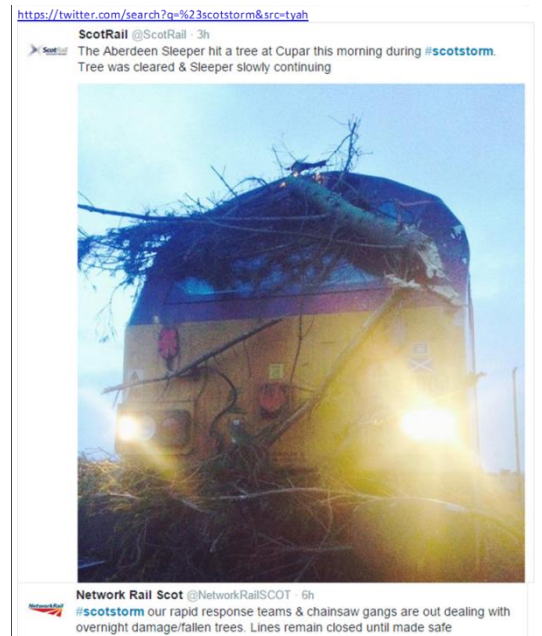


Figure 3: Appropriate, weather-related Scotrail Twitter post

A range of channels are cited as currently being used by passengers and communication provision should reflect these. Channels that are accessed proactively to check train services on a regular basis include social media sites (Twitter and Facebook) as well as websites and apps for TOCs, National Rail and retailers such as the Trainline. Others note that they come across general travel advice on radio and television. Text, email and app alerts are considered the best way for passengers to be warned about any changes to service.

4 Conclusions

At a spontaneous level there are high and probably unrealistic expectations for what the rail industry can deliver during extreme weather, especially amongst those who perceive their journey to be essential. This is particularly the case where extreme weather is forecast as passengers feel that advance warning should enable train companies to put in place enhanced measures that avoid the need for changes to the timetable or disruption to services. It is clear that previous experiences of disruption caused during extreme weather impacts on tolerance towards such measures. Whilst some passengers express understanding of the challenges facing train companies, other have become sceptical over time and feel that train companies, including Scotrail, do not always have passengers' interests at heart. Overall, a lack of awareness and understanding of operational and safety factors promotes high expectations and limited tolerance for the measures put in place for extreme weather and encourages the view that the railway 'gives in' too easily to the weather.

These passenger expectations can be influenced and to some extent managed through better information and communication with passengers. This in turn will help build a more positive relationship between passengers and train companies. With this in mind, passengers regard it as key for train companies to:

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- Put measures in place to run a normal service wherever possible
 - Put passenger safety and interests at heart
 - Make sensible decisions as to when it is safe to run trains
 - Be transparent and provide information that enables passengers to make informed decisions, including whether to travel at all
 - Provide clear information clarifying the impact that the extreme weather and pre-emptive measures will have on their journey
 - Provide rationale for decisions, demonstrating that the train company is doing its best and helping passengers trust that decisions that are made for legitimate reasons
 - Reflect communication preferences in all passenger communications (not just those regarding extreme weather) to help build a more positive relation with train companies.

Based on these conclusions and our previous work on *Passenger information when trains are disrupted*ⁱ, Transport Focus has made recommendations to the rail industry on maintaining a normal service as far as possible during extreme weather and on the need to provide timely information so that passengers can make informed decisions, including whether to travel or not.

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This paper is based on the Transport Focus report *Reacting to extreme weather on the railways*ⁱⁱⁱ.

ⁱ <http://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research/publications/passenger-information-when-trains-are-disrupted>

ⁱⁱ *Op cit*

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research/publications/reacting-to-extreme-weather-on-the-railways>