

Written evidence submitted by Transport Focus (RIW0011)

Introduction

Transport Focus is the independent, statutory consumer watchdog promoting the interests of transport users. Working with transport providers and Governments across England, Scotland and Wales – and in close partnership with our colleagues at London TravelWatch – we ensure that the users’ voice is heard.

Transport Focus welcomes the opportunity to respond to this inquiry. Our response is informed both by our extensive evidence base and insight gathered through the engagement of our work in Wales.

Responding from a user perspective

Where does responsibility lie for rail infrastructure in Wales?

Responsibility for Wales and Borders rail infrastructure rests with both UK Government, through Network Rail and Welsh Government. Transport for Wales has responsibility for the Core Valleys Lines and Department for Transport has responsibility for the rest of the network.

How effectively do the UK and Welsh Governments co-operate with one another in the management, and funding, of rail infrastructure in Wales?

Our submission¹ to the Williams Review on the structure of the rail industry reports that passengers’ understanding of how the railway is structured and operates is limited and vague. They know that train companies run trains and that ‘someone’ owns the tracks and that Governments have ‘some sort of role’. However, most passengers knew what they wanted from the railway – their focus was on outputs rather than structures. Equally, the lack of clarity and the sense of fragmentation often led to conflicting expectations and confusion about who was in control and where all the money from fares went. The question of accountability, or a lack of it, came up frequently. This coupled with the perceived lack of customer-focus led many to think that the system was based around the needs of the railway rather than the needs of passengers.

Should responsibility for railway infrastructure in Wales be fully devolved?

The fundamental principle that should guide decisions on how services in Wales are run must be what is best for the passenger. We believe that the decisions on rail passenger services in Wales should be determined against the ‘passenger test’ which incorporates three core questions:

- What benefits will this bring to passengers and how will these improve services?
- Will it create any disbenefits and what effect will this have on passengers?
- Will it inhibit/prevent development of future benefits?

¹ [The structure of the rail industry – what do passengers think?](#) Transport Focus. 2019

The current situation in Wales contrasts with arrangements in Scotland where rail infrastructure responsibilities are devolved. This devolution it could be argued has led to an increased focus and delivery on infrastructure projects that deliver passenger benefits. For example major infrastructure projects delivered, include:

- £57m of improvements to the Highland Mainline from Perth to Inverness to accommodate the HSTs, including platform extensions and resignalling work, which will add eight extra services between Inverness and the Central Belt every day
- Track doubling on the 25km Aberdeen – Inverurie section of the Aberdeen – Inverness line, helping to increase frequency from one to two trains per hour from December 2019 as part of the larger Aberdeen – Inverness improvement project, which aims to improve Aberdeen and Inverness commuter services
- Expansion of Glasgow Queen Street to accommodate longer trains as well as provide a larger concourse and improved accessibility
- Lengthening of platforms at Edinburgh Waverley station
- Edinburgh-Glasgow Improvement Project (EGIP), increased capacity and performance on the central belt through a major programme of electrification as well as station improvements and the introduction of new rolling stock.

The devolved arrangements give the Scottish Government powers to set the strategic direction and funding priorities for Scotland, to specify the outputs that they wish the rail industry to deliver (often expressed in terms of performance levels, and requirements in respect of capacity and journey times), and to set out the funding that will be made available to support their delivery. This is done to correspond with the railway five-year control period cycles. The specification of Scottish Government's requirements are informed by a range of evidence and through engagement with stakeholders and a public consultation. In order to achieve the vision for rail, the approach to the development of rail infrastructure and services is driven by the following principles:

- improved services – faster journey times, strengthened commuter services and effective connections between cities and regions
- improved capacity – greater utilisation of network and on-train capacity through investment and high levels of performance
- improved value - efficiency and value for money, for the taxpayer and the fare-payer and the rail freight customer
- more effective integration - between rail services, and between rail and other transport modes.

However, it needs to be acknowledged that replicating the Scottish model will be much harder in Wales. The nature of the border and the infrastructure is different and far less self-contained in Wales than it is in Scotland. In Wales there is far greater interaction and crossing the border with England. Indeed, the main North-South spine of the network operates in England. Greater devolution would not resolve this and it will inevitably remain an area where co-ordination and collaboration are crucial.

What share of investment has Wales secured in its rail infrastructure since privatisation came into effect in 1994, and how sufficient is this level of investment?

