Putting rail information in the public domain

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OFFICE OF RAIL REGULATION

Foreword

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The ORR and Passenger Focus both consider that the rail industry should put more information into the public domain, specifically on how the rail industry is performing in a way that will be useful to drive improvements to services for passengers. The ORR publishes the Public Performance Measure results quarterly, showing each train company's average punctuality figure. Passenger Focus's National Passenger Survey, which rates Great Britain's rail companies' train and station facilities, is published twice a year. To encourage transparency and to help compare operators' performance across the industry, Passenger Focus results are now shown down to route level. Although there is some rail performance information being made public, ORR and Passenger Focus felt it important to acquire more evidence on this issue to best consider the way forward, even though both organisations have access to opinion from individuals with considerable rail industry expertise. We therefore jointly commissioned this independent research to look at what performance measures passengers wanted published, how it should be made publically available, how they would use it and what benefits they saw it would bring. We see this initiative as being fully consistent with the Government's open data agenda.

The main finding is that passengers would value more rail data being brought into the public domain. Passengers saw the greatest benefit coming just through its existence and availability, with public information increasing the transparency of the rail industry and enabling greater scrutiny. This accords with a benefit highlighted within the Government's report: "Better Choices: Better Deals Consumers Powering Growth" (2011, p33):

"Making performance and complaints data more transparent is a good way of encouraging businesses to improve their performance without the need for heavy-handed legislation, as no company wants to be last in an indicator of performance or customer satisfaction."

The second significant finding, especially given the remits of ORR and Passenger Focus, is that passengers are looking for organisations to champion, on their behalf, any issues that this rail data would identify.

The research has provided greater evidence to make the case for more information in the public domain for rail and ORR and Passenger Focus wish to move the initiative forward for passengers' benefit. Over the summer months, in discussions with the industry, we will consider what would be the most effective steps that can be taken to achieve transition from the current situation to much greater public availability of rail performance information. Though we are separate organisations with different objectives, where there is common ground we will work together. At the end of this phase of work, we intend to issue our recommendations on how the rail industry can take this forward.

Management summary

ORR and Passenger Focus support the Government's policy of making more information available on industries that are publicly funded. Prior to the research, both organisations have been looking at the issue of increasing the extent of information available about the rail industry's performance. We commissioned the research to acquire a deeper understanding of passengers' and others views on this issue. It specifically asked what rail performance information or data passengers need to help to make accurate statements and judgments like: 'I travel on the XYZ line, my opinion of it is ….' The research approach chosen was 'qualitative', involving focus groups and in-depth interviews conducted during January to March 2010. The objectives of the research were to establish:

i What information passengers require to most effectively understand their train companies' and others' performance, how it should be broken down and what frequency of publication is desired;

ii How, or who should source and publish the information and to ensure what is made public is accepted by passengers as being authoritatively true;

iii How such information can be used: how and who should increase transparency of train companies' performance and challenge poor service where warranted;

iv How such performance information might input to "strategic" decisions such as "where should I live?", "how should I travel?; and

v The role of 'value for money' in any performance information.

Cragg Ross Dawson was the market research agency selected to carry out this research. Outlined below are ORR and Passenger Focus's key learnings from the research:

1 Overall passengers considered there was a role for such information. They saw the benefit chiefly coming just through its existence and availability, believing this would increase transparency of the rail industry and lead to improvements through the rail industry being under greater scrutiny. Passengers' had limited interest in taking action themselves, mostly borne out of the fact that they generally felt they had little choice of train provider to use and secondly, they felt a lack of empowerment to challenge train companies directly. The mechanism of scrutiny and the process of challenging train companies were unclear to passengers, but if there was more public information available, it would be taken up by organisations / bodies involved with the rail industry. ORR and Passenger Focus particularly note this point given our organisations' remits, industry position and capabilities.

2 Passengers said that they want this information broken down to accurately show and reflect what their experiences are of their own train travel. They were clear that train companies' overall averages can mask highs and lows across services, times of day and at different points along the route. A sentiment came through: I want those who can make a difference for me to know what my journey is like. ORR and Passenger Focus note the desire for significant route-level and localised details to make any rail information useful.

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3 The measures that passengers felt captured their experience were punctuality and reliability, investment, comfort, fares, staff, station facilities and journey times. They also wanted the data to be updated at least every three to six months to reflect how the service has been in the recent past. ORR and Passenger Focus believe they are well placed to judge the current information available around the industry and the issues involved in bringing it into the public domain.

4 Passengers want the provider of rail data to be a trusted source; there was suspicion that if it was left to the train companies they might provide selective information. They wanted someone to provide the stamp of approval that the information is reliable and unbiased. In this regard, knowledge of the existence of both ORR and Passenger Focus was limited, although when explained we were well received for our roles, independence and the authority we could bring as a 'seal of approval' to any data made available. The organisation many passengers rated as a possible source was National Rail Enquiries by virtue of its widespread use and their view of its effectiveness, but passengers presumed it to be independent of train companies. Overall passengers had a limited understanding about the roles of the organisations within the rail industry. In this context, any role we might have in the provision of information would have implications for ORR and Passenger Focus in terms of developing a more recognised public profile.

5 The way information is provided is important. Passengers felt simplicity is key. Whether ORR and/or Passenger Focus do get involved in the development of the mechanisms that publicly present/promote the data is an issue to be decided, but if we do, then this point is very important. Also, although passengers are unlikely to use the data themselves (see point 1), to have confidence in the publicly available results they need to be able to see that it reflects their experience. If the data is too complex to interpret then it will lose passenger support.

It is the case that on many journeys, passengers do not have a choice of operators due to a monopoly train service running. The research has shown passengers want more rail-performance information to be available so organisations can better act on passengers' behalf and make operators more publically accountable. ORR and Passenger Focus are keen to move forward with the initiative.

The following section contains a copy of Cragg Ross Dawson's detailed findings.

