



Train Journey Survey Report 2022



David Butterworth

A Rare Treat The final DalesRail service of the 2022 season arrives at Clitheroe on 11th September. For 'operational reasons' this Sunday-only service failed to run on a number of occasions during the summer season, leaving intending hikers and sightseers frustrated. On its final day the sun was shining, the train appeared and many happy passengers were able to enjoy the journey towards the Yorkshire Dales, the Eden Valley and Carlisle.

A bitter disappointment awaited users of the Clitheroe – Manchester service on the same day when the usual hourly service was reduced to a train every three hours without advance warning.

1. Introduction

TravelWatch NorthWest (TWNW) is an independent Community Interest Company representing all users of public transport in the North West. Membership is open to any not-for-profit organisation representing the interests of users or potential users of public transport. TWNW holds regular conferences open to the public at various locations in the North West when issues of interest are debated and public transport users have the opportunity to contribute and raise their concerns. TWNW's chief purpose is to influence, by research and campaigning, public transport policy in the North West always with passengers' interests foremost. Contact details are provided at the end of this report.

During the summer of 2022 TWNW surveyed 150 passenger train journeys selected at random mainly across the north West of England. The purpose of the survey was to obtain a snapshot of service provision as it directly affected passengers.

The majority of journeys sampled were operated by Northern Trains with additional journeys being provided by Avanti West Coast, TransPennine Express, Merseyrail, East Midlands Trains and Transport for Wales.

2. Passenger expectations

People who choose to travel by train, rather than go by bus or use the family car, have expectations regarding what constitutes a worthwhile and enjoyable journey. They include:

- A service frequency appropriate for the nature of the route;
- An easy means of obtaining a ticket, perhaps by using a ticket office, a passenger-friendly ticket machine (TVM) or via a mobile phone;
- The opportunity to discuss travel plans at a staffed station;
- The payment of a fare which is judged to be reasonable for the distance covered;
- A train which provides sufficient accommodation to avoid the need to stand;
- A seat which provides comfort throughout the journey;
- A nearby space where luggage may be stored;
- An environment which is acceptable – not too hot, not too cold, not too noisy, not too draughty, etc;
- The provision of light refreshments on a longer distance journey;
- An expectation that toilet facilities will be in full working order and clean and tidy;
- An expectation that the journey will be completed safely;
- An opportunity to seek travel advice from an on-board train manager;
- Confidence that the train will reach the passenger's destination on time;
- The opportunity to make an onward connection (by train or bus) without the need for a long wait.

It is with these criteria (and maybe others) in mind that this report has been compiled.

3. Survey principles

Surveyors were asked to complete a proforma questionnaire relating to the practicalities of the journey concerned, i.e. a tick-box exercise, and were also invited to add narrative comments about any aspect of the service which was of special note. In many cases these comments have been particularly informative and throw more light on whether the passengers expectations listed above have been achieved.

Most passengers are 'train operator blind', in that little regard is paid to who runs the train, given that in most cases for a particular route the passenger has no choice of operator. In the case of multi-operator routes, e.g. Preston to Oxenholme, passengers may need to be aware of possible ticket limitations but apart from that they simply wish to get from A to B (or in this case P to O) and don't really mind who takes them there.

However, because different operators run their own particular types of service, (e.g. Northern Trains run urban and all-stations inter-urban trains, whilst at the other extreme Avanti West Coast operate high speed services stopping at fewer stations) the results of this survey have been grouped by operator, as listed below:

Northern Trains	119
Avanti West Coast	16
TransPennine Express	7
Merseyrail	4
East Midlands Trains	2
Transport for Wales	2

4. Departing and arriving at stations

In contrast to the comments made in previous reports it is clear that stations are now very different from what they were. There has been a significant increase in the use of electronic 'gatelines' where passengers must present a valid ticket to gain access to their chosen platform. There are now very few stations in medium to large settlements which do not have these facilities. Additionally most of such stations have, so far, retained their ticket offices although their long-term future may be in doubt.

The majority of stations, large and small, have Customer Information Screens (CIS) which, in the main, provide comprehensive journey information regarding calling points and the destination of the next few trains. It has been noted however that many smaller stations now lack readily available printed timetable information, either on panels at the entrance and/or as take-away leaflets. Perhaps it is now (maybe unwisely) assumed that prospective passengers will obtain such information via the web. Given that there is no legal requirement to carry a working smartphone or similar device the lack of easily accessible printed information could be judged to be discriminatory.

