



February 2020

**Report on the hearing into the
safety and delays on West Midlands
Trains**

PURPOSE OF REPORT

1. To enquire into the impact the train delays and cancellations have had on public safety due to overcrowding on the trains and platforms.
2. To discover what lessons can be learnt to reduce the number of delays and cancellations.
3. As appropriate, this report will make recommendations to the relevant authorities to indicate how public safety could be improved on the railways.

BACKGROUND

4. Over the past few months there have been considerable delays and cancellations on the railways in the West Midlands. In December 2019 there were 1350 train cancellations. This has caused serious overcrowding on trains and platforms which has had an impact on public safety.
5. On 13/01/2020 the West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner launched a public consultation into the delays. The consultation received over 1450 responses. The responses highlighted that the recent issues had an impact on public safety.
6. There were also concerns raised about police officers and police staff being unable to get to their shifts on time. This has a considerable impact on staff who work in departments such as Force Contact who answer 999 calls and are working shifts around the clock. The concerns around not being able to get to work on time are not just limited to West Midlands Police with a many of respondents stating that the delays and cancellations impacted on them getting to work on time.
7. After considerable public feedback, the West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner, David Jamieson, and Leader of Birmingham City Council and West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) Transport Portfolio Holder, Ian Ward, held a hearing into the impact that the delays and cancellations were having on public safety.

8. Members of the general public gave evidence of their experiences on the trains, and representatives from the Guide Dogs Association for the Blind, the West Midlands branch of Rail Future, the West Midlands Rail Executive (WMRE) and Transport for West Midlands (TfWM).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

9. The two main recommendations are:
 - **There must be a stronger passenger voice as the public feel abandoned and are frustrated that West Midlands Trains appear not to be listening to them.**
 - **In its current format, there is no one single body currently holding the train operators to account. They currently feel the Mayor is too weak to effectively carry out this function and that the government must enhance the Mayor's powers to improve the Mayor's ability to hold West Midlands Trains to account.**
10. On 21st February 2020 David Jamieson, West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) and Councillor Ian Ward Leader of Birmingham City Council and WMCA Transport portfolio holder held a public hearing into public safety on the trains in the West Midlands.
11. The purpose of the public hearing was to get an understanding of what has gone wrong and what needs to be done to improve the rail service in the West Midlands.
12. Before the hearing the PCC launched a call for evidence to give passengers a voice. The consultation received over 1450 responses from people who live, work and study throughout the wider West Midlands. It was clear from the responses to the consultation that large numbers of those who use the railways in the West Midlands are dissatisfied with the service that they are currently receiving. The number of responses was not expected and neither was the level and depth of anger towards the poor service in the wider West Midlands area. There were several themes that were raised in the public's response and the main ones were:
 - Public and personal safety,
 - Financial loss,
 - Negative impact on the environment,
 - Negative impact on people's mental health.
13. At the hearing members of the public were given the opportunity to present evidence of their experiences on the trains. Some of the key concerns raised were that passengers received poor customer service from West Midlands Trains, communication regarding delays, cancellations and platform changes was poor. This has a significant impact on vulnerable passengers and dangerous levels of overcrowding. All of those who gave evidence at the hearing were asked to confirm that they knew no one on the panel and that their testimony was their own.
14. In December 2019 there were 1350 train cancellations and the majority of the cancellations were mainly due staff shortages. Towards the end of last year, it became clear that there was a lack of resilience in the timetable and minor disruptions had a major impact on the overall service. Work has already been done to increase resilience in the overall service and this will continue into the spring, however, the service is still not meeting the standards required by the public.

15. It is totally unclear who is holding the train operators to account and how effectively they are performing this function. Currently the West Midlands Rail Executive (WMRE) is responsible for holding train operators to account in the West Midlands. The Department for Transport (DfT), WMRE and WMCA must be more effective in holding train operators to account if they fail to provide the service required.
16. The findings of the hearing will be summarised into this report then presented to the Secretary of State for Transport, the Mayor of the West Midlands, West Midlands Trains, Network Rail and the WMRE.

CALL FOR EVIDENCE

17. On 13/01/2020 the consultation was opened. On 22/01/2020 the PCC invited the Mayor, DfT, West Midlands Trains, Avanti West Coast and TfWM to attend the hearing. In total 1450 responses have been received from the consultation, almost all of which have been complaints against West Midlands Trains, nearly all complaints have been about the safety and convenience of the trains service.
18. To perform the analysis the call for evidence the PCC surveyed the first 1203 responses to get an understanding of what people were submitting.
19. A complete analysis of the call for evidence can be found in the appendix.
20. A number of people who responded to the call for evidence stated that they had been impacted financially by the train delays and cancellations. The majority stated that they had to pay for other modes of transport to get home despite already paying for their train ticket. Others stated that it has had an impact on their wages and loss of working hours as they work on shifts.
21. Some respondents also stated that the overcrowding on the trains was having a negative impact on their mental health. Some respondents stated that the overcrowding on the trains caused them anxiety. Others stated that they had an increase in stress and worry due to fears about being left stranded at a station with no way of getting home or not being able to pick up their children.