Introduction to detailed findings

In the following section is a copy of the detailed findings from Cragg Ross Dawson's report. An overview of the research methodology is provided below. Cragg Ross Dawson's full report can be viewed on ORR or Passenger Focus's websites.

Overview of research methodology

The methodology was qualitative, involving group discussions and in-depth interviews with a mix of passengers and organisations that have an interest in the rail industry. The discussions took place between 17 January and 14 March 2011. They were all conducted by employees of Cragg Ross Dawson.

The range of discussions comprised:
• seven standard size focus groups of passengers – chosen to gain a spread across short distance commute, long distance commute, business travellers and leisure travellers, age groupings (18-30, 31-50 & over 50), and a mix of locations between London/South East, Midlands and Manchester.
• three 'mini groups' with members of Rail User Groups representing passengers on lines in the South East
• five individual in-depth discussions with organisations having an interest in the rail industry: two with representatives of rail/consumer bodies, two with journalists/commentators on rail; and one with a representative of a charity working for blind people.

All discussions followed topic guides agreed with ORR and Passenger Focus, a copy of the topic guide used for the passenger groups is shown in the appendix.

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Cragg Ross Dawson's detailed findings

1 Contextual points – passengers

1.1 The strong overall impression from passengers was that few felt closely engaged with the rail industry. For most it was a service they used which more or less meets their needs but which they believed transacts with them largely in a commercial fashion: passengers need the industry's services; the industry needs their custom. There was no relationship beyond this and no sense of openness or transparency in the industry's dealings with its customers.

1.2 Few passengers were entirely satisfied with the rail service they used, though most felt that performance had improved in some respects over the last ten years or so. To a large extent satisfaction was determined by individual experiences; this meant that commuters had significantly different perceptions from more occasional rail users, especially leisure travellers. Commuters and frequent business travellers tended to have higher expectations than leisure travellers and were more attuned to quality of service. Leisure travellers were less demanding, though their overall perceptions could easily be shaped by a single experience.

1.3 When asked to consider rail travel and their experience of it, passengers focused primarily on immediate, day-to-day issues which affected their journeys: punctuality, delays, crowding, fares and fare increases, staff and station facilities. They wanted better service and performance in all these areas, and underlying this they had an interest in knowing what the TOCs were doing, or planning to do, to make improvements.

1.4 When they thought about rail travel a little more, many passengers, especially long distance commuters and frequent business travellers, raised some of the bigger issues in the industry and the way these affected them. Above all they felt they had no choice of train company, since most routes were served by only one TOC. Even where there was a choice of TOC, such as in Brighton, for passengers travelling to London, a sense of lack of choice prevailed. Related to this they felt that TOCs are remote, that it is not easy to have a dialogue with them and that they are not accountable to passengers in a way that passengers understand.

"There isn't a competition really. I mean if you're going to fly to London you've got four or five options these days. Easyjet, British Midlands, British Airways. There is the competition, whereas for us it's Virgin and that's it to get to London. They've got you over a barrel."
[Business travellers 36-55 Manchester]

1.5 On this latter point, passengers appeared to have little knowledge of regulation in the rail industry. Few had any idea who or what regulates it, how they regulate it and by what means, what standards are set for service providers (ie the TOCs), nor what sanctions and penalties are imposed, and by whom, in the event of transgressions. The impression was that if changes were made in the industry they were done for the benefit of the TOCs and the industry, and were not necessarily in the interests of passengers.

1.6 A consequence of this was that many passengers, especially frequent users of train services, felt they lack power. In their view rail was a monopoly market which offered little or no choice, unlike the provision of most other commercial goods and services. They did not feel inclined to complain because they had little faith in the outcome, and they believed that to a large extent train companies control the industry.

"Because train companies are so big and you've no idea who you're writing to, you write to some complaints department in the middle of nowhere, you're never going to get answered or talk to anyone, so you just don't bother, it's not worth the time you're going to spend doing it."
[Business travellers 18-35 London]

1.7 Collectively these perceptions pointed to and resulted in a sense of passivity in passengers' attitudes. Service was usually just about good enough to keep them accepting of it; they tended not to expect any better, and they did not seek alternatives because they felt none were viable.

"In bad times it [train travel] hacks me off; when it works it's just working. I'm never really happy with it but what can you do?"
[Long distance commuters 18-35 South East]

2 Contextual points – interested parties

2.1 Interested parties (rail user groups, consumer groups and journalists) largely reflected the passenger view of the rail industry. They felt that there is not a close link between passenger and industry, and that passengers are negatively affected by aspects of the context within which the train companies work.

2.2 Interested parties regarded two issues as particularly important: franchises and the commercial environment in which franchises are awarded and operated; and capacity on the network, which they felt is determined largely by Network Rail and the Department for Transport. Several worried that capacity problems will worsen as demand continues to increase.

2.3 Like passengers, interested parties were concerned with the detail of rail industry performance but they tended to take a broader view than passengers and felt that these factors have a major impact on performance. Their view of the rail industry in general was mixed; they felt that improvements have been made in recent years but many had reservations and some were still concerned about the consequences of privatisation.

2.4 Most interested parties felt that as a result of limitations on day-to-day performance and problems deriving from the franchising system and capacity limits, the entire passenger experience of rail can be poor. Some believed it is worse than the performance figures suggest and likely to get worse in the future as demand grows. Many reflected the passenger perspective, that people are not entirely happy with the service, but are stoical and simply tolerate it. Others were a little more positive in their views.