Most stations operated by Northern Trains fall within the Penalty Fares scheme, where passengers must obtain their travel tickets prior to boarding their train. From a revenue protection (RP) point of view this is a sound idea, not unique to Great Britain. However, naive passengers (those who travel rarely or those who are trying train travel for the first time) are often challenged by the complexities of the ticket vending machine (TVM) so they fail in their attempt to buy a ticket and ultimately may fall foul of the RP officer. Certainly more visual attention needs to be paid regarding passenger awareness of the Penalty Fares scheme and its implications whilst, at the same time, ensuring that TVMs are user friendly to more than just regular travellers.

By virtue of their wide area of operation Northern Trains stations vary widely regarding facilities offered. Ticket offices feature at the larger stations but at the majority passengers must rely on their ability to use the on-site TVM(s). The following surveyor's account highlights the practical difficulties relating to TVMs:

I tried to work the machine to get two day returns to Appleby using senior railcards. I arrived at Kirkby Stephen station 10 minutes before the train was due to leave but discovered that Appleby (the next station) was not on the machine's list, so it had to be typed in. There were so many questions and the train was due before they were completed so I opted to get a Promise to Pay for speed, only to end up with another long list of questions. I gave up and boarded the train. The conductor did not come through to check tickets so my ride to Appleby was free.

Another surveyor's station experience highlights the need for train operators to really understand the practical needs of intending passengers. Brampton (Cumbria) station, some distance from the village it serves, has limited facilities.

The surveyor noted:

There are no train information screens on the platform but there is a 'long-line PA' system which gives announcements 'once only, a minute before the train is due'. There was no evidence of traditional display timetables. The TVM displayed a reminder not to travel on strike days but there was no real-time information. A call button was pressed to seek advice about the next train to Carlisle but there was no response. There was a Cumbria CC poster about using their website to find train times – OK if you have a phone with internet access. Only later I discovered that there is a list of train times within the TVM but its presence is not obvious.

Brampton (Cumbria) is typical of the number of stations which are effectively out of bounds to mobility impaired users. Access to the Newcastle-bound platform from the access road is easy but, on their return, the user will be stranded on the Carlisle-bound platform. The National Rail website states that it is a 3 mile round journey by road back to the departure platform! An alternative course of action would be to continue on the train to Carlisle and return on it to arrive at Brampton's accessible platform some 40 minutes later. Given its rural nature it is unlikely the access issue will be improved in the near future. Brampton has been given as an example but there are many other stations in the North West where ease of use by mobility impaired persons is not possible.

Whilst an increasing number of intending passengers are now booking their tickets in advance via their mobiles, TVMs are clearly here to stay. It is therefore important that the programmers should employ the KISS (Keep It Simple, Stupid) principle. Don't seek information that is not required. Require as few user inputs as possible. One surveyor tried to book a return ticket from Carlisle to Dent but in doing so was required to specify the time of both the outward and return journeys. The surveyor gave up and went to the ticket office where he was able to buy the ticket without specifying train times.

Another surveyor was baffled by the situation at Bare Lane (on the Lancaster – Morecambe line) where there are two platforms which look conventional, but in reality there are two single bi-directional lines. The only way between the platforms is by using the level crossing but interchange between platforms is not possible when the barriers are down. Trains travelling in either direction predominately use Platform 1 (on which there is a ticket machine) but Platform 2 is occasionally used, and definitely so for trains to/from Heysham Port. A sign provided by the local user group indicates which trains use Platform 2 but that sign merges with the plethora of other displays on the platform and is easily missed. People waiting on Platform 2 may realise that their train is actually leaving from Platform 1 but are prevented from changing platforms once the barriers have come down. The only TVM is well down Platform 1, a long walk if the occasional train is using Platform 2. Given that this is a suburban station rather than being 'out in the sticks' a more logical form of use would avoid passenger frustration.

Even Manchester Piccadilly station is not exempt from confusion when more than one train waits at a platform. One recorded example was a CIS display on Platform 2 that the Rose Hill train was 'the front train'. In fact there was only one train. It had its doors open but had no destination at the front. The arriving driver confirmed that the train was for Rose Hill but, as passengers were boarding, another train arrived in front of it. Was that to be the real Rose Hill train? The two units were coupled together and the whole train departed seven minutes late.