EVIDENCE FROM THE TRAIN OPERATORS AND NETWORK RAIL

22. The DfT, West Midlands Trains, Avanti West Coast and Network Rail were all invited to the hearing, however, they all declined to attend. They all sent letters to the West Midlands PCC responding to his invitation which are in the appendix.
23. The Permanent Secretary from the DfT responded and stated "*WMT's performance in the second half of 2019 was not acceptable and it is understandable that this will have caused frustration locally...an extra £20m will be invested by WMT to restore performance to the required levels. This £20m will include investment in day to day operations; addressing staffing shortages; timetable improvements; and passenger compensation for the poor service*".
24. The response from the DfT highlighted that West Midlands Trains will be investing £20 million into improving services but it does not state a timescale for these improvements. The response from the DfT is vague and it does not state what it has been doing to hold

West Midlands Trains to account for the poor service passengers received over the autumn of 2019.

25. The Managing Director of Avanti West Coast stated in his response *“The average daily reactionary minutes (i.e. delays on our services caused by WMT’s services) has tripled from 74 to 221 across our whole route. The picture is no better in the West Midlands, increasing from 41 to 125 minutes. That’s an extra 1hr 20mins of delays to our services each day in the West Midlands that are directly linked to problems with the WMT service... As of the start of November, 434 northbound west coast services had departed Birmingham New Street late because they followed late WMT trains (out of 2447 that ran). That led to 151 Public Performance Measure (PPM) failures”*.
26. The response from Avanti highlights that issues with West Midlands Trains is having a significant impact on other rail operators.
27. The Director of the Central Route for Network Rail responded to the letter sent to the Chief Executive of Network Rail. *“There have been improvements, and these were acknowledged in the recent letter from Andy Street, Mayor of the West Midlands, to Transport Secretary, Grant Shapps. However, he also said that while ‘performance has begun to improve’ the ‘improvements we have seen so far this year are a start, but they most definitely do not make up for months of misery”*.
28. The response from Network Rail clearly states that there has been initial work to improve the service however, this does not make up for the problems caused in late 2019. One of the key concerns raised by the public was that there was poor communication from staff in the train stations and their letter does not state what Network Rail is doing to address this issue.
29. It is clear from the response provided that the DfT, Avanti West Coast and Network Rail that the previous service was unacceptable and that work is being done to address these issues. However, none of the responses clearly state what is being done to hold train operators and Network Rail to account for when the rail service falls below the standard expected. They also do not mention how they are listening to passengers to get an understanding of their views and what their priorities are. As the hearing concluded it became clear that passengers do not feel like they have a voice and this is something that these organisations need to address.

PUBLIC AND PERSONAL SAFETY

30. The main purpose of the hearing was address the public and personal safety issues on the trains that are caused by overcrowding.
31. 90% of the first 1203 responses to the call for evidence stated that due to delays or overcrowding their personal safety or personal comfort had been affected.
32. Statements from those who spoke at the hearing and made submissions into call for evidence made it clear that there were significant concerns around potential for pickpockets on the train.
33. Women in particular expressed concerns about being touched inappropriately due to the number of people in the carriages. There were also concerns around having to walk home in the dark or wait in dark stations due to train delays or cancellations.

COMMUNICATION

34. Members of the public who gave evidence stated that the communication from staff regarding the delays has been poor. People are often left on platforms with little information. Poor communication has had a particular impact on vulnerable passengers.
35. Members of the public also stated that they were concerned that they were not able to speak to a person from West Midlands Trains when they want to make a complaint about the service, complaints are now be done by filling out forms. This has made people feel that West Midlands Trains is not listening to the public or taking them seriously.

MODAL SHIFT

36. To reduce congestion and improve our environment we must encourage the public to leave their cars at home and use public transport to get around the region. Having an effective and reliable rail network is key to achieving this ambition and train operators need to ensure that they are providing a service that the public are confident in.
37. In the summer of 2020 Birmingham City Council will be introducing a Clean Air Zone in the city centre. For the Clean Air Zone to be effective Birmingham must have a reliable public transport system and the trains play a key role in making this work.
38. Congestion is also a major issue which costs businesses millions of pounds each year. If we are going to be successful in getting people out of their cars then the train service must be reliable.
39. At the hearing one member of the public stated that they have resorted to using their car as they could not rely on the train service. This theme was also present in the call for evidence and highlights that the rail service in the West Midlands must improve if we are going to effectively get people out of their cars and onto public transport.

HOLDING TO ACCOUNT

40. The Executive Director for the WMRE and Director of Rail for TfWM attended the hearing to provide an update on what TfWM and the WMRE is doing to hold train operators to account.
41. The service customers received during the autumn of 2019 did not meet expectations but improvements have been made to address this but the service is still not where it needs to be.
42. The WMRE is holding West Midlands Trains to account over its poor communication with customers but no detail was provided of how this takes place.
43. Scrutiny of train operators and Network Rail is not conducted in public and the minutes of these scrutiny meetings are not published. However, Network Rail is a national body which receives 70% of its grants from the DfT and Transport Scotland and West Midlands Trains receives public subsidies. Therefore, scrutiny of these organisations should be done openly in public as they are receiving tax payers' money.
44. When analysing the effectiveness of holding train operators to account in the West Midlands it is not clear who the lead body is and how effective they are in performing this function.

