



OFFICE OF RAIL REGULATION

The impact of publishing more information on seat availability: South West Trains case study

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Overview

We have been working with South West Trains (SWT) on assessing what impact putting more data on seat availability into the public domain has on passengers' behaviour. Posters with seat availability information were therefore put up at five SWT stations between November 2011 and February 2012.

We wanted to get passengers' views on whether they had seen the information and if it had any impact on the train they catch and we therefore handed out questionnaires to ask passengers directly at all five stations on 20th and 28th February.

We intend to use the results, as well as some analysis of actual loading data, to assess whether passengers actually find the information useful, whether it changes their behaviours and what the next steps would be in this area for the ORR transparency project board to consider.

Key Findings

- 34% of respondents had seen the information.
- Over two thirds of respondents who had seen the information found it at least fairly useful and almost 10% found it very useful.
- Most of those that had seen it understood the information.
- Just over a fifth of respondents who had seen the information have regularly or occasionally changed the trains they get as a result of the information published.
- Around three quarters of those that reported they had not seen the information, said they would have found it at least fairly useful.
- Almost two thirds (61%) of those that had not seen the information said that they would have considered changing the trains they get, 13% of those on a regular basis.
- Analysis of the comments/complaints identified that the majority of individuals suggested South West Trains should add more carriages to their existing services (283 responses) and invest in more trains during peak periods (130 responses).
- Passengers were also keen to greater visibility of the seat availability poster information (153 responses), suggesting it should have been placed at more accessible/prominent locations at stations and on the South West Trains website and also included on other rail travel websites.
- Individuals also requested receiving more information, such as the location of available seats or less crowded carriages on each service (119 responses) and real time (mobile phone) updates regarding delays or cancellations (100 responses).
- Many respondents were also keen to know the outcomes of this research and how South West Trains would use this information to help increase capacity and reduce overcrowding on the network during peak periods (76 responses).
- Analysis of the South West Trains loading data suggests that there may have been some limited changes in loading patterns, possibly as a result of the placing of capacity posters.
- The volatility of the loading data makes it hard to draw firm conclusions.

Survey Summary

Approximately 14,000 surveys were printed, a large majority of which were handed out although we don't know the exact number. The survey was also available online. We had 1,454 paper replies and 107 respondents online, a total of 1,561. Please note that where the total does not add up to 1,561, it is because that answer has been left blank.

	% of surveys printed	Total received	% of received surveys
Basingstoke	20.7%	119	8.2%
Farnborough	15.7%	449	30.9%
Motspur park	7.9%	46	3.2%
New Malden	14.3%	268	18.4%
Surbiton	41.4%	572	39.3%
Total	100.0%	1,454	100.0%

40% of the surveys returned to us were from passengers travelling through Surbiton. Almost a third of the surveys received were from passengers at Farnborough; however only 16% of the surveys printed were allocated to that station.

The most disappointing result was Basingstoke; 8% of surveys received were from passengers travelling through the station compared to 21% of the total allocation. However there were problems getting access to Basingstoke station, which resulted in the first few trains being missed on both days, so the result is not unexpected.

Q - We asked respondents if they had seen any information SWT had published about seat availability:

	count	Percentage
Yes	533	34.2%
No	1025	65.8%
Total	1,558	100.0%

533 respondents, 34%, had seen the information on seat availability; meaning around two thirds of people who filled in the survey had not seen it. SWT might want to consider how to make the information more visible if they choose to publish this information on a regular basis.

Results from those that had seen the information

Q - What have you seen (multiple response available)?

	count	percentage
Posters	516	95.9%
Online	22	4.1%
Total	538	100.0%

Only 4% of respondents had seen the information online, however as the majority of responses were received by post, we have no idea about how many people saw the information online but did not fill in the survey that was also available on the SWT website.

Q - How useful was the information?

	count	percentage
Not at all useful	152	28.8%
Fairly useful	182	34.5%
Useful	143	27.1%
Very useful	51	9.7%
Total	528	100.0%

Over two thirds of respondents found the information at least fairly useful and almost 10% found it very useful. However 29% did not find the information at all useful.

Q - Did you understand the information?

	count	Percentage
Yes	508	96.4%
No	19	3.6%
Total	527	100.0%

Only 19 respondents (4%) did not understand the information that was made available. We will be analysing the comments of those that said they didn't understand it and feed anything of interest back to SWT.