At Romiley station the surveyor killed time by resting on the platform seats located under the substantial canopy. Although it was a dry day, whichever seat he chose he got wet as water dripped onto his head. Furthermore, there were regular announcements advising passengers that there was no tactile paving, except that such paving is present on each platform.

Back at Piccadilly our surveyor was concerned about the excessive control tactics on Platforms 13/14:

There was considerable congestion as passengers tried to leave Platform 13 for the main concourse. This was made confusing as there were frequent announcements telling people to 'use the escalators and stairs', yet the stairs are clearly marked 'No entry' as they are the route down to the platforms.

All around the station there are signs telling passengers to do this and not to do that, numerous staff in high-viz jackets, e.g. standing around doing nothing at the top and bottom of the escalators, and frequent 'safety' announcements, e.g. 'stand behind the red line'.

Together these make the station unwelcoming with far too many orders to 'do this, don't do that'. A much more welcoming passenger environment is needed'. For example, on all German stations there are notices giving 'rules for the station' which are simple and clear.

As ticket machines become the norm on all but main stations their location and quantity are important. For example, the ticket machine at Arnsdale is located on the Barrow bound platform, somewhat hidden within the shelter. This is inconvenient for most passengers as the greater originating flow is towards Lancaster. Ideally an additional machine should be sited on the Lancaster bound platform. It is noted that this issue was raised in the 2019 train survey but since then no more user friendly modifications have been made.

One surveyor visited Earlestown. Being a railway T-junction with five platform faces it must be confusing to the newcomer, even if the CIS system is functioning. On the day of the visit it wasn't. The departure sheets, showing each directly served destination is split alphabetically into two, the first half being on Platform 1 and the other half on Platforms 2 and 3. The surveyor's conclusion was *'The station is also dark and gloomy, and quite the worst visited'*.

By way of contrast to the critical views expressed – all borne out by observation – there are many observed stations in the North West which are a credit to the voluntary groups who take care of them and to the community rail partnerships which encourage the provision of artworks on platform edge fencing, etc. Such places encourage their use by virtue of their appearance.

One surveyor drew particular attention to Corkickle station which *'was always rather scruffy, unkempt, not at all a very pleasant environment'* but on a recent visit he observed a massive improvement. *'There were two litter sacks. The platform was clean, litter-free, there were timetable sheets (also true for all stations on the route) the Northern TVM was working and departure information was available on the TVM. There was clearly someone caring for it'*.

5. The journeys

Out of 106 Northern Trains journeys for which journey times were provided, 10% arrived at the surveyor's destination more than five minutes late. Of the two most extreme cases, one train arrived 13 minutes late due to a door malfunction enroute whilst another arrived 36 minutes late due to a wait for a driver.

In the case of the Avanti train from Preston to Carlisle which arrived 87 minutes late congratulations are in order as this train made a detour via Manchester Victoria (perhaps a first) to avoid an overhead line problem in the Wigan area. Rather than being cancelled, as is usually the case, this train continued all the way to Glasgow. This was fortuitous as the previous Trans Pennine Express train had been cancelled due to a driver shortage.

Overcrowding was generally not a problem except that on 14th May the 15.40 Carnforth to Lancaster carried over 100 standing passengers, whilst the 10.10 Kendal to Lancaster train also carried around 100 standees.

Whether or not the passengers have passed through an electronic barrier they must have a ticket prior to travel on a Northern train. The penalty fares rule applies to the majority of routes in the North West. One surveyor witnessed the actions of Revenue Protection (RP) staff who imposed fines upon ticketless passengers who claimed that they were unaware of the regulations. Perhaps there should be a visual reminder at each set of train doors (as is the norm in Switzerland, for instance, where the 'eye' symbol is evident).

Some Avanti operated stations do not have gatelines so it is possible for passengers to 'be creative' and avoid paying for their ticket, as was witnessed (but not actioned) by the surveyors. Preston station allows direct access without a ticket check to Platforms 3 to 6, whilst tickets may be checked on the bridge leading to Platforms 1 and 2, the platforms predominately used by Northern services. There are alternative, check free, means of reaching these platforms so it is possible for a passenger to travel from Preston to Poulton le Fylde, for instance, without paying the fare unless the conductor is diligent.