45. KEY FINDINGS

46. At the hearing members of the public had the opportunity to state what they felt were the main issues caused by the train delays and cancellations. These are:

- Customers feel that West Midlands Trains does not effectively listen to their concerns. A number of passengers felt that they received good customer service from staff on the trains however, there was no effective way to express their concerns directly to West Midlands Trains.
- It is not clear which public body is supposed to be holding train operators to account. There does not appear to be a clear understanding between the DfT, WMRE, TfWM and WMCA over which is the main body responsible for holding West Midlands Trains to account when the franchise does not provide the service expected by customers.
- The accountability process is not in public view and does not include the public's voice.
- There is poor communication between staff and vulnerable passengers when delays and cancellations occur. Evidence from the vulnerable passenger group highlighted that sometimes staff leave those who require assistance and provide them with no further information.
- The rail system is too fragmented. This has resulted in a lack of accountability the WMCA and Mayor are not strong enough to hold train operators to account for poor service. This finding is also being looked into by Keith Williams in his review into the railways.

RECOMMENDATIONS

47. Throughout the hearing the PCC and Councillor Ward identified recommendations which the DfT, WMCA, WMRE and West Midlands Trains should consider to improve the rail service in the West Midlands, the recommendations are:

- The public voice is not being heard. The WMCA, TfWM, WMRE and West Midlands Trains need to establish a way in which they can effectively listen to the voice of those who use the railway and learn from what passengers are saying to improve their service.
- West Midlands Trains should publish the improvement plan soon along with timescales for implementation.
- As of 26/02/2020, after the hearing took place, West Midlands Trains released a statement stating that passengers will be able to take part in a series of Customer Panels. These panels will aim to give passengers a voice on what they feel needs to be done to improve the service. The customer voice needs to be strong throughout this process and West Midlands Trains must seriously consider any recommendations that passengers make.
- Improve communication with passengers when delays and cancellations occur.
- Publish meeting notes between WMRE, TfWM, WMCA, DfT and the train operators to show the public what the public bodies are doing to effectively hold train operators to account. This would strengthen public confidence in public bodies' ability to hold train operators to account.
- Train operators need to build greater resilience into the timetable to ensure that delays and cancellations do not have a serious impact on the rest of the line and other lines.
- To improve accountability over the train operators in the West Midlands the DfT and Secretary of State should devolve more powers to the West Midlands so there can be more effective system of holding operators to account.
- The government recently commissioned Keith Williams to review the rail service. The government must seriously consider the recommendations from this report, when it is published, particularly around tackling the fragmentation of the railways to improve accountability of the train operators.

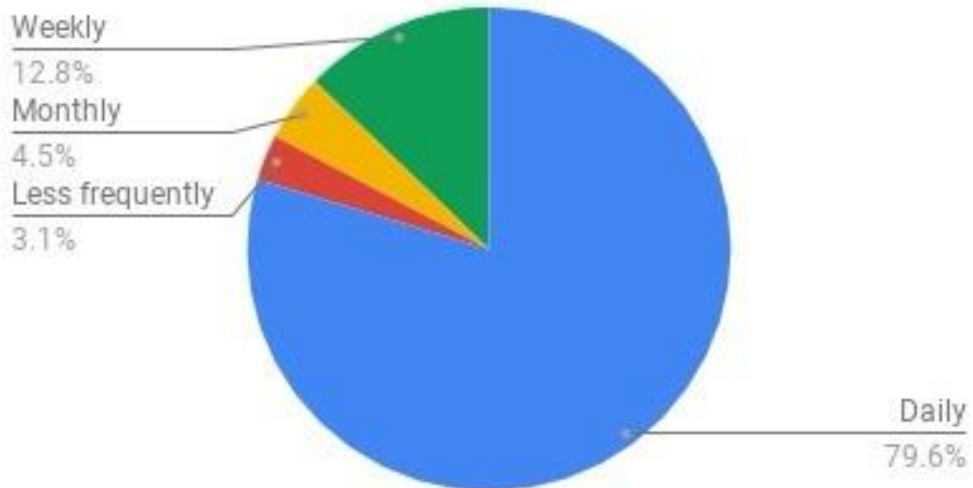
NEXT STEPS

48. This report will be delivered to the Rt Hon. Grant Shapps Secretary of State for Transport, Bernadette Kelly Permanent Secretary for the Department for Transport, Andy Street Mayor of the West Midlands, Julian Edwards Managing Director of West Midlands Trains, Phil Whittingham Managing Director of Avanti West Coast and Dave Penny Central Route Director for Network Rail.