"I think people have a very passive attitude towards it, they grin and bear it. I think it's because a lot of people realise that it's structural. If you're on a crowded train every day and there's a 10-coach train already and it's still crowded daily, they probably think there isn't much you can do about it."
[Interested party]

"I think the problem is, particularly for commuters, that very often the railways are a monopoly provider."
[Interested party]

"I think on balance the passenger is better served than 30 years ago but it's a difficult one because you can point to aspects of the service which were better then."
[Interested party]

2.5 Issues of concern to minorities also came up among interested parties. The organisation representing disabled people felt that those with disabilities are disadvantaged in rail travel, as they are in other areas of life, and need not only better, more tailored services but also targeted advice and information. Two others believed that rural rail users have different needs from the urban rail-using majority, which are not always met by the industry.

3 Defining performance in rail

3.1 Most passengers and interested parties had clear ideas of what they felt constituted good or poor performance by train services; this went some way beyond punctuality. The general consensus was that the principal measures of performance are, in descending order of importance:
- punctuality and reliability of services
- comfort and space on board: being able to get a seat
- fares, and fare increases
- customer service: this was a term commonly used by passengers to refer to: staff and staff attitudes at stations and on trains; facilities on trains such as catering; and facilities at stations – parking, catering, disabled access
- journey times.

3.2 Some passengers and interested parties put slightly different emphasis on certain of these points. A few interested parties felt that crowding was a particularly important criterion in gauging performance, and should be a top priority. Other interested parties and some passengers with elderly or disabled family members who used trains regarded facilities for disabled people as especially significant.

3.3 Value for money, though important, was not identified in itself as a valid indicator of performance. Assuming it was defined as quality of service set against the price paid for it, value for money in the context of train services was thought difficult to judge. It only had meaning when set alongside value for money for comparable services; while this might be simple in areas such as banking, it was not easy to make comparisons between different rail companies, different journeys or different modes of transport.

"It's very hard to work out if the price is right because you don't know what it's worth. You can't compare one journey with another."
[Business travellers 18-35 London]

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4 The availability of performance and service information generally

4.1 As a means of drawing comparisons with information in the rail industry, respondents were asked to consider the current availability of consumer information more generally, in any sphere, and how easily it is accessed.

4.2 The widespread feeling was that information is increasingly available and accessible. Almost everyone felt that in virtually all areas of product and service transactions there is now more information on offer than in the past, from both service providers to promote their services and regulatory authorities to monitor them. At the same time they felt that this information is increasingly easy to find, particularly thanks to the internet: most people now have access to all the information on offer easily and quickly.

"It's a lot more accessible now than it was ten years ago. Information of any kind. So many people now have smart phones and it's like "Just let me Google that."
[Business travellers 36-55 Manchester]

4.3 This meant that in their view there is not only information but also advice and guidance on offer to help people make decisions about major purchases and about significant life events such as moving house or changing jobs. There was no doubting the benefits of access to information and advice in these contexts: respondents felt it was genuinely useful and that it did affect the decisions they made.

"Say you're looking for information on schools and careers decisions you can look online for info about colleges, employers, apprenticeships. It's all very helpful. It's easy these days."
[Short distance commuters 36-55 London]

4.4 The type of information people wanted in helping them make decisions was both factual and experience-based. Hard fact was essential in gauging performance, but there was cynicism surrounding statistics, and the way they can be manipulated. This seemed to be based as much on prejudice as anything else, and particularly on mistrust of 'official' statistics such as crime figures, but it clearly coloured views of factual information in all spheres, including rail.

4.5 Given this, and also for its own sake, people valued customer feedback on services as an adjunct to statistical and other factual data. This sort of information helped them contextualise the factual material and added colour and real-life experiences to their perceptions. The example most often mentioned was Trip Adviser, which a number of respondents had used and had found helpful when choosing and booking

holidays. Some were sceptical of some of the entries, but most felt it significantly enhanced their knowledge.

"You want to ask people who've already done it. That's how you find what it's really like."
[Business travellers 18-35 London]

"Yeah I always go for website reviews…Square Meal, Top Table. I just sometimes think if I take a friend's recommendation they might not quite have the same idea as what I do for that particular thing."
[Business travellers 18-35 London]

"You can use internet forums and find someone who's bought that product. You get a better opinion from another customer [than from the retailer/provider]"
[Short distance commuters 36-55 London]

"I use Trip Adviser for holiday information, so I can see what other people have found. It's unbiased."
[Short distance commuters 36-55 London]

4.6 Some passengers also used price comparison websites for certain products and services, which they felt gave them a more objective view of what was available in markets where there was direct competition.

4.7 Response to examples of performance information in areas of public services demonstrated that there is genuine interest in this but that much depends on the way it is presented. Passengers were shown performance information for schools, universities, a local authority and a police force. Interest tended to be highest in school and university information, but the police performance data invariably worked best because it used a simple visual approach (a pie chart) which was presente in colour, and it spelled out clearly the question that had generated the information it presented.

4.8 In comparison any information presented with little visual element or without clear explanation of how the information has been gathered and what it covers was less well received.

5 Rail performance information

Knowledge of its existence

5.1 Almost all *passengers* knew or assumed that performance information about the railways exists in some form but they knew little, if anything, about it. To a large extent this seemed a reflection of their passivity: they focused strongly on immediate concerns – *Is my train on time?* or *Can I get a seat?* – and gave little thought to performance in a more general sense.

5.2 Consequently passengers tended not to look for performance information, nor know where to look for it. If and when they felt they needed information they typically expected it to come from TOCs, in the form of posters at stations setting out performance records; most passengers recalled seeing these. If they were to seek information themselves they generally expected simply to use search engines and see what came up. Beyond this, none had any ideas of how and where to look.

"I'm sure you could [get hold of performance information], but I haven't looked."
[Business travellers 18-35 London]

"I'm sure if we went on to First Capital Connect's website, they probably have something on there, one of those charts or something around their monthly performance. I've never looked, because if you've got to take the train, you have to. So actually whether they have been on time last month isn't going to influence whether I book a ticket."
[Business travellers 18-35 London]

5.3 Passengers were shown parts of a recent Passenger Focus National Passenger Survey and an ORR National Rail Trends report. Reactions to these reflected their response was consistent: most said they found the National Passenger Survey easier to use because it was in colour and used more visual elements; these made it seem more accessible. It was clear that data needed to be explained in a way that anyone could understand it; some passengers queried statistics in the reports because they mis-read the figures or were unsure what size samples of passengers had been used to calculate them.