From a passenger perspective, we reported on what passengers wanted from the future Wales and Borders rail service², ahead of the franchise change in 2018. They characterised the infrastructure as outdated and in need of investment. Trains were seen as being old-fashioned, poorly maintained and dirty, with limited capacity. Passengers experienced persistent delays. Stations were also in need of investment. Some urban stations had been renovated but others were seen as neglected and in need of investment. Passengers feel that stations that should be ‘flagships’, such as Cardiff Central, often felt dated and lacking amenity and smaller stations suffered from a lack of basic facilities. There have also been setbacks in investment, with scaling back of electrification in South Wales and delays to plans for this in North Wales. Upgrades to rolling stock have also been delayed, with continued use of ‘pacer’ trains presenting hardship for people with reduced mobility.

Pre-Covid results from the National Rail Passenger Survey show some improvement in passenger satisfaction, but point to a lot more work being needed:

Passenger satisfaction – National Rail Passenger Survey³

Factor	Spring 2019	Spring 2020
Overall satisfaction with the station	73%	75%
Upkeep and repair of station buildings and platforms	61%	64%
Toilet facilities at the station	40%	60%
Facilities for car parking	60%	63%
Facilities for bicycle parking	57%	53%
Personal security at the station	68%	73%
Shelter facilities at the station	62%	66%
Availability of seating at the station	56%	60%
Availability of Wi-Fi at the station	41%	52%
Upkeep and repair of the train	58%	67%
Toilet facilities onboard	47%	50%
Step or gap between the train and the platform	61%	57%
Level of crowding	71%	76%

This picture declines for those who are older or have mobility difficulties, with half of stations in Wales not properly accessible and one third without wheelchair access.

Welsh Government procured the new rail contract and the substance emerging from the specification shows considerable ambition, which is also the theme of the Wales Transport Strategy. This ambition will require considerable investment, not only in rail but across modes and across Wales and the Borders, not least to provide options and encourage modal shift in support of Government targets for zero emissions and sustainability.

How is funding allocated to rail infrastructure projects across the UK and how are the different infrastructure needs of the regions and nations of the UK assessed?

² [The future of the Wales and Borders rail service: what passengers want](#), Transport Focus. 2017

³ [National Rail Passenger Survey – spring 2020](#), Transport Focus. 2020

The closer that national strategy is aligned with passenger priorities the better the potential service for passengers. In an era of cost consciousness and efficiency it will be essential that scarce resources are focused on the things that deliver the biggest passenger 'dividend'.

Our work⁴ shows that rail passengers' top priorities for improvement are reliability and punctuality, value for money and getting a seat. In Wales, clean toilets, comfort onboard and environmentally friendly journeys are placed higher. Younger passengers also place higher importance on more environmentally friendly journeys, along with better information during delays, fewer disruptions and good connections. Passengers with a disability put clean toilets, improved personal security and step-free access higher on their list. Tables of priorities for improvement are collated in Appendix 1.

The Borders have particular sensitivity and mechanisms will be required to ensure that the Welsh and UK Governments maintain ongoing liaison and both bodies have a say, and a stake, in the decision-making processes as they affect cross-border matters. Funding streams must also be available for stations and services on both sides of the border.

There may also be scope for developing the role of the Cross-Border Strategic Rail Forum – currently chaired by Transport Focus and attended by Transport for Wales and Department for Transport, alongside bordering English authorities – which scrutinises performance and service delivery in the Borders region, from a user perspective.

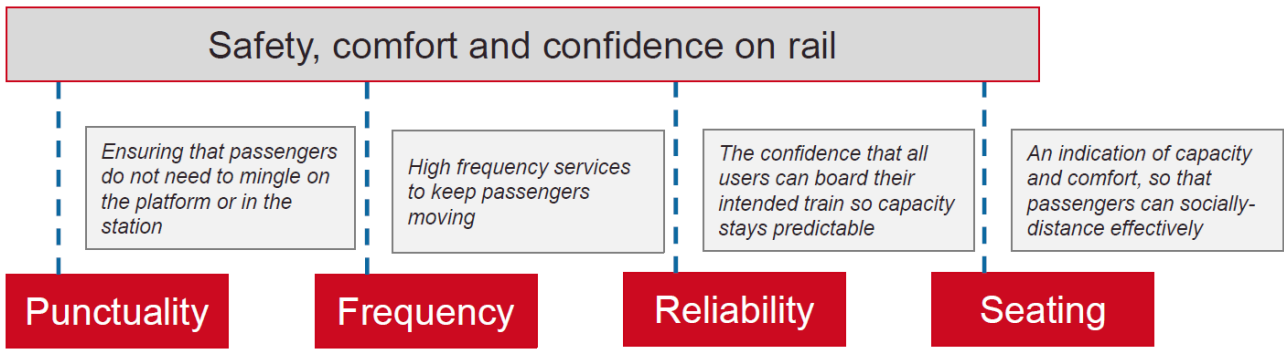
What will be the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic for the railway network in Wales (including the sustainability of services and potential impact on investment in railway infrastructure)?