On many trains, from long-distance Avanti expresses to the rather more pedestrian Northern stoppers, the train manager/conductor was never seen. One surveyor made a Poulton le Fylde to London Euston round trip without being required to show his ticket at any time. Likewise it was noted that many Northern conductors choose not to pass through the train to check tickets or take fares off passengers who have joined at rural unstaffed stations. It was noted that many passengers had not observed the legal notices at station entrances or chose to ignore penalty fare regulations. They still expected to be able to pay on the train.

As noted earlier there is a practical issue at some medium sized unstaffed stations when a number of intending passengers choose to use the machine, perhaps if they do not own a smartphone, and create a queue which can still exist when the train arrives. Do the remaining passengers miss the train or do they take a risk by boarding without holding a valid ticket, possibly incurring the actions of the RP staff? If the railway industry is seeking to grow the market matters like this need to be addressed.

The average age of trains operated by Northern has significantly shortened in recent years with Class 195 (diesel) and Class 331 (electric) trains being used on major routes. Other trains have been refurbished with most offering decent comfort except that the remaining Class 150 trains (now nearly 40 years old) offer cramped seating accommodation and a noisy environment.

All trains now offer an on-board CIS which informs the passengers of the train's route, the next calling station and other relevant information. There were a number of incidents on the Clitheroe Line when the CIS stopped working during the journey, with the panels displaying incorrect information. The visual information is accompanied by concurrent spoken messages. It is unfortunate however that as a train approaches its next station the announcement states *'Please mind the gap when leaving the train'*. Its tedious repetition prior to each station on a local service is unwelcome. Poor alignment and the height of track have created the gaps and the excessive stepping heights at many stations. This is a hinderance to seamless accessibility without additional human intervention.

It is pleasing to see that trains have been lengthened on many routes but sadly not all platforms are now long enough to accommodate the trains concerned. For safety's sake it is necessary to lock out sections of the lengthened train. This has been observed to cause delay as a journey progresses.

Surveyors commented that when conductors came through the trains they were generally pleasant and helpful. Particular mention is made of the staff on the Lancaster – Skipton route.

The following points were highlighted in surveyors additional comments and in the overall data collected:

- *There was a trolley service on the train but it never reached my carriage.*
- *The fare has gone up yet again. In the last days of Virgin it was £14.00, now it's £19.25.*
- On a day when there were problems north of Lancaster on the West Coast Main Line passengers were advised to travel to Carlisle via the Cumbria coast route as it was assumed that the WCML would be blocked for some time. However, the blockage was cleared within an hour so the coast route passengers would have had a much longer journey than if they had stayed at Preston/Lancaster. This underlines the problems of trying to find efficient solutions to operational problems.
- It was observed that some passengers choose to ride in the first three carriages of a six car unit as there is invariably no ticket check. This matter was commented on by a number of surveyors.
- At Blackburn the ticket office is situated on the platform which can only be reached by passing through a gateline.
- A surveyor noted that Northern's local trains between Manchester and Stoke on Trent were cleaned to a high standard.
- A number of passengers joined the train at Southport and immediately started vaping. *'The guard was very prompt in his response and dealt with the problem in an exemplary manner'.*
- Three people boarded the train at Bare Lane but only one had bought a ticket prior to travel.
- *My standard class reservation was in Coach H but outside of Coach H it said 1st Class. The platform lady at Preston said 'use H'. inside Coach H it said 'Standard Premium' whatever that is. Very confusing.*
- On its arrival at Preston the above Avanti Pendolino displayed external panels showing Euston, next stop Haymarket. The interior CIS panels were blank. Seat reservations had not been loaded.
- Of the 16 long distance Avanti journeys assessed only eight featured enroute ticket checks.
- *Prior to return from Birmingham to Preston I had looked up what Standard Premium was, so I decided to sample it. There was no ticket check so I was not asked to pay the £25 extra.*
- At Preston the following Avanti announcement was regularly made: *'This service is likely to be very busy so if you have a flexible ticket you may wish to use a different service'.* The options were a service via

Birmingham taking over 60 minutes longer OR the next direct train to London, for which the announcement said *'This train is likely to be very busy!'*.