Q - Has anything changed since seeing the information?

	count	Percentage
Change trains I regularly get	14	2.7%
Occasionally get another train	96	18.5%
Experimented, but still get the same train	24	4.6%
Nothing	381	73.3%
Other	5	1.0%
Total	520	100.0%

Just over a fifth of respondents have regularly or occasionally changed the trains they get as a result of the information published. Almost three quarters haven't changed anything. Two people said that since the posters have gone up, their trains have been busier as a result.

Q - Have your perception of how busy the trains are been changed by seeing the information?

	count	percentage
Yes	90	17.1%
No	437	82.9%
Total	527	100.0%

Ninety people (17%) reported that their perceptions of how crowded trains are have been changed as a result of the information published.

Results from those that had not seen the information

Q - How useful would you have found the information?

	count	Percentage
Not at all useful	301	26.0%
Fairly useful	333	28.8%
Useful	329	28.4%
Very useful	194	16.8%
Total	1,157	100.0%

Around three quarters of those that reported they had not seen the information, said they would have found it at least fairly useful. 17% of those that hadn't seen it said they would have found it very useful, compared to 10% for those that had seen it.

Q - What might have changed had you have seen the information?

	count	Percentage
Considered changing trains regularly get	147	13.1%
Considered occasionally getting another train if I could	539	48.1%
Nothing	403	36.0%
Can't say	32	2.9%
Total	1,121	100.0%

Almost two thirds (61%) of those that had not seen the information said that they would have considered changing the trains they get, 13% of those on a regular basis.

Analysis of Comments

A total of 1,561 questionnaires (of which 107 were Internet responses) were submitted regarding the seat availability on South West Trains. From this, 1,408 comments and suggestions were made about a variety of areas. A total of 579 questionnaires did not provide any comments or suggestions.

Overall, the majority of responses focused on South West Trains adding more carriages to their existing trains (283 responses) and investing in more trains (130 responses) during peak periods to help ease overcrowding.

Passengers also requested greater visibility of the seat availability poster information (153 responses), suggesting the information should have been placed at more prominent and accessible locations at the station/on the platform and on the South West Trains website. Respondents also suggested presenting the information on rail travel websites, such as the National Rail Enquiries website.

Individuals were keen to know the location of available seats or less crowded carriages (119 responses) in each train service, to enable them to have a more comfortable commute.

Many people also requested real time updates or mobile phone apps to provide accurate and timely information on delays/cancellations (100 responses).

With regards to the information displayed on the posters and currently available to passengers, respondents were keen for more information to be presented to them including more performance data/analysis (102 responses), more information regarding cancellations/delays and the reasons behind them (96 responses) and station specific information (75 responses) such as the departure/arrival times at each station on the South West Trains network (rather than just the start and end station information displayed on the posters).

Individuals were also keen to know the outcomes of this questionnaire and how South West Trains will use this information to increase capacity and reduce overcrowding during peak periods (76 responses).

Analysis of Passenger Loading Data

Between November 2011 and February 2012, posters highlighting seat availability information on individual South West Trains peak morning services were placed at five stations: Basingstoke, Farnborough, Motspur Park, New Malden, Surbiton. To complement the survey described earlier, and in order to understand if these posters affected passenger behaviour, we analysed data on the number of passengers on the displayed services to see if we could detect changes in loading.

Data on the passenger loading of the displayed services were collected from Automatic Passenger Counting (APC) equipment, fitted to roughly a third of SWT rolling stock. The sensors in the fitted stock record passengers as they alight and board individual trains.

This analysis looked at average loads on trains before and after the introduction of the posters and compared monthly averages before, during and after the trial. Fluctuations in the data during the trial were compared against historical data by looking at what typical variation an individual service experienced over the past few years.

Due to the limited coverage of the APC equipment, measurements were sporadic and varied in coverage and quality across the services analysed. The changes reported here are those that exceed, or are on the margin of, variation experienced by the train service group historically.

The analysis suggests that there may have been some **limited changes in loading patterns**, possibly as a result of the placing of capacity posters.