Train Survey

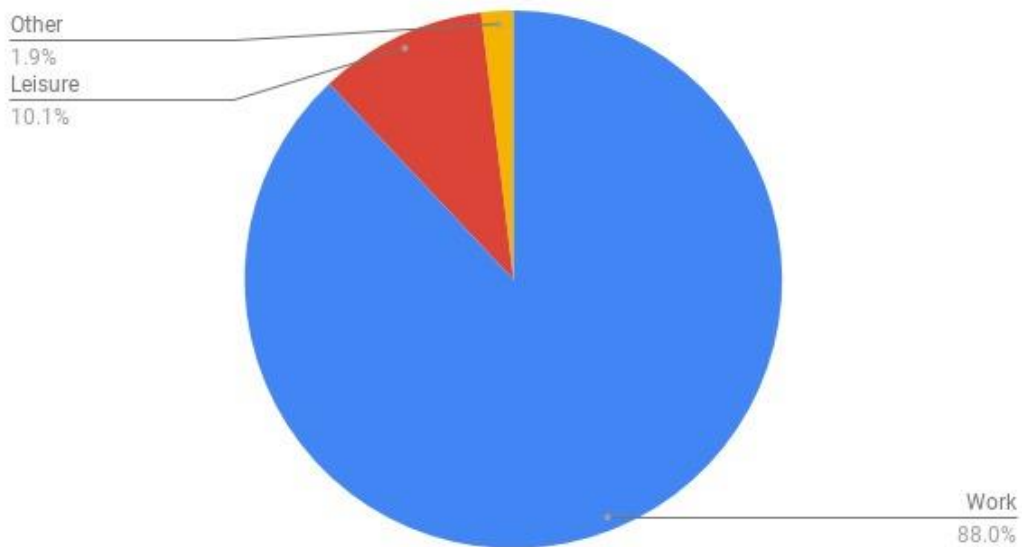
How often do you use the trains?

Count of How often do you use the trains?



What do you mostly use the trains for?

Count of What do you mostly use the trains for?



How frequently have your trains been delayed?

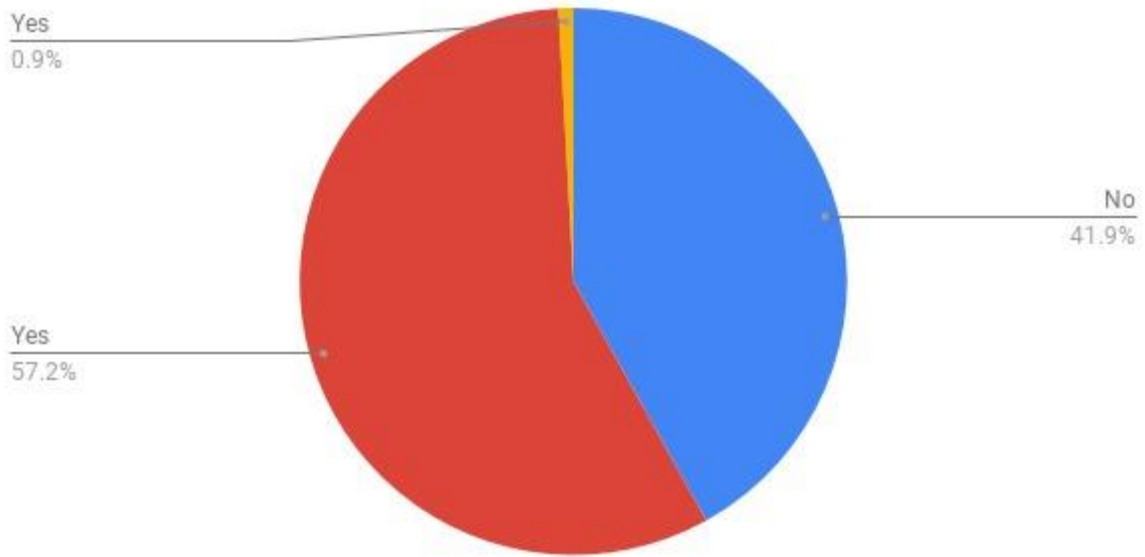


What has been the length of the delays?

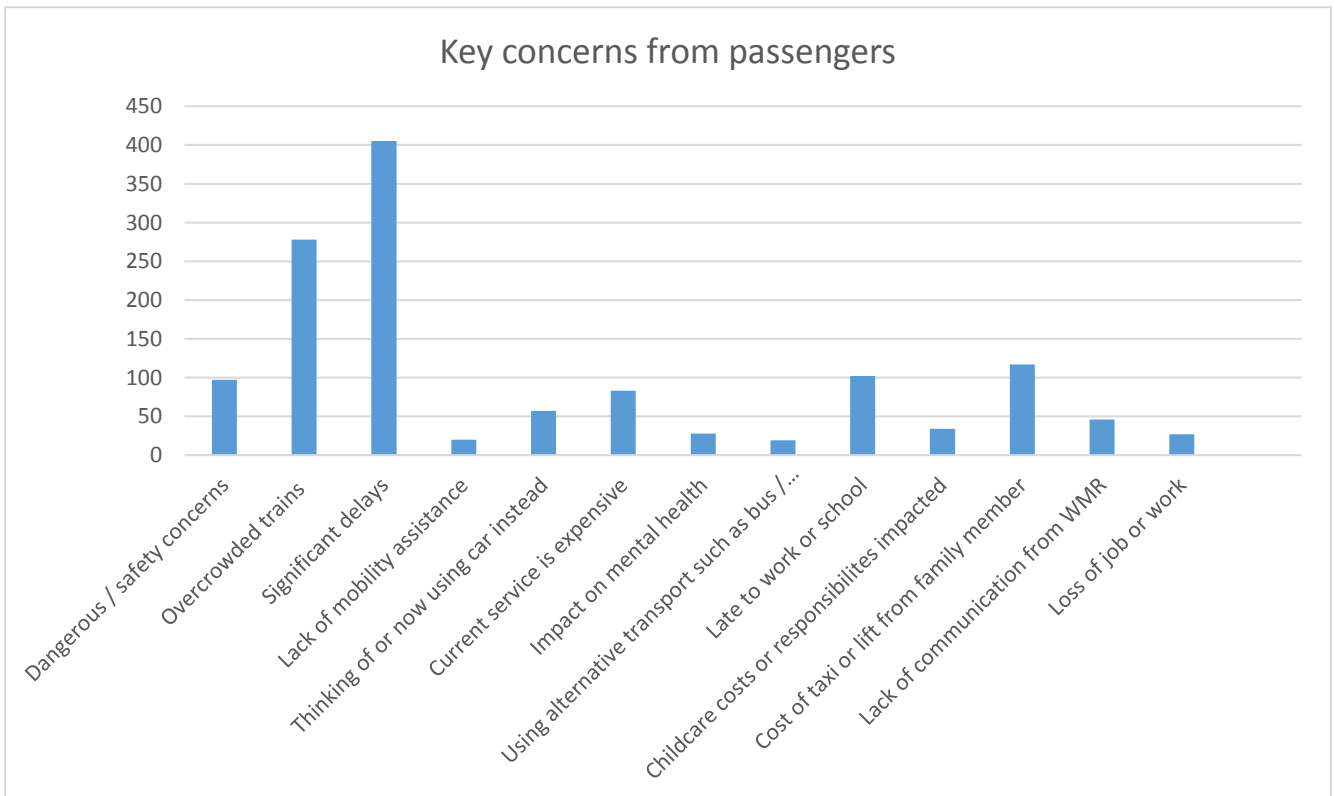
Average delay is 9 - 25 minutes based on 197 people who answered that particular question.