5.4 *Interested parties* were invariably better informed about rail performance information than passengers. They made it their business to know, and they knew where to look and what to look for. Generally interested parties knew of TOC Passenger Charters and performance information produced by TOCs to meet their Charter obligations. They were also aware of Network Rail's Public Performance Measure (PPM) data, the Passenger Focus National Passenger Survey, and ORR's National Rail Trends reports.

"Well that's pretty well catered for, for those who want to know. It's publicly available and not charged for, it's a vast document called National Rail Trends published by the ORR."
[Interested party]

5.5 Discussion of the existence and availability of information prompted some interested parties to make critical comments about the information they see. They felt that it is not sufficiently disaggregated to be used easily: that it is too often provided for entire routes, rather than specific journeys. A particular problem was that information given for a route was not broken down into journeys covering part of the route, and was only provided for an end-to-end trip. More generally they felt that the information typically gives a broad-brush picture of performance and is not easily made relevant to individual usage of a train service or route.

5.6 Linked to this some also believed that most rail performance data is not well presented if it is intended for use by passengers. They felt it is not always in user-friendly form and so is not genuinely accessible. Interested parties reflected what passengers said about their low awareness of performance data: they believed passengers did not know it existed apart from posters at stations carrying very basic information, and that passengers would not know where to look for it.

What is your feeling about passenger information provided by rail companies?

"I can sum it up in three words: could do better. Preferably, must do better. It has been improving. There are some operators who are better than others. They still do not give, in my view, the right priority to information and there are a number of issues here. One is disaggregation...The other problem is that the devising of information and messages to passengers is done from too low a level and by staff who are not really qualified to do it are very often the ones who put together the words that are the information. This is why many messages to passengers are not well written, not well devised."
[Interested party]

"What it [rail performance information] lacks is a real customer focus. They're not really providing what people want. It's an industry that is still very much producer led rather than customer led."
[Interested party]

Passengers' response to the offer of rail performance information

Initial reactions muted

5.7 Passengers' initial response to the prospect of rail performance information being made available to them reflected the passivity and lack of involvement they displayed in relation to using rail services. Reactions to the idea at first were typically muted, unconcerned and unenthusiastic.

5.8 This response seemed based on two key features of the way most passengers perceived rail travel. First, because they based their assessment of the service they received primarily on their *experience* of rail travel they were not immediately convinced that performance information would be of significant value to them. Second, if, as many believed, they had no choice of train service, they were not sure how performance information would help them in making decisions about rail travel: they had no option but to use the service they always used.

"It's all very nice but I don't see why anybody would want to read it because there is no choice of operator for most…"
[Business travellers 36-55 Manchester]

"If there was any form of competition on the lines and I had a choice of which operator to use then something like that might be useful. There isn't and therefore I just don't need that information."
[Leisure travellers 18-35 Birmingham]

"I know it's like freedom of information but I don't think this information is really vital to us. I'm not sure it would alter my opinion on anything because I still need to get my train to London."
[Business travellers 36-55 Manchester]

5.9 If passengers did want information about rail services their needs were primarily of a tactical nature: more than anything they expected to be able to have access to and use information about their short term travel plans. These were typically one-off enquiries which did not take in 'bigger picture' issues around rail services. They felt that this sort of information is detailed and easily available: websites offer a large amount of data on rail services, and smart phones make this accessible. There was some sense that tactical information can inform strategic decisions: knowing the details of a specific journey could help passengers come to a view about travelling on that route in the future.

Information as a means of providing greater transparency

5.10 When passengers had considered and discussed the idea of performance information their interest in the idea tended to grow, and their perceptions around how it might be used broadened. On reflection they could see some value in having access to information that went beyond immediate needs and gave them a broader view of rail companies' performance. This prompted them to think differently about the information that might be offered: it was not only to help them in their decisions, but it could have a role in providing insights into rail services in a more general way.

5.11 If information did work in this way, few passengers expected to use it in a proactive way. They did not imagine seeking out information unless, on rare occasions, they had a particular need for a specific example of a train company's performance. It would be useful to know it was there but it would not prompt them to look for it and use it.

"If they put this information on the train, where you can pick it up if you're bored you might have a look at it. You've got something to occupy you on your journey, but to go online and book it you wouldn't look at these things…If it's online you'd have to download it or print it to have a look at it."
[Business travellers 18-35 London]

5.12 Rather, passengers saw the most salient benefit in a passive sense: in providing them with access to information which they might not use but which, simply through its existence, assuming it were known, would increase accountability of rail services. Their thinking was that more information about train services would mean *greater transparency* around train companies' performance and that this in turn would effectively *empower passengers* because they could call the companies to account.

"I wouldn't go around looking for this information on the internet or books or anything. If you were just looking around it would catch your eye and you'd be like 'Oh well this is really good' and you can compare it to your experience as well. In that sense I think it's quite handy."
[Leisure travellers 18-35 Birmingham]

"This is to show they're being watched over and they can't just do anything they please. They still have to give a good service to the companies. So in that respect it's good having this."
[Long distance commuters 36-55 Birmingham]

"If you're being regulated by anybody you've got to be trying to improve."
[Long distance commuters 36-55 Birmingham]

5.13 Few passengers considered unprompted how they would use their empowerment in dialogue with their train company; for many the assumption was simply that if performance information were in the public domain and it was poor, this would encourage train companies to make improvements. When asked, some felt they might contact their local MP or local newspaper and point out to them performance figures as a means of highlighting problems.

