URBAN
TRANSPORT
GROUP

Consultation Response

Improving the rail passenger experience

Transport Select Committee

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1. Introduction

1.1. The Urban Transport Group (UTG) represents the seven largest city region strategic transport bodies[1] in England, which, between them, serve over twenty million people in Greater Manchester, London, the Liverpool City Region, the North East Combined Authority area, the Sheffield City Region, the West Midlands conurbation and West Yorkshire. Nottingham City Council, the West of England Partnership and Strathclyde Partnership for Transport (SPT) are associate members of the UTG.

1.2. Our members plan, procure, provide and promote local and regional transport, with the aim of delivering integrated, effective networks, accessible to all. Being accountable to local decision makers means that city region transport authorities have a strong incentive to improve passenger satisfaction and are well placed to act as customer champions.

1.3. Central to our work is the belief that public transport networks need to consider passenger requirements for the entire length of their journey, door to door, and not just from station stop to station stop. Transport operators therefore need to ensure that passengers have easy access to suitable information, ticketing and an appropriate level of service throughout their journey.

1.4. City region transport authorities play a key role in ensuring an integrated approach to public transport, for example by promoting multi-operator ticketing schemes, providing comprehensive travel information, coordinating the actions of different operators and infrastructure providers and setting quality standards on some services. We therefore welcome the Transport Select Committee's decision to look into the rail passenger experience and the opportunity to respond to this consultation.

1.5. We understand that some of our members are providing their own evidence and we have worked closely together on this consultation. In this response, we focus on issues of common interest to city region transport authorities.

2. Response

The Committee invites written evidence on, and recommendations to improve:

a. Information provided to passengers before, during and after rail journeys, including information provided at stations, in trains and via National Rail Enquiries, operators' websites and online apps (*excluding in relation to the process for claiming compensation for a delay/cancellation*)

2.1. Public transport is at a natural disadvantage to private travel as it offers a timetabled rather than on-demand service. High quality information can help overcome this weakness.

2.2. When focusing on information, it is important to realise that people do not just travel from station X to station Y, they travel from door to door. The value of information provided by different agencies in isolation is lower than if information were integrated across different parts of the journey, and communicated in a consistent format or through a single platform, to help provide a more seamless experience.

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[1] With the exception of Transport for London, these bodies were formally known as Passenger Transport Executives (PTEs) and the UTG was previously known as the Passenger Transport Executive Group. In recent years, some PTEs have been abolished with their functions transferred onto successor bodies, such as Combined Authorities. The new name for our group reflects these changes.

2.3. For example, the National Rail Passenger Satisfaction Survey, highlights the fact that rail information, both at stations and on trains, varies considerably between adjacent geographical areas and indeed often within them. There are examples where passengers travelling on different services that leave from the same station have widely differing views on the quality of information provided.

2.4. The importance of consistent and comprehensive information is even greater for journeys taking place, or starting/ending, in large urban areas where passengers often need to rely on different modes of transport and different operators. City region transport authorities understand local and regional travel patterns, how local networks perform, and how they can best be developed in future. They are therefore in a strong position to broker and design effective information services, but need adequate access to many sources of information held by transport operators and other stakeholders. The devolution of rail franchising powers is a move in the right direction as it is strengthening transport authority powers over certain local rail operators. But, in relation to information, these powers should extend to the rest of the rail industry more widely.

2.5. It is not just transport authorities who can help develop better passenger information systems. Third party app developers, for example, are driving innovation in information provision in some places. The availability of travel information is key to enabling the emergence and success of these services.

2.6. We would therefore argue that travel information should be viewed as a public good and that transport operators should be expected to contribute to a common information pool. We believe that our position is very much in accordance with the proposed Digital Economy, Bus Services and Modern Transport Bills announced in the Queen's speech.

2.7. We recognise that the UK rail industry has made significant progress in this respect over recent years, but feel that it could go further, both in terms of quality/consistency and the range of information provided. One example of the latter would be access to information on real time passenger boardings or volumes on individual trains or at individual stations, which would enable passengers to be informed about crowding level.

We make some more specific points below:

2.8. Despite the growing use of, and demand for, digital information, a large number of passengers still value access to an informed member of staff, either face to face or via help point communications – this can be particularly important when things go wrong on the network and digital information systems are overwhelmed, lack detailed up to date information, or cannot explain the underlying problems in a suitable way.