Due to delays or overcrowding have you felt that your personal safety or personal comfort has been affected? If so provide details

Count of Have you experienced any direct or indirect financial costs from the delays?



Key concerns from passengers



Quotes

I am a sixth-form student, using trains twice a day to travel between home and sixth form. Whilst there has been no direct expense due to the late running of these services, I have had examinations disrupted due to cancelled trains in the mornings and have been late to sixth form due to a series of late running trains. Often the return journey can be worse due to disruption on services during the day, this often impacts the time I get back home and therefore induces stress for both myself and my mum which has a detrimental impact on our mental health. A number of phone calls to complain about LNWR services, whilst have been answered, have clearly not been taken seriously by the train operator as the delays and disruption continues to impact upon mine and many other commuters daily lives.

Not only do I pay for a monthly train pass to be late for work and miss several university lectures. The delays have been up to an hour before. Resulting in me missing job interviews. I now have to leave my house 90 mins before work for what is a 10 minute journey as I cannot risk the amount of delays there has been lately.

Now losing my home and my kids will be homeless due as of the loss because of losing my job and also because of the trains and also the unhelpful staff and how rude there are

I once saw a gentleman faint on an overcrowded morning commute. It took over ten minutes to release the man from the train as there were so many commuters in the carriage. He was then left at jewellery Quarter Station and a kind passenger got off to stay with him until he felt better. The guard had to get back onto the train and could not stay with the gentleman.

They've missed the disabled accessibility deadline in respect to the toilets on the train, they are consistently late or cancelled. I've cancelled my train pass and got a bus pass instead.

The school has now implemented a lateness register. I have to put my name every time I am late. Pretty much my name is the only one that appears in this book.

I don't think west midlands railway have any understanding of what impact this has had on people. It isn't just inconvenient. It's massively affected my life. I've given up my gym membership because I can't get there most days. I've suffered at work because my employer is fed up with it. I've missed out on family and social events because I'm still trying to get home. My mental health has been affected as it's massively stressful every day. I've had weeks where the additional travel time caused by delays and overcrowding has added an additional 12-15 hours onto my working week. To top it off I wasn't even included in the season ticket price freeze because I have a ticket that includes bus and train. From an environmental point of view I'm really passionate about using public transport and getting people out of their cars. Or I was until I reached the ends of what I'm prepared to endure. What a choice - compromise my beliefs and become a guilty polluter or risk my job, my sanity and my relationships because west midlands railway are incapable of getting me where I need to be.

I have witnessed others faint on the trains due to intense over crowding, often caused by cancellation and delays leading to double passengers packed into 3 carriages. Regularly there are particular morning trains delayed daily which has led to me having to get earlier and earlier trains to avoid busier periods. Violence has often occurred due to over crowded conditions, whereby people bar entry to others from attempting to get onto the train which erupts into argument, with shoving and pushing common place.

It's frustrating, hot, crowded, irate people, lack of comms from train company, angry train staff, impacts social life.

Passengers are frequently stressed and agitated at the conditions on trains on the Cross City Line. In recent weeks I have witnessed a passenger shouting and fighting to get off the train having become overwhelmed by the conditions, and on a separate occasion a young girl passed out on an overcrowded and overheated train and had to be helped to a seat by fellow passengers and given water. I think this indicates a potential safety risk for passengers generally.

Sometimes when a train service has been cancelled, it has a knock on effect on other services after that (if indeed they are still running). This worsens all of the issues already present (overcrowding, not enough space on the trains etc.) I get the train at Marston Green and there are school children who get the same train, when the train is cancelled I have seen them having to phone their parents or friends parents for help because they can't get to school - no child in the West Midlands should have to worry about not being able to get to school!

Late home to help with getting my young children to bed. Sometimes I do not get to see them awake.

