

# How can technology help with social distancing as more people get back to travelling on the rails?

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As we accept that social distancing is a part of our life and will be best practice for some time, now more than ever customers on the platform need better accurate information.

**KeTech** specialises in the provision of enhanced, real-time information, improving rail customer experience and ensuring that both passengers and operators are better informed throughout the end-to-end journey.

The company has written a piece for [railbusinessdaily.com](https://railbusinessdaily.com) on the vital role technology will have to play in re-establishing confidence and encouraging people back on to the trains.

“Many trains are now fitted with passenger counting technology and digital seat reservations which has increased operational efficiency. Not only has it made reserving seats easier, it saves staff time on having to put “reserved” markers out and reduces time of passenger boarding, ultimately reducing risk of delays. The data provided has proved useful for train operating companies (TOC’s) helping them to better understand passenger behaviours.

Some TOCs have chosen to display how full each carriage is on the on-board screens helping at peak travel times to avoid overcrowding one carriage when there is space available further down the train, others have rearranged, removed or limited seating. What if we go one step further and provide this information sooner so that passengers waiting to board the train know which carriage has the most available space and can choose where to board?

Social distancing is going to be on people's minds for a long time to come. Maintaining a safe distance from other passengers wherever possible will be key to rebuilding people's confidence in public transport. Transport Focus have produced regular reports throughout the pandemic on the public's views and fears about travelling by train with as many as 71% recognising the effort of the rail staff in making them feel safe (1) but still commenting that the inability (or unwillingness of some passengers) to socially distance was a significant concern. Fears that, as more people get back to work and begin using the trains again, the old crowding problems will re-emerge and risk spreading illness. Will the lack of space effect user numbers going forward?

Even after the vaccines have been administered to the wider population, and as more people get back to work and socialising can begin again, there will still be a risk to consider for many. This pandemic has made many people more aware of personal space and the cleanliness of the places we go, things we touch, how many surfaces we inadvertently share. The pandemic has reshaped our world in profound ways. We are adapting to a post-COVID environment, and technology is playing a huge part.

### **Could technology provide the solution?**

Technology already has a place in reducing contact and increasing convenience; contactless payments, automated ticket barriers, online booking. Not to mention the technology involved in ensuring information is accessible to the visual or hearing impaired.

Evidence shows that providing more information breeds trust; Today, the speed of which information is delivered is crucial, with the advent of social media, that fact is even more apparent as people rely on minute-by-minute updates. Being digitally connected will be noticed only by its absence, not its presence. With more information people can plan their movements to suit their individual needs, providing a transparency which is increasingly important to modern consumers. Delivering a better-informed journey equates to happier passengers.

Only 50-60% of people asked by Transport Focus were satisfied with the standard of information about how busy the service would be. Do Customer Information Systems need to expand their delivery, provide more detailed information, supply the information across more outlets to ensure its accessible to all? Possibly even take it mobile and put PIS in passengers' pockets.

Throughout the pandemic, **KeTech's** PIS has been delivering accurate, location-based information to passengers; relevant updates on best practice and procedures. PIS can be synchronised with CIS to provide the same reminders and reassurances to travellers at the stations and on trains.

It's interesting to consider how people's attitudes to public transport have changed, how their expectations may have changed. According to the Department of Transport statistics (2), use of the railways dropped to

as low as 4% during the coronavirus pandemic and despite much being done to encourage people back to offices and social environments in the summer, numbers didn't increase beyond 43%. During this time, their figures show that despite a 1.4pp increase in service punctuality, there was still a 1% decrease in overall satisfaction. Perhaps this is an invitation to all who work within the industry to consider where else improvements can be made or what perceptions could be changed to provide a more positive passenger experience.

### **Communication and reassurance**

TOCs invest a huge amount into technological improvements, complying with safety and accessibility regulations, some of which won't necessarily be obvious to all passengers. Across the rails, TOCs have made vast improvements to their cleaning routines during the pandemic with the visual presence of cleaners being a source of reassurance to those who have needed to travel through the national lockdowns. Technology can be used to increase passenger assurance that safety does come first; screens displaying a cleaning schedule or notice of "This carriage was last disinfected at 10am" or "this platform is on a cleaning rota and will be disinfected again in one hour". The right information, thoughtfully delivered can help passengers to plan their movements and reassure them that our railways are safe.

Reports carried out by Transport Focus are invaluable in helping us better understand what rail customers expect, and its clear to see that the provision of information is going to be vital in re-establishing confidence and encouraging people back on to the trains."

(1) Transport Focus Survey wave Week 17 - 21 to 23 Aug 2020

(2) <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/transport-use-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic>

*Photo credit: KeTech*