Timetable changes inquiry

House of Commons Transport Select Committee

Which? is the largest consumer organisation in the UK with more than 1.3 million members and supporters. We operate as an independent, a-political, social enterprise working for all consumers and funded solely by our commercial ventures. We receive no government money, public donations, or other fundraising income. Which?’s mission is to make individuals as powerful as the organisations they have to deal with in their daily lives, by empowering them to make informed decisions and by campaigning to make people’s lives fairer, simpler and safer.

Summary

- Which? has heard from hundreds of passengers about the impact of the May timetable changes on their personal and professional lives.
- Which? has been calling for improvements to the rail system since 2015. The chaotic introduction of the new timetable is just the latest example of a rail system that too often fails to deliver for passengers. Passenger trust in rail remains at an all-time low with only 23% of passengers saying that they have trust in the sector.
- The stories collected are indicative of a culture of not treating passengers fairly and highlight where train companies failed to address passenger concerns both ahead of and following the implementation of the timetable.
- As a bare minimum, the Government must introduce automatic compensation for delays and cancellations as soon as possible to ensure that passengers receive the compensation that they are owed.

Introduction

1. Which? has a very simple goal when it comes to rail: we want a rail system that works for passengers, not just for the rail industry. The introduction of new timetables in May this year are just the latest example of a rail system that too often fails to deliver for passengers.
2. Following the implementation of the new timetable, thousands of trains were delayed or cancelled, and in many cases passengers have been left stranded on platforms. Over three months on from the changes, passengers are still facing issues with their journeys, despite the introduction of several interim timetables across the most affected routes.
3. We have heard from hundreds of passengers following the timetable changes, many of whom feel that the entire process has been inadequate, from the consultation and bungled delivery to the communication around compensation. With more timetable changes expected at the end of the year, the regulator and Government must step in to ensure that this widespread disruption won't be repeated.
4. Since we used our legal powers to issue a super-complaint on rail compensation to the Office and Rail and Road (ORR) in December 2015, the issue of passenger compensation has been at the forefront of the political agenda in rail.
5. Millions of people across the UK depend upon the railways and the timeliness of trains is a critically important aspect of a rail service to passengers. Delays to journeys can lead to considerable hassle, anxiety, and stress.
6. A number of steps have been taken to address these concerns, such as the extension of the Consumer Rights Act 2015 to rail and the introduction of Delay Repay 15 for new franchises.


Which? is a consumer champion
We work to make things better for consumers. Our advice helps them make informed decisions. Our campaigns make people’s lives fairer, simpler and safer. Our services and products put consumers’ needs first to bring them better value.
However, consumer trust in the rail industry remains chronically low at just 23% with distrust up 8 percentage points to 37% from the same time last year\(^2\). Rail companies are less trusted than banks, energy and telecom companies.

7. As a bare minimum, automatic compensation must be introduced across the network as part of the rollout of smart ticketing. This will ensure that passengers receive the compensation that they are owed without having to claim it themselves.

8. It is also important that train companies ensure that they are adequately and effectively consulting with passengers when making decisions about the services that they run.

The rail passenger landscape: background

9. Trust in the rail sector has fallen to its lowest point in the last six years. According to the Which? consumer insight tracker, rail is now one of the least trusted sectors, only ranking ahead of car dealers. The months of chaos following the May timetable changes are just the latest example of a rail system that often fails to deliver for passengers.

10. Millions of train journeys are taken every day, and customers are paying more than ever to use rail services. However, in 2016/17 nearly 67 million of these passenger journeys were either cancelled or significantly late\(^3\).

11. Despite these developments, and a number of actions taken by the rail regulator and train operating companies, just 34% of people delayed by 30 minutes or more on their last journey actually make a claim\(^4\). Which? analysis has found that significant problems with compensation persist in the rail industry that may contribute to this:

12. One in nine passengers felt they had a reason to complain about their last journey, but only one in seven of those with a reason to complain did so.
   - Passengers feel things are getting worse: over one in five say their train service got worse in 2016, and only 13% of commuters thought their journeys had improved.
   - Which? 2018 analysis also found that passenger satisfaction with punctuality and reliability has dropped by six percentage points to 73% over the last 10 years, despite fares increasing by 40% in the same period\(^5\).

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14. The May timetable changes impacted a large portion of the rail network, with the Northern and Govia Thameslink Railway franchises among the worst hit by delays and cancellations. In November 2017, Which? surveyed over 14,000 members of the public about their experiences of travelling with UK train operators. Northern Rail ranked 24 out of 28 UK train companies for commuter rail services with an overall customer score of 44%, while Thameslink and Great Northern ranked 27 out of 28 UK train companies for commuter rail services with an overall customer score of 39%.