I'm sick of this awful service from West Midlands Railway, please do something about this! It causes me to be anxious and panicky as I don't want to be late for work. Sometimes I have to wait and miss at least 2 trains due to being overcrowded and late. As commuters all we ask for is a reliable service, it impacts your day to day life from going to work and getting home after a long day. The refunds I've had also don't cover my taxi fare as this costs me 10 pound a time. It's getting to the point where I now dread going to work as trains will be delayed. This then causes me to be stressed and anxious

Trains being delayed also impact on staff working at Birmingham Children's Hospital and others alike. This can impact not only on shift changes but also clinics. Direct impact can be either clinicians are perhaps or parents and families.

The compensation offered is laughable. There's no point claiming delay repay as that doesn't get me back my lost work time. As an network card holder I am not even eligible for the fare freeze offered by West Midlands trains even though I've suffered the same delays. The poor lighting and minimal staffing is also an issue. I don't feel safe as a woman traveling alone waiting for trains that never turn up

I suffer from anxiety disorder and Aspergers, and regularly request assistance on the trains. WMR are good at booking the assistance, but have never once actually provided it. They have also failed to respond to a complaint that I made about the lack of provision - and that complaint will shortly be taken up with the ombudsman.

I am fed up with trains being 'expressed' from snow hill to Kidderminster/Stourbridge junction because they then meet their KPIs for timing and the true extent of the situation is still covered up...and someone who works at Snow Hill station told me that was the reason!

I've had to catch taxis in order to get home and I'm missing out on valuable time spent with family which you can't put a price on as a result of not getting home on time i.e. train delays



Department for Transport

From the Permanent Secretary

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10 February 2020

David Jamieson

Lloyd House
Colmore Circus Queensway
Birmingham, B4 6NQ

Dear Mr Jamieson,

Hearing on West Midlands rail services

Thank you for your letter dated 22 January, inviting me to attend a public hearing you have decided to hold on 21 February on the subject of West Midlands rail services. I am afraid I am unable to attend.

The successful operational delivery of rail services in a particular region is a matter for the train operator concerned, in this case West Midlands Trains (WMT) and Network Rail. More broadly, rail responsibilities are already partially devolved to the West Midlands region, enabling increased local involvement and accountability compared with the previous arrangements. I would suggest an appropriate approach would be for you to invite a representative of WMT to your hearing.

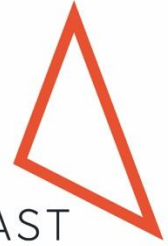
WMT's performance in the second half of 2019 was not acceptable and it is understandable that this will have caused frustration locally. As you will have seen this weekend, officials from the DfT and the West Midlands Rail Executive (WMRE), which answers to local elected representatives, have worked closely together to use the powers available under the contract to ensure an extra £20m will be invested by WMT to restore performance to the required levels. This £20m will include investment in day to day operations; addressing staffing shortages; timetable improvements; and passenger compensation for the poor service. The DfT and WMRE will continue to monitor the performance of the operator, and ensure they meet their contractual obligations.

Yours sincerely,

Bernadette Kelly CB
Permanent Secretary

David Jamieson
Police and Crime Commissioner
Lloyd House, Colmore Circus
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13 February 2020

Dear David

Thank you for your letter and kind invitation to the public hearing next week.

Please be assured we share your frustration. Alongside the other train operators serving the West Midlands, we recognise that performance of the network has declined sharply since May 2019 when a new timetable was introduced.

Conversations are taking place at the highest level, and we are committed to working with the other parties involved including Network Rail and Transport for the West Midlands to remedy this situation. There is unfortunately no easy fix. It is a very complicated problem to solve, particularly given that our own timetable hasn't materially changed in the region, and so we are very limited in the levers we can pull, but we are being affected by congestion.

Here are just a few headlines that bring to life the impact West Midlands Trains' (WMT) May 2019 timetable has had on our services (and customers). We are happy for you to share this at the meeting:

- i) The average daily reactionary minutes (i.e. delays on our services caused by WMT's services) has tripled from 74 to 221 across our whole route. The picture is no better in the West Midlands, increasing from 41 to 125 minutes.

That's an extra 1hr 20mins of delays to our services each day in the West Midlands that are directly linked to problems with the WMT service.

- ii) As of the start of November, 434 northbound west coast services had departed Birmingham New Street late because they followed late WMT trains (out of 2447 that ran). That led to 151 Public Performance Measure (PPM) failures.

We believe our PPM figure is down 2% as a result of the changes made in May 2019.

avantiwestcoast.co.uk

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- iii) The introduction of direct services from Liverpool to London via Birmingham (combining the previous Liverpool to Birmingham and Birmingham to London services) has proved difficult for WMT to deliver. Between 19/05/19 and 07/11/19, WMT had 502 services with planned origin of Liverpool Lime Street that were either cancelled throughout or started from somewhere further along the route.

As a result, barrier staff were introduced at Liverpool Lime Street to help with passengers from cancelled WMT services.

Whilst we are pleased to report there has been some progress of late, we are still some way below the levels of service reliability we had prior to the introduction of WMT's May 2019 timetable. So, we will continue to impress on all concerned the need to come up with a speedy resolution to the problem.

