



National Audit Office

Reducing passenger rail delays by better management of incidents



SUMMARY

1 Passenger rail services are being used more heavily than at any time for almost sixty years. While rail performance has steadily improved since the Hatfield derailment in October 2000, incidents such as infrastructure faults, fleet problems, fatalities and trespass still cause significant delays to the travelling public. In 2006-07, 0.8 million incidents led to 14 million minutes of delay to franchised passenger rail services in Great Britain, costing a minimum of £1 billion (averaging around £73 for each minute of delay) in the time lost to passengers in delays. Of these incidents 1,376 each led to over 1,000 minutes of delay. Managing the consequences of incidents and getting trains running normally again is vital to reducing delays. We examined how well Network Rail and the Train Operating

Companies work together and with the emergency services in resolving unexpected rail incidents that affect franchised passenger rail services in England.

2 In 2006-07 the Department for Transport's Rail Group provided £3.4 billion in grants to Network Rail and £1.7 billion in net franchise payments to Train Operating Companies. It sets rail policy and awards franchises for running train services to the Train Operating Companies. It also monitors the performance of Train Operating Companies in delivering the services agreed in their franchises in England and reports to the Secretary of State each month on their performance. The Office of Rail Regulation monitors the overall performance of the rail industry, including the percentage of services arriving at

their final destinations on time and the length of delays attributable to Network Rail. It does not routinely monitor how well the industry manages incidents but its annual assessment of Network Rail's performance includes an analysis of the delays attributed to Network Rail. It also investigates individual incidents that cause particularly severe disruption to services. For example, it investigated the major disruption caused by overrunning engineering works at Rugby and London Liverpool Street over Christmas 2007 and the New Year. The Office of Rail Regulation reported its findings on this in late February 2008.

3 Network Rail is accountable for the overall performance of the railway and has primary responsibility for managing incidents, including those suffered by Train Operating Companies as a result of other Train Operating Companies' actions. There are well-established procedures for dealing with and recovering from all types of incidents. Responsibility is shared between:

- Network Rail for keeping the rail network open, taking decisions about closing lines and cancelling trains (subject to industry-agreed criteria including consideration of the impact on passengers); and
- the Train Operating Companies for organising train services and looking after passengers, for example by providing information.

4 Since 1999-2000 the total number of delay minutes to franchised passenger services has increased by two per cent, while the number of incidents has fluctuated year on year around 900,000 before falling by 10 per cent in 2006-07 to some 793,000. This is against a background of growth in rail usage with passenger journeys increasing by 25 per cent and the distance travelled by trains increasing by six per cent in the same period. Under the delay attribution system, Network Rail is held responsible for delays caused by infrastructure faults and those caused by external factors, such as bad weather.

5 Infrastructure faults caused the most delay minutes in four of the last five years, and in 2006-07 they were responsible for 42 per cent of total delay minutes (5.9 million out of 14 million minutes). From 1999-2000 to 2002-03, when Railtrack was responsible, the number of delay minutes caused by infrastructure faults almost doubled from 4.9 million to 9.7 million minutes. Delay minutes caused by infrastructure faults since Network Rail was established fell by 3.8 million minutes to 5.9 million minutes between 2002-03 and 2006-07.

6 While fewer in number, the total delay minutes for incidents caused by events such as adverse weather, fatalities and vandalism has increased from 2.0 million to 2.9 million minutes (45 per cent) from 1999-2000 to 2006-07 accounting for 20 per cent of total delay minutes in 2006-07. The average delay due to externally-caused incidents (45 minutes) was around double that caused by infrastructure faults, and four times that of incidents caused by Train Operating Companies. Many external incidents require the involvement of third parties such as the emergency services which can make incident management more complex and can result in control of the incident site passing to the emergency services, limiting the scope for Network Rail and operators to minimise delays to services and passengers.

7 Train Operating Companies caused 38 per cent of the total delay minutes in 2006-07 but have reduced the number of delay minutes they cause from 6.8 million to 5.3 million minutes (22 per cent) between 1999-2000 and 2006-07.

8 We reviewed 412 of Network Rail's incident reports between 1 April 2006 and 31 March 2007 and 74 incident reports from Train Operating Companies. Where comments were made, we found as follows:

- although contingency plans do not have to be rigidly followed, they were available and correctly implemented in most incidents. However, there were 20 cases where trains were not cancelled as planned, or there was no plan available;
- almost all the incidents were dealt with by the appropriate level of personnel both within Network Rail and the Train Operating Companies, with only 11 incidents where the correct procedure was not followed; and
- there were some concerns about communication and cooperation, which was better where Network Rail and Train Operating Company staff were brought together in Co-located and Integrated Control Centres. It has not been possible to determine the extent to which co-location and integration have in themselves improved incident management. There is, however, general enthusiasm for the concept of co-location within the industry and Network Rail considers that co-location has contributed to significant performance improvements.