Which? insight - passenger experience

15. May 2018 saw the biggest six-monthly timetable change on record, with 40,000 changes scheduled, more than four times the usual number\(^8\). Figures from Transport Focus show that almost half of Britain's 19,000 trains were included in the change\(^9\).

16. Passengers were promised improved connectivity, a more frequent and more reliable service as a result of these changes and told to expect "more seats, longer trains and more choice on

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\(^1\) https://consumerinsight.which.co.uk/tracker/trust
\(^2\) https://press.which.co.uk/whichpresleases/millions-of-rail-passenger-journeys-experienced-significant-delays-last-year/
\(^3\) Which? Train Satisfaction Survey 2015. In November 2015, Research Now surveyed 6,986 members of the UK general public about their journeys by train in the last 12 months.
\(^4\) Which? Annual rail survey
\(^6\) https://www.which.co.uk/reviews/trains/article/best-and-worst-uk-train-companies/best-and-worst-uk-train-companies
\(^7\) https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CDP-2018-0154
\(^8\) https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/news-events-media/blog/may-revolution-timetable-changes/
destinations”. However, passenger experience following the change shows that this was not the case.

17. Which? promoted an online questionnaire to supporters and other passengers through social media following the introduction of the May timetable changes. The purpose of this questionnaire was to understand passengers’ experience and the impact of these changes on their lives.

18. Hundreds of passengers have shared their stories after months of chaos on the railways following the May timetable changes. These stories demonstrate the broader impact of rail delays and cancellations on passengers’ lives, from causing them to miss time with loved ones, to being late to work, and reports of a negative impact on some respondents’ physical and mental health.

19. Respondents described experiences where they were unable to plan their journey and experienced uncertainty, journeys took far longer than anticipated, they were frequently late for work or time-sensitive appointments, and they experienced overcrowding.

20. We conducted a qualitative analysis of the data collected through the questionnaire and identified three key factors that passengers felt led to the poor service that they were experiencing: the timetable changes themselves, the poor implementation of the timetable changes and the poor provision of information. All of these contributed to what passengers perceived as dangerous overcrowding on their peak-time journeys.

21. **The timetable changes themselves** - some stations are now serviced by fewer trains at peak times due to timetable changes. Some respondents (particularly those identifying themselves as being based in Harpenden) felt this reduced the level of service they receive, the value of their season ticket and contributed to overcrowding as the same number of rail users were relying on fewer trains.

22. **The poor implementation of timetable changes** - Respondents commonly described encountering delays and cancellations, the re-designation of trains from being ‘high-speed’ trains to being stopping services mid-journey, and stations being ‘skipped’ en route. This meant respondents faced uncertainty over whether they would reach their destination on time or, in some instances, at all. It also meant they experienced longer journey times than anticipated. This uncertainty also meant some respondents felt they had to take any available train that was running as they did not have confidence that later scheduled trains would run.

23. **Provision of information** - Respondents commonly reported trains being cancelled at short notice or with no notice, lack of consistency over which services would run, and lack of communication during journeys, in stations or through journey planning apps. Respondents felt this made it more difficult for them to plan their journeys and for them to claim compensation. As mentioned above, many respondents described distrusting communications and losing confidence that train companies would run certain services.

**Which? insight - passenger impact**

24. Which? found a number of rail passengers were affected by the recent timetable changes, with a majority of these feeling that the delays had a negative impact on both their work and family lives. A substantial minority had also seen negative impacts on their health (mental and physical) and adverse effects on their finance.

25. Despite the ongoing disruptions of the timetable changes, many said they struggled to access compensation. This was generally because they perceived the process to be overly burdensome on the customer.

26. The negative impact of the timetable changes on passengers’ lives and trust in the rail sector was also a key finding from our questionnaire. Respondents described a range of ways in which the timetable changes, the poor implementation of the timetable changes, provision of information and overcrowding had impacted their lives. From our qualitative analysis of passenger stories, we identified five areas that were impacted by the timetable change, outlined below.

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10 Which? research commissioned through YouGov conducted 2,003 online interviews with a nationally representative sample of respondents aged 18+ in Great Britain. Interviews took place between the 12th and 13th June 2018. Of those surveyed 150 responded to say they were affected by the delays caused by the Northern Trains and Govia Thameslink Railway timetable changes in May 2018.
27. **Passengers’ mental and emotional wellbeing** - Respondents reported that the May timetable changes had negatively affected their mental and emotional wellbeing in a variety of ways. Some said they found using and anticipating using the rail network stressful and anxiety provoking. This was generally because they were unable to manage their own time and the expectations of others, found the conditions on trains and in stations uncomfortable and were concerned about exhausting the good-will of others. Respondents that identified themselves as being ‘vulnerable’ in some way (for instance, saying they had a particular need for a seat due to their age, a health condition, or pregnancy) said that they found journeys following the timetable changes additionally stressful.