I am not confident we would add much value to the hearing beyond the facts provided above, the problem being largely out of our control; however, if you would still like us to attend please let me know.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'P. Whittingham', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Phil Whittingham
Managing Director

David Jamieson
Police and Crime Commissioner
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14 February 2020

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Dear David

On re-reading your initial letter I realise I did not directly address your comments about overcrowding and the risk to customers.

Please be assured that the safety of our customers and people is paramount. There are no grounds for compromise, and whilst day to day we do have challenges, we have clear procedures and processes in place. In that regard, we do not believe we have a systemic and on-going problem with overcrowding. Nevertheless, we will continue to work closely with our industry colleagues to ensure we run one of the safest railways in the world.

Whilst we fully understand the frustrations when things go wrong, I would also like to confirm that we have seen an improvement in performance since the turn of the New Year. That improvement has, in part, been down to the work of the Grand Rail Collaboration (GRC) and the new management team in place at West Midlands Trains, both of whom we are supporting.

We are active members of the GRC, and actions taken as a result of challenges from the Mayor are a good example of how the Collaboration is delivering tangible benefits, both around day to day and long-term strategic issues. I am confident the GRC will drive standards and that customers in the region can look forward to a much-improved travelling experience.

I do not think we can add any additional value to the points we have already made by attending the hearing in person so must decline your invitation.

However, I want to reassure you again that we are committed to working together as an industry to continually improve performance.

Yours sincerely

Phil Whittingham
Managing Director

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11th February 2020

Dear Mr Jamieson,

I am responding to your letter to Andrew Haines, Network Rail's chief executive, regarding your concerns about train performance and passenger safety. As the director of the Central route, which includes the railway in the West Midlands, I want to help address them.

I am unable to attend on Friday 21 February but want to provide you with some detail to reassure you that Network Rail is working hard to provide passengers with a better railway.

Safety is always my priority and Network Rail's. Birmingham New Street, the hub of the railway in the region, welcomes 48m passengers a year and I want everyone to feel, and be, safe. The station has a professional and dedicated team to make this happen and provides a high level of customer service to passengers. During exceptionally busy times, additional staff are recruited and used across the station, particularly on platforms, to provide extra support and assistance.

Every day we work with West Midlands Trains and British Transport Police, which is responsible for policing the rail network, to provide the best and safest service we can.

Train performance in the region has not been good enough for too long and that this has caused disruption and concern for passengers. As an industry, we are sorry for this and are taking action to ensure the service we are providing to passengers is improving.

To improve performance across Britain, Network Rail has been restructured to make faster, more targeted decisions to benefit passengers. This is why the Central route was created and I was appointed. Our promise of 'Putting Passengers First' is at the heart of every decision we make in the West Midlands and is at the forefront of how we are managing this issue.

There have been improvements, and these were acknowledged in the recent letter from Andy Street, Mayor of the West Midlands, to Transport Secretary, Grant Shapps. However, he also said that while 'performance has begun to improve' the 'improvements we have seen so far this year are a start, but they most definitely do not make up for months of misery'.

I completely agree and that is why we continue to work closely with West Midlands Trains to continue to improve performance and provide passengers with a railway they can rely on.

An industry-wide strategic group, chaired by Network Rail and involving West Midlands Railway and the Department for Transport, is meeting regularly to ensure we are addressing longstanding challenges, such as timetables and traincrew availability. Network Rail continues to make every effort to deliver reliable infrastructure and information shows we are beginning to have a positive impact.

Collectively, these changes will help deliver sustainable and planned improvements for passengers both now and in future.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D. Penney', written in a cursive style.

Dave Penney
Director, Central route
Network Rail

Cc Julian Edwards, managing director, West Midlands Trains



The impact of train delays, cancellations and overcrowded services on people living with sight loss.

There are 29,000 people living with sight loss across the West Midlands. With this number set to rise exponentially in the coming years as a result of an ageing population and complications with medical conditions that are increasing prevalent, ensuring that the West Midlands is accessible for people living with sight loss is vital to future-proofing the region.

Whilst the system needs to be improved to limit the number of train delays and cancellations and reduce overcrowding, mechanisms also need to be put in place to mitigate the negative impacts such occurrences have on people living with sight loss. We recently conducted a survey which revealed that one in five people with sight loss actively avoid rail journeys due to concerns about access. Several service users in the region have also reduced their working hours or left jobs as a result of the stressful, unsafe nature of commuting by train in the West Midlands. This is deeply concerning, especially given that unemployment rates amongst visually impaired people are already the highest of any disabled group (75% of working age visually impaired people are not in employment.)

In theory, trains should be an excellent travel option for commuting and leisure for visually impaired people. Many stations have good facilities, rail assistance available, and correct tactiles in place to aid long cane users and Guide Dog owners with navigation and safety. Additionally, most trains have audio visual announcements which help VI people know where they are – this is in stark contrast to many buses across the region which do not have AV and subsequently leave VI people



feeling vulnerable and uncertain of where they are when travelling by bus. Further, for some VI people, trains are preferable to taxis. Not only are taxis costly but a large number of guide dog owners have experienced a taxi access refusal on account of their assistance dogs. Despite the fact it is illegal to refuse access, many taxi firms across the region have been found to do this – with some even turning up, seeing that a person has a service dog and driving off without saying anything!