9 Further findings emerged from interviews with the rail industry and the emergency services:

- Network Rail staff felt that local police force practices could be unhelpful in some cases, making it more difficult to resolve the incident and, on occasion, presenting a risk to the safety of passengers on delayed trains and at overcrowded stations when services are disrupted;
- there was evidence to suggest that emergency personnel are not always aware of whom to contact within Network Rail during an emergency;
- there are agreements between Network Rail and the emergency services on how to deal with the most severe types of incidents but little evidence of agreements for the serious but more common incidents such as fatalities, trespassing or road vehicles hitting railway bridges. The Highways Agency is making progress in establishing memoranda of understanding with the emergency services that the rail industry currently does not have;
- medical and other emergency protocols take precedence over rail industry procedures and protocols which can prolong incidents, for example, where medical staff treat ill passengers in situ rather than moving them; and
- individual emergency personnel attend rail incidents infrequently, do not normally undergo formal training on railway incidents or track safety and may not receive all the available Network Rail guidance, and so may not be aware of how to work safely on the railways.

10 There is scope to develop the incident review process to achieve greater sharing of the lessons learnt from incidents, for example by involving the emergency services in the review process or disseminating lessons outside the local Network Rail area. Some Train Operating Companies could also produce more detailed reviews of incidents.

11 The National Passenger Survey for autumn 2007 showed that 35 per cent of passengers were satisfied with the way that delays were handled, and 29 per cent were dissatisfied. Of passengers who were unhappy, 75 per cent did not feel that they had received sufficient information. There is no franchise service level for how often information should be provided to passengers during service disruption. In December 2007, the Association of Train Operating Companies issued passenger information good practice guidance which sets out standard announcement templates and recommends that operators should inform passengers of any delays within two minutes. We also found that visual display units on trains were not used to provide messages about delays. Network Rail and some Train Operating Companies told us that they were taking steps to increase the number of staff at key stations during disruption and had contingency plans so that staff could respond quickly and provide information on alternative transport routes. The Association of Train Operating Companies told us that, in autumn 2007, the rail industry introduced specific arrangements to review the handling of passengers and the provision of information to them following every major incident. The reviews involve all affected Train Operating Companies, Network Rail and Passenger Focus.

Overall conclusion

12 Network Rail has had primary responsibility for managing incidents since October 2002. It has succeeded in working with the Train Operating Companies to reduce the number of incidents on the passenger network to the levels recorded before the Hatfield derailment in October 2000, and the number of delay minutes recorded in 2006-07 is not significantly more than in 1999-2000. We found from the sample of incidents that we examined that Network Rail has well-established protocols and procedures with Train Operating Companies for dealing with incidents which, generally, are applied appropriately. More could be done, however, particularly in dealing with incidents which require the cooperation of third parties. There is scope to build more effective relationships and to improve contingency planning. There are also shortcomings in the way that passengers are handled when incidents occur and there is scope for the rail industry to keep them better informed when they are delayed.

Recommendations

On working with the emergency services

13 Network Rail should have in place:

- procedures for notifying emergency services personnel of relevant telephone numbers to be used during incidents and should examine the costs and benefits of introducing a dedicated national telephone number for emergency services personnel to call to direct them to the appropriate Network Rail staff (paragraph 2.17);
- national memoranda of understanding with each of the emergency services' national associations setting out the respective roles and responsibilities, which can be used to develop local agreements with individual emergency services providers (paragraph 2.18); and
- should work with emergency services to identify and remove blockages in the distribution of training materials (such as leaflets, videos and DVDs) on railway safety to the emergency services (paragraph 2.19).

14 The Office of Rail Regulation should provide assurance that Network Rail is engaging with third parties such as the emergency services to resolve incidents and has appropriate mechanisms in place to do so.

On providing information to passengers

15 Train Operating Companies should:

- implement the good practice guidelines issued by the Association of Train Operating Companies for the provision of accurate and useful initial information to passengers and the frequency with which passengers should be updated (paragraph 3.4).

16 Train Operating Companies and Network Rail should:

- identify and use other means of communicating information, for example through visual displays onboard trains (where technically feasible) and at stations which may be particularly helpful to deaf and hard-of-hearing passengers (paragraph 3.6); and
- highlight in contingency plans for incidents the need to provide information to passengers (paragraph 3.8).

On learning from best practice

17 The Office of Rail Regulation should work with Network Rail to build on its arrangements for learning lessons from managing incidents and for sharing best practice.

18 Network Rail should:

- analyse its own incident review reports centrally to draw together lessons from across the network (paragraph 2.26).

19 Train Operating Companies should:

- complete more detailed incident reports to cover best practice and lessons to be learned, as well as issues such as communications with Network Rail and other Train Operating Companies, and how passengers were served (paragraph 2.27); and
- follow the example of some companies by providing contingency plans for stations so that staff can respond quickly to disruption and more staff are available in stations at such times (paragraph 3.8).

20 Organisations across the transport sector including Network Rail, the British Transport Police and the Highways Agency have much experience in managing incidents and could learn lessons from each other. The Department for Transport should work with these bodies to encourage the sharing of best practice and experience across the sector, for example through conferences or specific training events and seminars (paragraph 2.20).