28. The uncertainty around the journey, for example, whether they would arrive at their destination on time, whether they will be safe on the platform or whether they would lose their job was a significant cause of concern for passengers. In many cases, this developed into a strong sense of frustration and anger at the failings of the rail network.

29. Aside from anxiety, stress, anger and frustration, several respondents wrote about how they were coming to dread rail travel and coming into work and that they were becoming increasingly depressed about the amount of time they were needing to spend focused on travelling to and from work.

30. **Passengers’ quality of life** - Respondents often linked their experience of stress, anxiety and frustration to their deteriorating quality of life and work-life balance. Respondents said they spent less time with family and friends, had less time for leisure or social activities, or were late for/missed work due to disruption on the network. Numerous respondents who reported missing out on time with their children or partner said that it had negatively impacted their relationships as well as their emotional wellbeing.

31. Some respondents also said that the timetable changes and their travel conditions have negatively impacted on their physical health. Some respondents said that they have had to stand for extended periods of time, which has exacerbated existing health concerns. Others said they were losing sleep or experiencing anxiety attacks due to anxiety and stress over using the rail network.

32. **Passengers’ professional life** - Although many respondents attempted to mitigate the impact of disruption at work, respondents commonly said they had been late for or missed work as a result of the execution of the timetable changes. While many said their employers had been understanding about the disruption as a result of the timetable changes, some were concerned their employers’ patience would run out and they would become unemployed. This created a sense of anxiety.

33. In a few instances, respondents said they had been forced to turn down work that would require rail travel as they could not guarantee being able to reach their clients. Others were considering changing their hours, or working fewer hours, to ensure they can make their work and family commitments.

34. **Passengers’ personal finances** - In addition to lost time, some respondents said that they had incurred additional costs as a result of the timetable changes. This generally related to incurring additional charges (for instance childcare late fees or having to hire a car to make journeys), or having to meet the cost of different rail routes or alternative transport options. Others had missed paid for events or commitments as they were not able to get there or did not have confidence they would be able to reach their venue and also return as planned.

35. Worryingly, a number of passengers also complained about struggling to claim compensation for delays to their journeys, for the additional costs incurred and for the wider impact of delays on their lives. Highlighting the low levels of trust in the sector, there was a general belief that train companies were making it difficult for passengers to claim compensation. Respondents felt that the compensation system placed an unreasonable burden on proof on passengers, requiring them to enter numerous pieces of information from different sources. Respondents also felt train companies did not provide the necessary information to make a claim, for example, by removing cancelled trains from departure boards and making it unclear which services passengers were travelling on due to cancellations and delays. In addition, a number of passengers felt the ‘auto-repay’ digital infrastructure (where that was available) was not fit for purpose and unable to cope with demand.

36. Some respondents also highlighted concerns about the wider financial impact of the timetable changes, with some saying that the value of their home and the desirability of their local area had gone down as a result of the timetable changes. This was generally because their station was served by fewer trains and was less desirable as a ‘commuter town’ as a result.
37. **Passengers’ perceptions of rail** - several of our respondents said that their recent experiences on the network had negatively impacted their perceptions of rail travel. This often linked to the perceived competence of rail companies’ senior leadership and the preparation which had gone into the planning of the May timetable changes, the value for money they were receiving and their perceptions of the safety of rail travel.

38. In particular, some respondents felt that the level of service they had received since the timetable changes meant they were no longer receiving value for money. Some respondents who were now receiving fewer services at the times they wanted to travel as a result of the timetable changes felt they should pay less as a result.

39. While accidents on the UK rail network are at a record low since 2002/3, respondents said they did not always perceive the conditions they are travelling in to be safe. This perception generally stemmed from overcrowding on trains and on platforms and not being able to get home. Respondents reported becoming or seeing people become unwell as a result of overcrowding, for instance fainting, or seeing people fall in the rush to get between platforms which had been changed at short notice. Some respondents were also very concerned about the potential death and injury toll were there to be an accident.

40. Underpinning many passengers’ responses to the May timetable changes was a lack of control. In effect, the way in which the May timetable changes were implemented and poor passenger information around timetable changes, delays and cancellation meant that respondents felt they had little option other than to go to their station and wait. This also stoked dissatisfaction with rail companies’ advice to ‘check before you travel’ as respondents felt changes were made at such short notice they could not effectively plan even if they checked on the day of travel.

41. It is clear that none of these individual aspects occur in isolation and the knock-on effect of the timetable chaos on passengers’ personal and professional lives as well as their perceptions of their physical and mental health is cause for significant concern. Some respondents, for example, described how they adopted new behaviours in order to try to mitigate the impact of delays and uncertainties on their professional life. Many respondents said they were leaving home earlier in order to avoid being late for work, which in some cases resulted in less time spent with children and family in the mornings. Such behaviours can result in additional stress and anxiety and a poorer work-life balance as respondents attempt to stretch a finite resource: their time.