5.14 *The role of rail performance information in creating transparency and, implicitly, increasing accountability emerged as its most widely accepted and valued role. The assumption was that it would show passengers that train companies are being monitored and that this could bring about improvements in performance and quality of service.*

5.15 If information were available to be used to gauge train companies' performance in this more general sense, topics that were regarded as having the greatest value were all those which effectively comprised the passenger experience of using rail services: punctuality and reliability, comfort and crowding, station facilities, staff and fares.

A more active perspective

5.16 Though most passengers took up this passive approach to rail performance information, some accepted that it might also be used in a more active way. When it was suggested to them that passengers might be able to use information as a means of helping them make decisions about moving home, changing jobs and mode of transport used, they agreed. Some perceived an opportunity to link this into other information, on issues such as fares and levels of crowding, which they felt would be useful to know as part of the overall experience of using a train company and travelling on a certain route.

"If I was moving to a place and I wanted to compare the trains to commute and stuff that's the information I'd probably look at on the internet and do some research beforehand, to make that final decision on where I should move, depending on the transport."
[Long distance commuters 36-55 Birmingham]

"If I were moving to a different area I would look for information. On a daily basis it would be helpful to have it the station but I wouldn't actively look for it."
[Short distance commuters 36-55 London]

"Say you move jobs and you wanted to carry on travelling by train, that's when you might want that information, to see if it was still viable."
[Business travellers 18-35 London]

"I have a friend who relocated from Hertfordshire down to Surrey and they chose their town based on trains in to London and I could see how that would be really good information for them. And they really did pick the town around how long the guy's commute would be."
[Business travellers 18-35 London]

"(It's like) Is that journey from Coventry to Birmingham, what's the reliability of that journey from 8 to 9 in the morning over the last 12 months?"
[Long distance commuters 36-55 Birmingham]

"The thing that would be interesting to me is, if they said: 'In general, this train is extremely busy and your chances of getting a seat are...' Just that type of information so I know it all...to know what peak times are and the amount of traffic that goes on those trains."
[Leisure travellers 18-35 Birmingham]

5.17 Looking beyond this, and considering the potential for rail performance information, some also believed it would be helpful in giving passengers evidence if and when they wanted to approach TOCs with requests for changes. If they were dissatisfied with the service they received and wanted to contact the train company direct or via the local press they could use performance information to reinforce their case.

5.18 Related to this, there was some interest in data on planned investment by train companies. This came partly from an appetite for information on how the service was going to be improved and partly from the prospect of having information to support any suggestions or requests for improvements to the service they might want to make.

"About what they're spending the money on. You could analyse it and say 'We've improved this and that on the trains'."
[Leisure travellers 18-35 Birmingham]

"It's all worth knowing. You can see where your money's going and how it will improve your journey, what benefits for travellers there will be."
[Short distance commuters 36-55 London]

Limited role in gauging value for money

5.19 As noted above, passengers tended to see value for money in train travel as difficult to judge because there are too many variables to enable valid comparisons to be drawn. This stance was reflected in their views on using rail performance information to help them gauge value for money: they did not feel it would be useful because they would not know how it was assessed and it would be difficult to compare different journeys, lines or TOCs on this criterion.

5.20 A substantial minority remained unconvinced of the value of train performance information, even in a passive 'transparency' role. These passengers tended to be commuters and were more often those who were least engaged with their rail service. They focused strongly on day-to-day services and their only interest in train information concerned the tactical; they saw little value in anything beyond this.

"All I care about is my train so the fact that it runs 99.9% of its trains on time, if it's my train that's always late then that's what I'm interested in."
[Long distance commuters 36-55 Birmingham]

"It's maybe useful on a one-off basis – if you're moving or maybe changing your route, planning a journey for a child. Beyond that I'm not sure…"
[Short distance commuters 36-55 London]

Interested parties' response to the offer of performance information

5.21 As noted, interested parties generally believed that plenty of train performance information already exists, in the form of reports from the TOCs, Network Rail, Passenger Focus, and ORR, but most felt that it has real value and that it needs organising, disseminating and publicising more effectively.

5.22 They saw the primary role of performance information as demonstrating to TOCs the case for making service changes. Rail user groups, as might have been expected, focused primarily on the quality of service on their particular lines and at their stations. They, and one of the journalists, envisaged performance information becoming more publicly known and available, and being used to bring about improvements to services.

"I suppose it tells you what to expect, so if 97% of your trains are on time you can generally rely on the fact that it's on time. If it's 87% it's quite a big difference. So I think it could inform your choice of service and I think just by publishing that information it does put pressure on the operators.
[Interested party]

"We'd like to have information about other regions because we as rail users could hit them over the head with it! How come First can do this or Southwest Trains can do that and you can't?"
[Interested party]

5.23 Consumer groups tended to have a different perspective from rail user groups: either a broad view from a consumer or rail passenger stance, or a more targeted interest if they represented a minority group such as disabled people. Their interest inevitably reflected that of the groups they represented, and they wanted information in these areas. These interested parties also expected information to be made available in detail, and said unprompted that they felt it should avoid over-aggregation and use of averages.

"A TOC will provide statistical data like 'We reached 98% customer satisfaction. 78% of our trains ran on time.' I'm not sure how relevant that is to the passenger. It might tell them they're a fantastic company and the shareholders will go 'Great!'. But seeing that they are primarily the only train operator on that network how does that relate to the passenger in reality?"
[Interested party]

5.24 Journalists and one representative of an interest group tended to be less convinced of the value of rail performance information. They felt that a limited expansion of service data might help passengers, but that the real need was for more tactical information, especially in the area of fares, which they felt was still confusing. Beyond this they believed that it would only attract real interest if performance were poor.