As part of our travel during Covid-19 research, we asked our Transport User Community what impact this has had on their priorities. Our report⁵ shows that safety has emerged as a central priority for rail passengers. While punctuality, reliability, seating and frequency remain the 'core' of what rail users want, the community has realised that these metrics now serve a different purpose. In addition to a smooth journey, these priorities are now understood as helping to deliver a safe and COVID-secure one.

Post-pandemic, most argue that the overall sense of safety will continue to be important. It may change slightly to encompass feelings like 'comfort' or 'confidence' in public transport, but few are willing to concede that the need to feel safe will decline, even if the pandemic does. The old priorities have to some extent been re-framed to feed into safety, serving a dual purpose:

⁴ [Rail passengers' priorities for improvement](#), Transport Focus. 2020

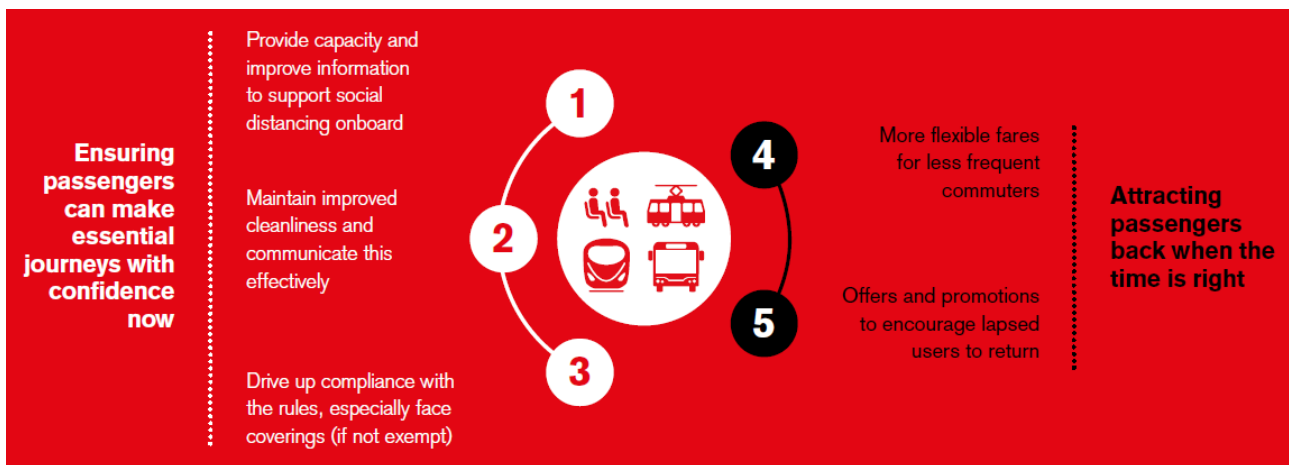
⁵ [Transport User Community – rail and bus priorities](#), Transport Focus. 2020



Key findings from our insight over the past year are highlighted in our report on key lessons for 2021 and beyond⁶. This draws out some of the lessons that governments and transport operators can apply to help those that need to travel now feel more confident and help more people return to public transport when restrictions have eased.

There is significant work to do to ensure that public transport does not feel different to other activities and that social distancing and strong sanitation habits continue. Providing enough capacity with better information about how busy services are expected to be, more efforts to drive up compliance with face coverings and evidence of enhanced cleanliness will be important in boosting confidence and helping passengers to feel safe.