**Automatic compensation**

42. Despite Which?’s calls for better information and communication around delay compensation and consequential losses, findings from the ORR continue to demonstrate how little improvement has been made in information provision to passengers around compensation.

43. Adequate and accessible compensation is a vital part of redress for consumers when things go wrong. However, Which?’s research has identified a number of ongoing issues with claiming compensation in rail, including feelings that the claims process is too complex, low levels of passenger awareness of their rights, and potential non-compliance with consumer protection laws due to train companies providing misleading information about passengers’ entitlement to claim for consequential losses.

44. Which? has previously raised concerns that most delayed rail passengers are not aware of, nor apply for, the compensation to which they are entitled. In a market where consumers are often not able to vote with their feet and switch providers if they are unhappy, compensation is a critical factor in incentivising train operators to improve the service they deliver to their customers.

45. Under Delay Repay, the industry scheme that both Northern and GTR are signed up to, compensation is available for delays or cancellations, with the amount passengers are entitled to varying according to the length of delay. Both Northern and GTR have introduced automatic

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11 It is important to note that the UK has one of the best rail safety records in Europe in terms of fatalities per passenger journey and per passenger kilometre and that potentially high risk train accidents have fallen consistently over recent years. Rail Factsheet: 2017, p.5


repayments, demonstrating that auto-compensation works to improve the system for customers. However, these schemes still leave room for improvement as they only cover advance tickets bought directly through the train company.

46. Which? is calling for all passengers who have paid for their ticket electronically to be refunded automatically. Automatic compensation is the best method of compensating customers, as the rail industry has continued to fail in making any significant progress on this issue.

47. Automatic compensation will remove the hassle passengers face with the lack of clarity and complexity of compensation arrangements in rail, the inconsistencies in train companies’ handling of compensation claims and the reliance on train companies to provide accurate information. It will also ensure passengers receive the money they are owed and drive improvements across the network.

48. If the rail system is to start working for passengers the regulator and Government should introduce automatic compensation for delays and cancellations.

September 2018
Appendix I: Supporter comments

"I am a working Mum with two small children- I absolutely crave my time with them. Since the timetable change I rarely put my 1.5 year old to bed, due to cancelled & delayed trains. I have to get up earlier to catch a train as I cannot be late for work, therefore I do not get to see my 1.5 year old in the mornings. My 4 year old wakes up earlier as she is desperate to see mummy before she goes to work, she also makes it difficult for daddy to put her to bed as she wants to see mummy when she's home from work. This makes her very cranky in the day time for preschool and dad. I try very hard not to let the trains affect me- however it is becoming harder and harder to do so. The thought of having to claim delay repay makes me feel incredibly frustrated- I actually hate to say, but I do not have the energy to do it and I am not going to waste anymore of my valuable time with family to fill out forms! Compensation would be desirable- but again not if it was a hassle to claim. I am an annual season ticket holder and don't understand how they can charge so much for the very little service I get. I often have to stand on a very overcrowded train with barely any personal space. I do believe the government need to do more to hold train companies accountable! I do not have the energy to go on and on, I have tried my best not to talk about the changes in trains as it really frustrates me and makes me feel negative. Something needs to change."

"I only work Mon to Wed, today I completed by 9th delay repay claim (and I've had a week's holiday since new timetable was introduced). I'm trying to juggle working part time with kids and pick-ups have been a nightmare. We now have a revised, revised timetable and they're still cancelling trains, terminating them early and the overcrowding in the mornings is ridiculous yet no-one wants to take responsibility and resolve the issues. Instead of going by train I'm regularly having to go by bus and tube. This costs me more yet when I claim, as on pay-as-you-go I'm told I "choose" to travel that way and not entitled to re-imbursement... I do NOT choose, their crap service leaves me no choice. Train journey is 55 mins. Tube and bus is normally 1 hour 20 mins-ish but when you have kids 25 mins late is too much. You just can't be 45+ mins late picking up! It's pretty much every day and they no longer even bother to apologise, they are literally holding commuters to ransom as there is no choice."

"Trains just disappear from the timetable. Trains are so overcrowded - people are fainting. I am so stressed - all I think about is how I'm going to get to work, then how I'm going to get home. My home life is suffering - my daughter is doing her exams and needs my support - I'm stuck in London. My husband has had to pick me up from other stations as I can't get to Harpenden. Trains that are fast, just get downgraded to all-stoppers mid journey. Trains that are slow, just get their stopping sequence changed missing out your station mid journey so I get stranded at a station and there are no trains in the near time to get me home. My stress levels are so high, I'm not sleeping, I'm cross with my family (when I actually get to see them), I'm distracted and unproductive at work, I'm on edge and anxious all the time."