2.9. We would like to see a quicker roll-out of real time information available at stations. There is arguably greater value, on a per passenger basis, in knowing about delays at stations served more infrequently. However, many of these still lack information boards. Many of our networks are also at a disadvantage due to the persistence of antiquated signalling systems which mean underlying source data is of poor quality. Improvements in passenger information would be an important by-product of investment in modern signalling systems.

2.10. Whilst recognising that passengers may expect different information to be available in different contexts, we would be keen for the rail industry, in partnership with transport authorities and other key stakeholders, to work towards a higher degree of standardisation relating to the information given to passengers on-board trains and to reduce the number of instances where passengers are left without any information in the face of uncertainty.

2.11. We think that there would also be clear benefits from an improvement in the quality and consistency of onward travel information available at stations.

b. Ticketing, including overcoming obstacles to the more widespread delivery of "smart-ticketing" and part-time season tickets

2.12. We feel that passengers would benefit from a greater recognition by the rail industry of the opportunities for product and process innovation offered by local ticketing systems (including smart and contactless cards) that already exist, or that are in development, in many large urban areas. The integration of TfL's Oyster card pay-as-you-go feature with national rail services operating in London is a notable example and other city regions are implementing broadly systems elsewhere. We expect that further devolution of rail franchising powers to city region transport authorities will ensure greater collaboration with the rail industry, ultimately leading to improved outcomes for passengers.

2.13. In terms of innovation, smartcards could more easily enable the introduction of discounted ticketing products targeted at irregular passengers or part-time commuters. The current ticketing offer (e.g.: discounted season tickets) puts rail at a clear disadvantage compared to other modes of transport in the case of these passengers.

2.14. At the same time, the introduction of new ticketing products needs to find a balance between choice and complexity. This is particularly important in large urban areas, where many individuals make frequent and complex journeys that often rely on the services of different modes of transport and operators. In such cases, complicated fare structures and ticket restrictions can make the system more difficult to navigate and put some passengers off public transport. In contrast, a well-understood, multi-modal ticketing system can offer certainty, convenience, and generate customer loyalty.

2.15. Finally, we would suggest that the rail industry (alongside a number of other stakeholders) needs to recognise the potential opportunities created by the concept of “Mobility as a Service” (where individuals buy a “package” of different mobility services from a MaaS provider, in a similar way to how customers currently purchase bundles of telecom services, for example). By offering a compelling alternative to car ownership, MaaS solutions could be seen as complementary to traditional public transport services. However, the ability to develop compelling product offers requires MaaS providers to have easy access to transport operator fares, ticketing and information systems. Despite recent progress, we are still some way away from the ideal state.

c. Service quality (in-train facilities, including on-journey Wi-Fi and power supply)

2.16. The relative importance of different service attributes will naturally vary in line with the nature of the journey and the characteristics of a given passenger. It is important to bear this in mind when designing services or deciding what an acceptable level of service should be. A uniform approach to service specification can be expensive and inefficient. This is one of the reasons why devolution of powers over rail franchising and investment prioritisation can deliver a more efficient outcome, by helping to target resources more effectively.

2.17. But a more targeted approach is not the same as systematic under-investment. Train networks in many city regions have been starved of resources for a number of years despite record passenger growth rates. This has caused train services to fall below the minimum quality standards expected, with many passengers having to travel on ageing, uncomfortable, over-crowded rolling stock.

2.18. Early examples of devolution of franchising powers (such as Merseyrail, London Overground and Scotrail) show that a different approach is possible and we are further encouraged by the recent award of the Northern and Trans-Pennine Express franchises by a partnership between the Secretary of State for Transport and Rail North (effectively, an association of local authorities in the North of England). The future rail franchise covering the West Midlands is expected to follow a similar template, and there are also plans to transfer inner suburban rail services in the Greater London area to a partnership between DfT and Transport for London.

2.19. As devolution continues to progress, it will be important to follow through with adequate levels of investment, some of which will need to continue to come from the tax-payers through DfT grants to Network Rail or operating subsidy to train operators. In many parts of the country, the first priority is to invest in new or upgraded rolling stock, and in some cases, to continue to electrify the network. Our Destination Growth report[2] provides a good example of how investing in railway infrastructure and rolling stock simultaneously can provide high value for money and lead to a much improved passenger experience.