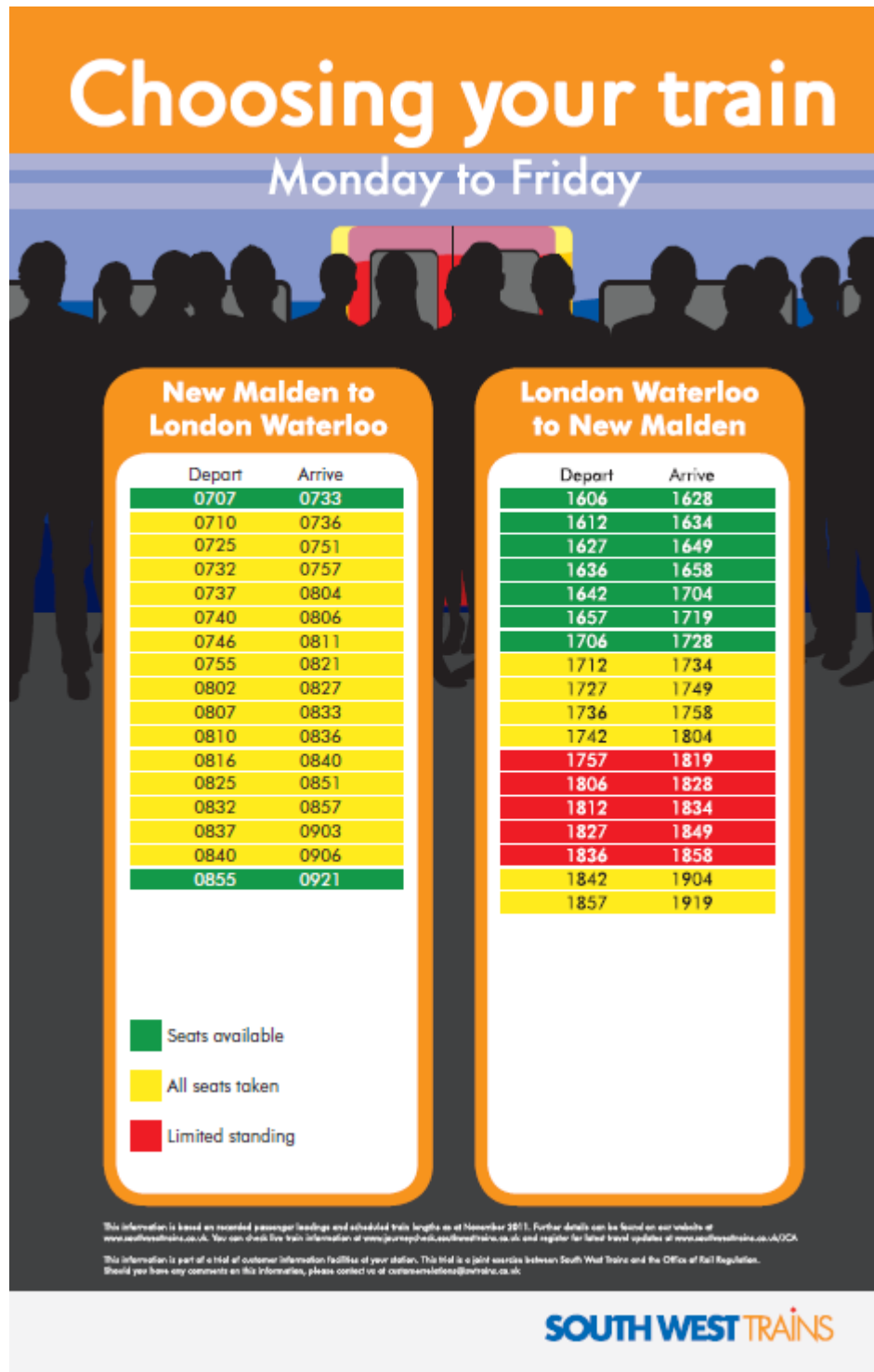
Stations further out, like Basingstoke and Farnborough, may have experienced some changes in passenger behaviour e.g. passengers changing to less crowded services. It is not possible to say with certainty whether this was as a result of viewing the information in the capacity posters.

Stations closer to London may be relatively insensitive to the effects of posters, with shorter journey times into London suggesting that a “turn-up-and-go” approach is preferred by passengers.

The volatility of the loading data makes it hard to draw firm conclusions. We will look at other sources of passenger numbers in order to understand the scale and context of the results reported here.

For further details please contact Fazilat Dar at the Office of Rail Regulation at Fazilat.Dar@orr.gsi.gov.uk or on 0207 282 3705.

Appendix – Example of information released





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