Further ahead, confidence can be rebuilt by reducing barriers and encouraging passengers to experience the benefits of travelling by public transport again. New fares and tickets are needed to suit different travel patterns and help rebuild passenger numbers and revenue when the time is right. Tackling perceptions of those who used to use public transport regularly will be vital. Positive communications and ‘word of mouth’ play a role, but the best way will be to draw people back onboard so they can see for themselves. Our insight points to five key areas where efforts should be focused:



During the post-lockdown period rail punctuality has been around 90-95 per cent (PPM measure) – levels almost unheard of a few months earlier. All Transport Focus’s research shows the importance of a reliable, punctual service – it is one of passengers’ top priorities

⁶ [Travel during Covid-19: key lessons for 2021 and beyond](#), Transport Focus. 2021

for improvement and a main driver of passenger satisfaction. As full timetables are re-introduced and as more people return to travel, the challenge will be to maintain these levels of performance. We believe there is a need to review timetables and fix any pinch-points before reliability becomes an issue again. This could lead to a difficult trade-off between frequency/capacity and performance, but we believe that it is better that this debate is had rather than us just drifting back to how things were.

Extreme weather conditions are becoming much more common – barely a year goes by without new records being set. The tragic accident at Stonehaven and derailment at Llangennech have given this a fresh and urgent emphasis. The inquiry into Stonehaven and the reviews being undertaken by Network Rail into weather related resilience will invariably have an impact on future rail operations – both in terms of infrastructure management and in operational decisions.

What opportunities are there for Wales as a result of the recently launched Union Connectivity Review?

The review is equally relevant and inclusive to both people and place, needing to recognise the different investment needs in cities, towns and rural areas. The transport system needs to be accessible, addressing barriers and provide sustainable options as well as defining a joined-up network enabling door-to-door journeys. Our work with bus passengers⁷ shows that services going to more places is their second highest priority and the top priority for non-users and both sets agree that a good bus network is important to the local area (93 per cent of users and 82 per cent of non-users agree).

Rail passengers⁸ also want this network to be effective, placing good connections in the top half of their priorities for improvement; but the National Rail Passenger Survey⁹ (NRPS) shows the most recent satisfaction with transport connections for Wales and Borders is only 65 per cent.

The Wales Transport Strategy has ambitions for better connectivity at its heart. Alongside the Union Connectivity review, there is a real prospect for delivering better journey opportunities across Wales. Achieving the vision will be dependent on the delivery, monitoring and evaluation of the priorities, outcomes, policies and enablers which underpin the vision.

Transport Focus stands ready to assist with measuring and assessing needs, aspirations and delivery, from a user perspective.

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⁷ [Bus passengers' priorities for improvement](#), Transport Focus. 2020