"I think to be interested in the statistics of operation and punctuality for themselves is not something I'd expect of many people unless they are involved in it for some reason."
[Interested party]

"I think what they need is good comprehensive information about what facilities are available not comparisons of whether it's better to travel on the Chiltern line or the Great Western line, into London."
[Interested party]

"I could see an argument for doing that [publicising existing information]. But the information is there, I don't think we need to add to it."
[Interested party]

"I think the better the railway is the less people want the details. I would suggest that one gets interested when one is not getting the service. I think people wouldn't be terribly concerned unless service goes below a certain level or there is a specific controversy."
[Interested party]

6 Detail and format of rail performance information

6.1 For those who were interested in the idea of rail performance information, either as a resource which would bring about greater transparency and accountability, or as an aid to making decisions, there were clear expectations around how it should be presented.

Level of detail and disaggregation

6.2 Passengers' primary needs were that information is available which is directly relevant to their own individual rail use; and that it is set in context. Effectively this meant that they could access information which reflected any individual passenger's journey(s); this would give it tangible meaning and value. Interested parties understood the passenger view on this and had a similar perspective: they felt that information had to be made relevant to for passengers to consider using it.

"I'm not interested in what's going on in the area, only what will directly affect me."
[Short distance commuters 36-55 London]

"The only thing you're interested in is your line… Whether that line is getting 95% and your line is getting 92% it's not relevant."
[Interested party]

"The comparative Passenger Charter information I don't think is very interesting. What would be interesting is the absolute information, that 5% of trains were late on your line, that's the crucial thing."
[Interested party]

6.3 Across the sample, among passengers and interested parties, the demand was for information that was disaggregated and detailed, especially for data on punctuality, reliability and station facilities. Almost everyone with any interest in the offer of performance information felt it would only be useful if it covered individual routes and departure points.

6.4 The expectation was that information should be available covering the key performance criteria for any passenger's local station or route travelled, at specific times of day, or at least within a narrow time band. There was also some interest in information relating to TOCs as a whole, in terms of aspects of performance such as recent customer satisfaction levels, issues such as fares, and future investment plans.

"I'd like to see it done by train company. You can see what the company has put in – the facilities, the whole thing."
[Short distance commuters 36-55 London]

"It could be something like the 5 stars on eBay. Just rate: 'How was your journey time?', 'How was the food?', 'How was the service?' Then you could put stars next to it."
[Leisure travellers 18-35 Birmingham]

6.5 Most passengers and interested parties saw little value in direct comparison data between TOCs, since no two routes were the same and there were too many variables between them for information to be valid. Nevertheless there was some interest in information that is set against a target, a national benchmark or compared with last year's performance, to help passengers put their own TOC's performance into perspective and to see how TOCs matched up in a more general sense, perhaps using overall performance indicators.

"I'd be interested to see league tables of performance – on reliability, customer service, frequency, how late trains run, feedback on complaints and so on."
[Short distance commuters 36-55 London]

6.6 On this point, some also felt an overall score or grading of routes or journeys might be helpful: if they could have access to how well their TOC performed on certain criteria (punctuality, reliability, crowding, fare level) this would be a simple and short-hand means of gauging how well their route was served.

6.7 Interested parties who represented minority sectors, or who had an interest in minority needs, and some passengers with disabled or elderly family members, wanted their own information needs covered. In particular they were concerned with information on access and facilities for passengers with limited mobility, to enable them to plan trips and to be prepared for action they needed to take at stations.

"Information on disabled facilities would be helpful – whether there are lifts, how many steps."
[Short distance commuters 36-55 London]

Statistics and passenger feedback

6.8 The general assumption was that performance data would be offered primarily in the form of statistics on issues such as punctuality and reliability or passenger satisfaction levels, largely as in Passenger Focus's National Passenger Survey. This was generally accepted.

6.9 In addition to this, passengers were also interested in user-generated feedback on train performance of a more qualitative type. Most were familiar with this form of service rating from other fields, notably Trip Advisor, and felt it was a valuable supplement to hard fact. If data on a certain service or route for a particular time of day were reinforced by passengers' experiences, this would enhance understanding and give a more rounded picture than the figures alone. Related to this, some also said they asked friends and acquaintances, and valued this as another angle on what they could learn. One of the interested parties supported this idea, in the sense of inviting passengers to contribute views of their experiences to a forum.

"I think because we all know people that live in different areas and we talk to people that do different journeys, you always hear people complaining about their journeys, so generally I'd listen to what my friends say over what a poster says."
[Business travellers 18-35 London]

"I think that would work very well. If I could feed back, in real time or sort of relative time, my experience and where the pros and cons were on that journey, and it's open for other people to see I think that's quite a positive thing...Maybe that would make TOCs sit up and take notice."
[Interested party]

6.10 Some also suggested that an information service should have an interactive element which allowed users to tailor their demands for information to their individual needs and to receive information back from the source or provider on specific routes and journeys.

"It would be good if you could tap in your route and get information on it unsolicited every day."
[Short distance commuters 36-55 London]

Frequency and presentation of information

6.11 Respondents were asked how often they felt information should be updated. The general expectation was that it should be reviewed and revised every 3-6 months if it were to remain relevant and useful. Updates less often than 6 months would mean passengers would lose faith in it, even if they were not using it proactively.

6.12 In relation to presentation and format of information, virtually all respondents felt the need is to make data accessible, usable and quickly understood. Visual approaches, including simple measures like using colour, basic graphs and pie charts were all thought helpful in principle provided rail performance data can be fitted into these sorts of format. Respondents often referenced examples of information they had already seen – a police for performance sheet and the National Passenger Survey – as effective ways of presenting information.

6.13 The representative of a disabled people's organisation was concerned that all information should be usable for those with sensory disabilities, especially poor eyesight; for them the best solution would be a telephone information service.

7 Sources of rail performance information

Unprompted views

7.1 If rail performance information were available and used, passengers had clear views on its origins and sources: in order to be perceived as plausible and convincing it had to meet certain expectations.

7.2 A key requirement was independence and objectivity: passengers wanted reassurance that performance information was not influenced by vested interests. Alongside this, information had to carry a sense of authority and of being well informed, and preferably would come from a known organisation. The expectation was that information was credible and based on reliable data gathering and sampling.