Whilst trains should be a good travel option for VI people, the recent increase of delays and cancellations of services and the number of trains that are overcrowded as a result means that many VI people are beginning to avoid trains, or left feeling extremely unsafe when using them. Below is a brief summary of some of the issues encountered, with quotes from service users in the region interspersed.

Overcrowding

'Overcrowding is a huge problem. Today we had no option but to sit on the floor on our train as there was no space for Buster (guide dog) with no one giving up their seat for us.'

We have also heard from guide dog owners whose dogs have been trodden on or had suitcases wheeled over them on overcrowded trains. The impact of overcrowding on guide dog owners is compounded by poor attitudes of some passengers and a lack of dedicated space for assistance dogs on the trains.

People also shared experiences of being pushed off crowded trains and trapped on crowded platforms; a terrifying experience for anyone, especially someone with little to no residual vision.



When it is that crowded, even with passenger assistance it is hard to get on a train. *'Despite the fact the platform was very busy, no attempt was made to get us near the front until everyone else had boarded the train.'*

Delays

Delays can have a huge impact on all those travelling, but especially those who require dedicated travel assistance. People with visual impairments may opt for travel assistance when using the rail network – this service requires them to call ahead and pre-book, and when delays aren't communicated to assistance staff it can result in them arriving at stations to find that no assistance is available for them. This can impact on their ability to get off the train and navigate the station, safely. Getting to one's destination when trains are delayed/ cancelled requires a degree of flexibility, yet if information is not conveyed to VI passengers and their booked passenger assistance then this can render them unsafe.

'We were 13 minutes late arriving and there should have been a member of staff to meet me but again, there was nobody there. As we set off down the platform, a male member of staff came down to tell us that all "assistance staff had gone home."'

Even when assistance is available, the stress caused by delays on passengers and staff alike can seriously impact the quality of assistance provided.

'When we arrived at the station, assistance was not there so I took myself off the train and a minute or so later he came. He was stressing about helping me make my connecting train as we were delayed arriving. He helped me get on the train but let me go first down the aisle to find my seat and did not assist me further.'



Poor quality assistance

Some people in Birmingham living with sight loss shared more general comments on the impact a lack of assistance has on them whilst travelling by train.

'I was already aware it was an unmanned station so I made sure I booked assistance two weeks in advance so that onboard staff would be aware of my needs and be ready to help me. On Friday evening before my arrival, the guard who checked my tickets did not seem to be aware of me being there and needing his assistance. When we got to the station, he did not come to find me and I was not assisted off the train. Fortunately, I managed to get myself down without any falls or trips.'

'I had a really poor example of assistance. He did not speak, did not offer an arm to guide me through the station and didn't assist me to a seat on the train. Just simply put my case on.'

'He barely spoke to me at all. He took my suitcase but did not offer to guide me which I would have accepted. Nor did he tell me where to sit down, how far down the platform to walk, when the train was pulling in and just simply put my suitcase on the train without attempting to guide me to a seat. He also put me in the wrong carriage, Southport were expecting me on the front one, as usual procedure.'

'On my return journey, when I arrived assistance was not ready for me. It turned up three minutes before my train was due to leave and was told to "hurry up". This is inappropriate and we would have got there safely, had assistance been ready and waiting my arrival.'

Cancellations

Many service users expressed concerns about the fact that cancellations are not communicated to them effectively. It can be hard to organize alternate means of travel if required and long waits at stations can make them feel unsafe or uncomfortable, especially if they are not familiar with the station. One service user informed us that they experienced a train cancellation and had to wait for over an hour at an unmanned, poorly lit station where they were concerned for their personal safety.

'The service was delayed in leaving Birmingham New Street, which meant I missed the connecting train at 3.55 from Nuneaton. The 4.55 was cancelled and control had been contacted before my arrival to see if a taxi could be provided but they refused saying everyone is treated the same and expected me to stay in the station for almost two hours to travel six minutes down the line to Atherstone. I refused and fortunately the assistants supervisor was able to get control to change their mind. I'm shocked control were willing to leave a blind passenger stuck for two hours.'

'When travelling with my children and my guide dog to Cornwall for Christmas, the train went one stop and then we were told that train will not be going any further to not having a driver past this point. At this point we had to get off and work out how to get to our destination. The station was busy with Christmas commuters and I didn't know where to go and couldn't easily get help as I had my luggage, two kids and guide dog. Eventually, a staff member did come to help us and we did catch another train but in an hours' time.'



Platform alterations

'We changed platforms and my assistance walked off. At some point the train did come in, but on a different platform. I believe I was told this by another member of staff who was not aware I'm DeafBlind. Even if I had heard him, I wouldn't have moved because my assistance hadn't returned.'

In another instance, for the same passenger:

'When we got down to the platform my train was delayed so he(my assistance) looked at the board and told me to listen our for any announcements. Highly ironic given that my booking would've told him I'm DeafBlind. I spent the next 15 minutes or so sobbing on the packed platform after he walked away. Nobody asked if I was okay. When my delayed train did appear, the onboard guard didn't attempt to find me. So I placed myself on the packed train and cried most of the way to Liverpool south parkway and in desperation tweeted Mersey Rail to ask them to call Liverpool South Parkway.'

For more information about the impact of rail delays, cancellations and overcrowding on people living with sight loss, contact Alexandra Jones (Regional Policy and Campaigns Manager) Alexandra.Jones@guidedogs.org.uk