- *The 10.30 return from Euston to Glasgow was 'the wrong way round' with First Class at the far end. This caused the start of chaos. The reservation system had not downloaded so the chaos was exacerbated.*
- *Outward trip from Poulton le Fylde to Euston – no ticket check. On the return trip – no ticket check. Why? Why? Why?*
- *At Altrincham there are two TVMs on Platform 4 (towards Chester) but none on Platform 3 (towards Stockport/Manchester).*
- *Journey from Hale to Plumley (Northern service) – Upon boarding the train cycle storage was totally obstructed by passenger's suitcases resulting in a noisy confrontation with a passenger only a few feet from the train manager's 'cubicle'. The train manager did not intervene. On alighting the situation was raised with the train manager whose response was 'There's not much I can do about it'.*
- *The surveyor for once sat in the rear of the six-car set between Preston and Poulton le Fylde but 'even then there was no ticket check'.*
- *There was a significant group of passengers who, with the surveyor, joined the front section of the six-car train. To the surveyor it was obvious that these people chose that section so that they could have a free ride (and leave by the ticket-check-free route at Preston).*
- *On only 61% of the 119 Northern journeys assessed was the conductor seen to be checking tickets. As frequently noticed, tickets were rarely checked in the front three carriages of a six-car set.*
- *Between Sheffield and Manchester on the Northern service passengers with 'TPE only' tickets had to pay again despite the TPE train being a 'temporary cancellation'.*
- *Blackburn station was particularly clean with a lady wiping seats whilst I was on platform 4. My train was shown on the CIS as Rochdale via Bolton, with no mention of Manchester, which must cause confusion.*
- *At Grindleford the timetable poster on the Sheffield platform was for trains to Manchester. There was no poster on the Manchester platform – but there were Amazon lockers!*
- *A journey on a Class 195 from Carnforth to Manchester Piccadilly – A very clean train and a pleasant comfy journey except for the ride which was too rough to write legibly. This poor ride quality was also noted by other surveyors.*
- *A surveyor said 'This must be the perfect train journey' on the 10.18 TPE train from Manchester Piccadilly to Sheffield on 12th May. Clean train, on time, comfortable, nice scenery. Not too many passengers so nice and quiet. Announcements were made by Rachael in the rear 3-car set. These were superb – clear, concise and informative. There were two other TPE traincrew in the leading 3-car unit. One checked tickets and the other worked the catering trolley. Pure delight.*

6. Conclusions

a. Positive aspects

- The long awaited introduction of modern rolling stock and the withdrawal of the generally unloved Pacer trains has brought about a significant improvement in journey standards.
- The introduction of consistent on-train announcements (route, calling points, arrival time, etc.) has improved passenger confidence.
- The improvement in overall cleanliness of train interiors, triggered by Covid 19 regulations, has been welcomed.
- The pleasant attitude of on-board staff, when present, shows the success of inter-personal relationship training.
- The impact of the voluntary work of 'friends of stations' has noticeably improved the condition of those in more rural areas.
- The provision of CIS at stations. An ongoing programme.
- The increase in the length of trains on popular routes.
- The provision of mobile phone recharging sockets.

b. Matters of concern

- The continuing provision of trains which are approaching 40 years old.
- The tight legroom in the ageing fleet leading to poor comfort on a long journey.
- The continuing need to use diesel units due to lack of progress with electrification.
- The absence of regular ticket checks, leading to ticketless travel and loss of vital revenue.
- The increasing absence of poster timetables at stations.
- Rumours about proposed closure of ticket offices thus preventing intending passengers from seeking face to face travel information and obtaining best value tickets.
- The implied discrimination against persons who are not 'tech savvy', even to the extent of being confident in the use of TVMs.
- Continuing concern regarding the lack of direct access at some stations (or particular platforms) by mobility impaired persons.
- The presence of 'the gap' and/or a high stepping distance at many stations.
- The lack of highly visual and/or spoken warnings about the Penalty Fares rules. The legal notices at station entrances are not sufficient, leading to passengers being summonsed through genuine ignorance.
- The lack of mobile phone coverage on certain sections of some routes. On-board internet availability is hit and miss.

This report has been compiled from surveys carried out by:

David Butterworth
Malcolm Conway
Alan Hurst
Colin Kennington
Peter Lamkin
John Moorhouse
Richard Rollins
John Owen
Ian Stuart
Ian Watson

Results analysis and report:

David Butterworth

TravelWatch NorthWest Secretary:

John Moorhouse

North West Public Transport Users' Forum Community Interest
Company trading as TravelWatch NorthWest

Company No. 6181713

Registered Office: 11 Harvelin Park,
Todmorden,
Lancs,
OL14 6HX

Website – www.travelwatch-northwest.org.uk

Email – admin@travelwatch-northwest.org.uk