[You'd need to know] "Who have they asked? Where have they asked the people? Have they asked a cross-section of the population, different ages?'
[Short distance commuters 36-55 London]

7.3 For interested parties these features were largely taken for granted; they assumed that any information made available by the industry would be objective and sound in the way it had been collected. Passengers were more sceptical and needed reassurance on these points.

Reactions to possible sources and providers of information

7.4 Respondents were shown the names and logos of a number of bodies which might be sources of performance information. Of these, the most widely accepted among passengers was *National Rail Enquiries* (NREs). Though they did not directly associate NREs with performance information, it had a number of characteristics which prompted favourable views: it was familiar to virtually all passengers because they used it, at least occasionally; it worked in providing them accurate information, so they regarded it as trustworthy and reliable; and since none knew it is owned by the TOCs, they assumed it was independent and objective.

"National Rail Enquiries seems to be a consortium type thing. I've always found it to be accurate and helpful, therefore I use it."
[Long distance commuters 18-35 South East]

"It's familiar to you, you know the number and it's probably unbiased."
[Short distance commuters 36-55 London]

7.5 Interested parties were less convinced by the idea of NREs as a source, primarily because unlike passengers they knew it was owned by the TOCs and did not see it as independent. They understood why passengers might see it as an appropriate choice for providing or disseminating information, but felt that its lack of genuine independence meant it would not have credibility in the industry. Some believed it would work well in providing links to sources such as Passenger Focus and ORR: rather than being seen as a source in itself, it would as a conduit to the original source.

"Simple links to those Passenger Focus and the ORR on the National Rail website, and also on the websites of all franchised operators, might be an idea. We're then making better use of largely what we have already."
[Interested party]

7.6 As an alternative to NREs, a few passengers suggested *Trainline*, which they tended to use in preference for information and booking tickets; most regarded NREs as more reliable.

7.7 *TOCs* were generally not seen as ideal sources among passengers. Positively passengers regarded them as familiar because they used them, and as adept at providing certain limited sorts of information through websites which were typically user-friendly. Against this, they did not regard TOCs as independent and they were sceptical that they would provide accurate performance information, though one respondent pointed out that in any case the original source for performance information on a route would have to be the local TOC. Interested parties were less doubtful about TOCs providing reliable data but acknowledged passengers' views. *"I'm not sure I'd trust any statistics or figures published by the train companies."*
[Business travellers 36-55 Manchester]

"They fiddle the numbers anyway. They do all sorts of things like cancelling trains that are running late so that it doesn't hit their punctuality targets."
[Business travellers 36-55 Manchester]

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"The (train) companies have all got an axe to grind."
[Long distance commuters 36-55 Birmingham]

"ThamesLink have a poster which has their stats for the last month. They come out with these ridiculous numbers. I don't know what they've done in their spreadsheets. '99.3% of trains were on time last month.' I find that hard to believe, that 0.7% were late!"
[Business travellers 18-35 London]

"It's got to come from someone other than the train company because they're only going to tell you what they think you want to know." "But someone else is going to get the information from the train company anyway."
[Short distance commuters 36-55 London]

7.8 The *ORR* was known to very few of the passengers we spoke to; two thought they had heard of it. When its role and function were explained, and when passengers had seen samples of a recent National Rail Trends report, it came across as authoritative and impartial. The impression was that it would be seen as a reliable source if it were known.

"So they're like the regulatory body for the rail network? So they're going to be non-biased. This information I would believe more than something that South Western had produced themselves."
[Business travellers 18-35 London]

7.9 *Passenger Focus* was vaguely familiar to some passengers, and when described it was regarded in favourable terms. Passengers assumed it is independent and that it acts on behalf of passengers. These two features meant it was well-placed to provide information that seemed reliable and impartial, but like ORR, it would only really work in this role if it were better known. Interested parties tended to reflect this view.

"Passenger Focus sounds interesting but you'd need to know more about where they're from."
[Short distance commuters 36-55 London]

"Organisations like Passenger Focus I think can have a stronger passenger presence. They may be, in a sense, the voice of the passenger but I'm not sure how much the passenger knows that they do that on their behalf."
[Interested party]

7.10 The *Department for Transport* came across as authoritative in a general sense because is the national body with responsibility for transport. Less positively its perceived size and its status as part of government meant that it tended to be seen as remote and not necessarily entirely impartial; the feeling was that its output might be coloured by political considerations.

7.11 *Directgov* was well regarded in principle as a source of or conduit to information on a wide range of topics. A few passengers who had used it for tasks such as renewing car tax or getting information on public services had been impressed. In the context of rail performance information it tended to be seen as too generalist and not an obvious place to go.

7.12 A few respondents in London suggested Transport for London as a plausible source, partly because they had seen information from it on London Underground services and the Docklands Light Railway.

8 Information channels

8.1 Respondents were asked how they would like to access rail performance information if it were made available. Preferences initially focused on stations and trains, primarily because passengers wanted real time information and immediate feedback on the service they used, and because they accustomed to getting information in this way, via posters carrying headline performance information.

8.2 Alongside this, there was a general expectation that the internet would be a key channel for performance information, especially if the need was for a detail examination of performance as a means of making more strategic decisions. A key benefit of the internet was that it is always available, especially to people with smart phones, and it can be used as and when needed. In this sense it straddled tactical and strategic information needs: it could be used at home for an in-depth exploration of performance, or on the train for immediate information. In the strategic context it was seen as interactive because it can be used to drill down to access highly specific data, assuming this is available, and so is an ideal channel for information to guide decisions.

8.3 Another benefit of the internet was its broad reach: in the context of rail it could be used to access data from rail industry sources or from local information websites covering a range of issues. A few respondents suggested that rail performance information could be placed on sites such as Upmystreet.com or local authority websites.