2.20. Beyond that, access to reliable wireless internet (both through on-train mobile phone networks) and at seat power supply are increasingly seen as minimal requirements by both business and leisure travellers. These services not only have a value in their own right but can also improve the perception and competitive position of rail services overall. For example, they can enable more productive use of travel time, which is an area where car travel is at a disadvantage. Unfortunately, provision of power supply and wireless internet are two further examples of where many regional and urban rail services have not kept pace with changing passenger expectations and priorities, in large measure as the result of ageing rolling stock.

2.21. At the same time, it is important to remember that technology and passenger preferences are permanently evolving, not least at times of fast technological change. It is therefore important to constantly evaluate passenger expectations and preferences. Transport Authorities are well placed to address this requirement for entire door to door journeys.

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

2.22. We would again underline that City Region transport authorities are well placed to make trade-offs between performance and other factors. Past experience of both rail and other forms of public transport, shows that these bodies tend to place significant weight on monitoring performance and achieving high service reliability, often in challenging operating conditions (i.e.: congested urban networks), and this is reflected in relatively high levels of passenger satisfaction for such operations (London Overground and Merseyrail being the case in point).

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[2] http://www.urbantransportgroup.org/resources/types/reports/destination-growth-case-britains-regional-railways

2.23. But we would also point out that performance should be about more than analysing operating statistics and punishing operators for under-performance. More importantly, it is about understanding and addressing the root causes of poor performance, and being able to communicate with the passengers to explain any necessary trade-offs (for example, during engineering works) and corrective steps. Local knowledge and accountability mean that city region transport authorities are well-placed and incentivised to perform these roles.

2.24. In terms of the measurement of performance, and how this impacts on customer satisfaction, we would emphasise the importance of ensuring that information collected through national surveys is accurate, reliable and of practical value to those managing and operating the network. One potential issue we have come across is that poor reliability (and, in particular, extreme negative experiences) can weigh heavily on passengers' future decisions to use the network but can be under-represented in low sample size surveys capturing information on individual journeys. They can also fail to capture the impact of poor performance on non-users or people to decide to no longer travel by train following a bad experience. Gathering views from non-users is something some transport authorities seek to do, and one area where we would like national surveys to be improved. Understanding the perceptions of non-users (which could include people left on platforms due to overcrowding) is key to getting a more balanced opinion.

2.25. The on-going devolution of transport powers is likely to reinforce the role of City Region transport authorities in this domain, which is something we fully support.

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

2.26. We have seen significant progress in this respect, in part through greater involvement of city region transport bodies as the result of the devolution of franchising powers.

2.27. However, there are some shortcomings in the current regulatory framework. A key problem is the over-emphasis on financial flows as an incentive mechanisms, which can be an onerous to operate and ultimately counterproductive. A greater emphasis on collaborative working can often be more effective at addressing underlying issues delivering greater accountability.

2.28. A more fundamental issue our members face is to do with the lack of accountability of Network Rail, who is in a crucial position to manage system performance. With the move towards the devolution of transport powers and greater devolution within Network Rail itself, we feel that a closer relationship between Network Rail, city region transport authorities and sub-national transport bodies (such as Transport for the North, Midlands Connect, Rail North, West Midlands Rail, which represent the interests of consortia of local authorities) is warranted. This could take the form of greater involvement of local bodies in investment prioritisation, in setting Network Rail objectives and in project boards.

2.29. At a more detailed level, there have been a number of recent positive developments in parts of the industry, with a movement towards right time performance, automated delay/repay compensation for some season ticket holders, and a lower refund threshold. These changes should be rolled out on a more consistent basis.

2.30. For example, the switch from the Passengers Charter regime (which provided regular ticket renewal discounts of 5 or 10% for poor punctuality and reliability) to the more onerous and less generous Delay/Repay application process has considerably reduced the level of performance-related compensation for many urban and regional rail season ticket holders. New initiatives such as automated delay/repay mechanisms are therefore a key priority to ensure that all passengers are treated equitably and compensated appropriately for poor train performance in future.