⁸ See note 4

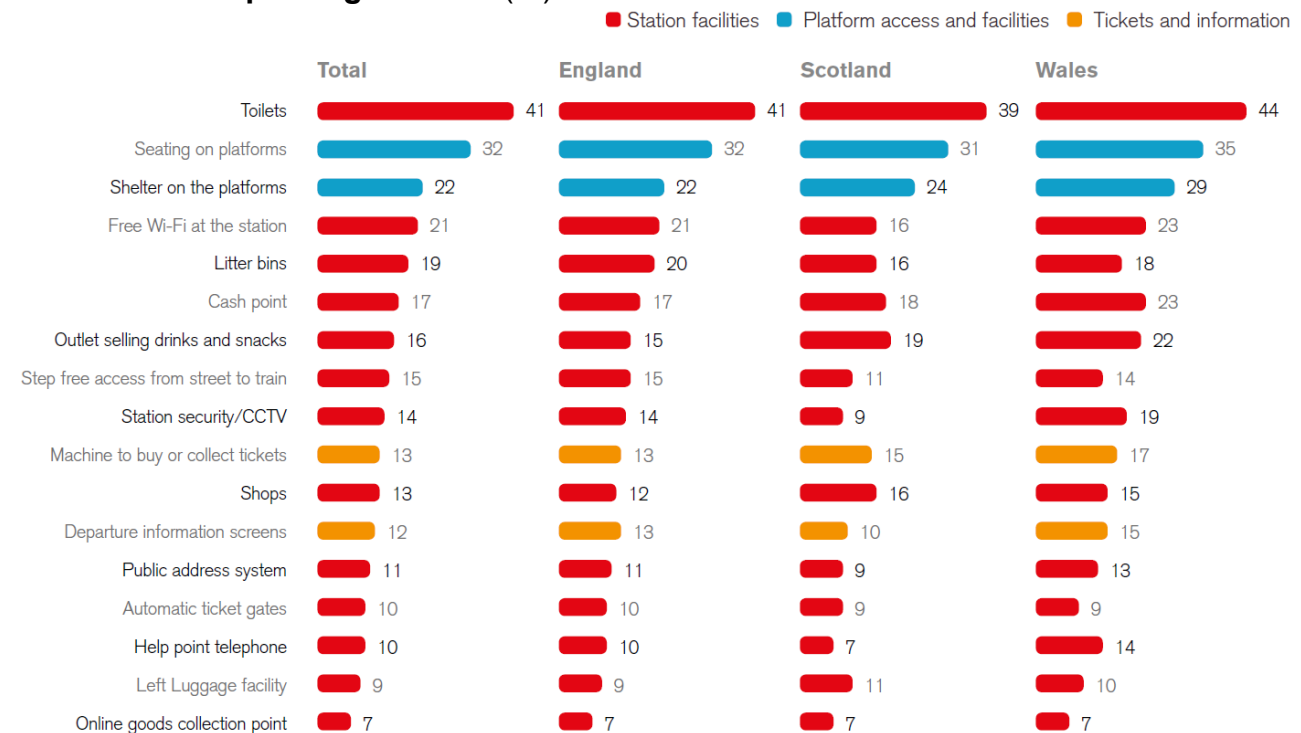
⁹ See note 3

Appendix 1

Rail passengers' priorities

	Great Britain		England		Scotland		Wales	
	Rank	Index	Rank	Index	Rank	Index	Rank	Index
Reliability and punctuality	1	245	1	245	1	245	1	246
Price of train tickets offers better value for money	2	237	2	237	2	240	2	245
Passengers able to get a seat on the train	3	201	3	199	3	212	3	216
Trains sufficiently frequent at the times I wish to travel	4	164	4	165	4	162	4	164
Train company keeps passengers informed about delays	5	150	5	150	7	143	5	149
Inside of train is maintained and cleaned to a high standard	6	139	7	137	5	154	6	145
Accurate and timely information available at stations	7	138	6	139	8	133	7	139
Accurate and timely information provided on trains	8	130	8	131	9	124	9	131
Well-maintained, clean toilet facilities on every train	9	129	10	126	6	148	8	138
Less disruption due to engineering works	10	125	9	128	10	106	10	109
Connections with other train services are always good	11	103	12	103	11	103	11	104
Journey time is reduced	12	102	11	104	12	95	14	90
Good connections with other public transport at stations	13	91	13	91	14	92	13	90
Seating area on train is more comfortable	14	86	15	85	13	94	12	94
Easier to buy the right ticket	15	86	14	86	15	92	15	85
Improved personal security on the train	16	82	16	83	16	77	16	80
More room to stand comfortably on busy trains	17	75	17	76	19	64	17	76
Improved personal security at the station	18	70	18	71	20	64	20	66
Stations maintained and cleaned to a high standard	19	68	19	68	17	75	19	69
More environmentally friendly journeys	20	66	20	66	18	68	18	74
Easier to claim compensation when delayed	21	59	21	61	26	51	27	49
Free Wi-Fi available on the train	22	58	22	58	23	58	23	57
Sufficient space on train for passengers' luggage	23	57	23	57	22	60	21	62
Train staff have a positive, helpful attitude	24	56	24	55	21	63	22	59
Access from station entrance to boarding train is step-free	25	54	25	54	25	51	26	49
Station staff have a positive, helpful attitude	26	52	26	51	24	57	24	54
More staff available at stations to help passengers	27	48	27	48	28	47	28	47
More staff available on trains to help passengers	28	47	28	47	27	47	25	49
Better mobile phone signal on trains	29	42	29	43	29	39	29	34
Free Wi-Fi available at the station	30	36	30	37	30	33	30	31

Priorities for improving stations (%)