"You could have it in those local council magazines you get, say information about the service and about stations."
[Short distance commuters 36-55 London]

8.4 If information were used as a regulatory tool some passengers felt that news media could work well as a channel: local press, Metro, local TV and radio and associated news websites. The assumption here was that performance information might be published in local media on a regular basis to keep people informed on how well their local train service was doing, in the same way as information is released about the performance of police forces or primary care trusts.

"Perhaps the local newspaper could provide weekly updates on performance at your local station – facilities, improvements, timetable changes."
[Short distance commuters 36-55 London]

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Appendix

Explain that the research is intended to explore and understand rail users' need for information about the quality of service from train companies and the railway system.

Background – 5 minutes

A First name
B Their travel, frequency of trips, route and reason (commuting, business or leisure)
C Modes of transport used most often, changes in recent years and reasons

Train travel initial views – 10 minutes

A General feelings about rail – how well it meet their needs
B Positive / negative experiences (listen for but don't prompt on fares, crowding, delays and cancellations)
C How has rail travel changed – future expectations

Information generally – 15 minutes

Explain that we wish to discuss how information could help you decide if a service is good e.g. like a school, or a council, food labelling.

A Ask about high level information they have come across – promote discussion on the items/areas raised – prompt discussion about showing comparisons etc.
B How info acquired – they seek / provided to them, when sought – channels used.
C Seek their views on league tables – value to them, how well they gauge performance – probe for absolute versus relative, reliability of source & issuer.
D Discuss how advice is positioned vis a vis performance info.
E Discuss with how performance information melds with that from other sources e.g. newspapers, trade bodies etc.
F Seek their views on the high level information we have brought with (show 'set – extra' – the league tables – please add a food label)
Moderator – choose one with the most resonance to debate in more detail
G Discuss – source info credibility, peer review, how it would be used / drive choice.

Information on quality of service in train travel – 15 minutes

Explain we now wish to look at performance /quality of service information for rail. Make clear it is not the tactical – e.g. journey planning, checking train running time.

A What main things that contribute to quality of service in train travel – ask for a list
B Ask them to discuss / evaluate the information currently available – sufficiency?
C What are the information gaps (ask participants to write down their ideas)

Listen for unprompted mentions of journey times, fares and fare increases, station facilities, staffing, environmental impact of train services, sustainability. Focus on those of greatest interest. Prompt for any topics not yet mentioned by respondents

D Discuss 'value or money' (is it absolute, comparative with performance, comparative to performance of other train operators)
E what is their experience, if any, of making complaints or requests for information to train companies or about train travel

Response to examples of service quality information – 15 minutes

Explain – we want to get a read on some performance information that is out there – show board Set 3

A How do they compare in type, detail, format and nature of source, accessibility and ease of use
B Discover – how informative, clear, helpful to decision-making are they

Grouping and detail of information – 15 minutes

Ask respondents to create their ideal model of information on quality of service. Say "considering all the information you have seen (stimulus sets 3 and 4) and your own ideas for information, what would the ideal information be"

A Need to get participants to discuss the level of disaggregation they would like – individual train services, for their journey only, by station, for specific times of day or days of the week, by region, by train company or group of companies.
B Need to discuss periodicity – monthly, quarterly, etc

Source / provider of the ideal performance / service quality info – 15 minutes

A Unprompted – from what sources would they expect their ideal info to be available
If not mentioned, prompt for views on Set 4 sources
B Discuss their views of these organisations – knowledge and perceptions, strengths, weaknesses, trust, reliability, accuracy, impartiality.
C Who would be well placed to provide this performance information – evaluate against the criteria in B above.
Ask about multi sourcing.
D Ask about issuing – have to seek / provided. Then discuss channels and any affect this would have on delivery capability, passenger coverage, usability.

How could / would you use this ideal information to your benefit – 15 minutes

A Discuss their views on empowerment to take action
B What action would they like to happen
C Discuss how they would want pressure applied to train companies if info identified poorer performance – the role of pressure groups, passenger champions, the regulator, local press, national press, their MP
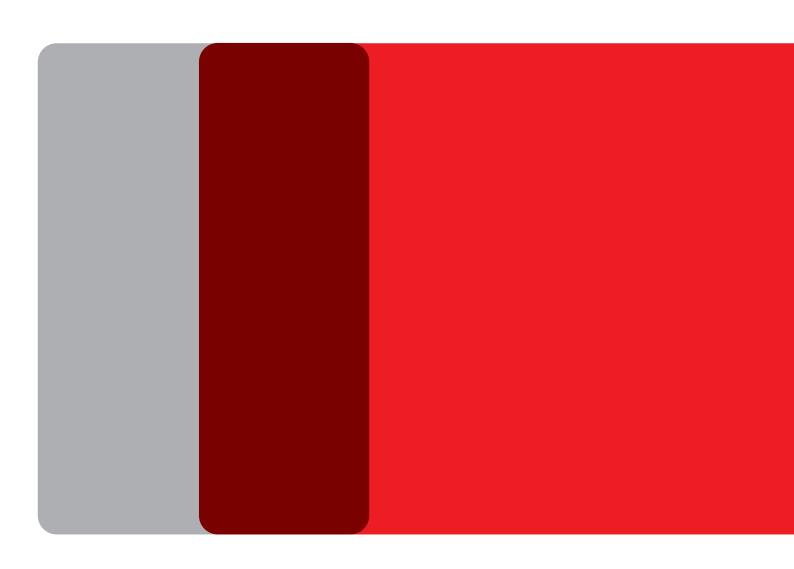**D** Explore how the information would link to compensation, assessments of value for money
E Explore how valuable it would be when making decisions on mode of travel, where to live, whether to change jobs requiring a different journey, modal shift.

Summing up – 5 minutes

A Determine how salient is the need for such information
B What three issues on rail performance / service quality would be of greatest value to them.