Rail passengers' priorities – by age

	All passengers		16-25		26-44		45-64		65+	
	Rank	Index	Rank	Index	Rank	Index	Rank	Index	Rank	Index
Reliability and punctuality	1	245	2	229	2	238	1	258	1	257
Price of train tickets offers better value for money	2	237	1	235	1	238	2	247	3	221
Passengers able to get a seat on the train	3	201	3	162	3	188	3	225	2	233
Trains sufficiently frequent at the times I wish to travel	4	164	5	150	4	168	4	175	7	154
Train company keeps passengers informed about delays	5	150	4	152	5	143	5	152	4	161
Inside of train is maintained and cleaned to a high standard	6	139	8	126	6	133	6	143	5	158
Accurate and timely information available at stations	7	138	6	139	7	132	7	140	8	150
Accurate and timely information provided on trains	8	130	7	135	9	127	9	130	9	134
Well-maintained, clean toilet facilities on every train	9	129	11	114	10	122	8	134	6	154
Less disruption due to engineering works	10	125	9	125	8	130	10	126	10	113
Connections with other train services are always good	11	103	12	102	12	102	11	104	11	103
Journey time is reduced	12	102	10	116	11	120	13	91	21	64
Good connections with other public transport at stations	13	91	14	93	13	93	15	90	14	88
Seating area on train is more comfortable	14	86	19	73	14	85	14	91	12	97
Easier to buy the right ticket	15	86	20	73	16	82	12	95	13	96
Improved personal security on the train	16	82	18	76	17	81	16	87	15	86
More room to stand comfortably on busy trains	17	75	15	90	15	83	18	67	25	52
Improved personal security at the station	18	70	22	67	19	70	17	72	18	70
Stations maintained and cleaned to a high standard	19	68	21	69	20	69	19	65	16	73
More environmentally friendly journeys	20	66	13	100	18	71	23	50	26	47
Easier to claim compensation when delayed	21	59	16	84	21	67	26	48	28	33
Free Wi-Fi available on the train	22	58	17	78	22	67	27	46	27	37
Sufficient space on train for passengers' luggage	23	57	23	64	24	53	22	53	19	68
Train staff have a positive, helpful attitude	24	56	27	49	26	51	20	59	17	71
Access from station entrance to boarding train is step-free	25	54	25	59	23	54	28	45	22	61
Station staff have a positive, helpful attitude	26	52	28	46	27	48	21	54	20	64
More staff available at stations to help passengers	27	48	29	41	28	46	25	49	23	57
More staff available on trains to help passengers	28	47	30	40	29	45	24	50	24	57
Better mobile phone signal on trains	29	42	24	60	25	51	29	31	29	22
Free Wi-Fi available at the station	30	36	26	53	30	44	30	25	30	19

Rail passengers' priorities – passengers with a disability

	Any disability		Mobility or wheelchair		Hearing		Eyesight	
	Rank	Index	Rank	Index	Rank	Index	Rank	Index
Reliability and punctuality	1	235	1	230	1	238	1	227
Price of train tickets offers better value for money	2	224	3	216	2	219	2	217
Passengers able to get a seat on the train	3	212	2	218	3	216	3	197
Trains sufficiently frequent at the times I wish to travel	5	145	5	142	7	139	4	145
Train company keeps passengers informed about delays	4	146	6	142	6	147	5	143
Inside of train is maintained and cleaned to a high standard	7	143	7	141	4	153	6	134
Accurate and timely information available at stations	8	132	8	129	8	134	8	131
Accurate and timely information provided on trains	9	121	9	116	9	122	9	119
Well-maintained, clean toilet facilities on every train	6	144	4	145	5	148	7	132
Less disruption due to engineering works	10	108	11	105	10	110	10	107
Connections with other train services are always good	11	100	12	100	14	96	11	97
Journey time is reduced	18	77	22	70	17	77	18	78
Good connections with other public transport at stations	14	90	15	91	15	85	14	87
Seating area on train is more comfortable	13	92	13	99	12	97	13	92
Easier to buy the right ticket	15	87	16	86	13	96	15	84
Improved personal security on the train	12	93	14	95	11	97	12	93
More room to stand comfortably on busy trains	25	64	26	57	25	58	25	69
Improved personal security at the station	17	79	17	81	16	82	17	80
Stations maintained and cleaned to a high standard	19	71	21	70	18	76	23	69
More environmentally friendly journeys	23	64	25	57	26	55	26	66
Easier to claim compensation when delayed	27	49	27	42	28	43	28	56
Free Wi-Fi available on the train	28	48	28	42	27	52	27	58
Sufficient space on train for passengers' luggage	26	63	24	60	20	69	19	77
Train staff have a positive, helpful attitude	20	69	20	75	19	71	20	74
Access from station entrance to boarding train is step-free	16	84	10	112	21	68	16	81
Station staff have a positive, helpful attitude	24	64	23	69	22	64	24	69
More staff available at stations to help passengers	22	67	18	78	24	61	21	70
More staff available on trains to help passengers	21	67	19	78	23	64	22	70
Better mobile phone signal on trains	29	35	29	29	29	36	29	42
Free Wi-Fi available at the station	30	29	30	26	30	29	30	36