

New Rail Ombudsman launches

November 26, 2018



Today, (26th November 2018) a new impartial and independent Ombudsman for the railway is launching to further enhance the industry's customer complaints process. The rail industry has worked with Government and consumer groups to appoint the new Rail Ombudsman.

The vast majority of complaints (99%) are dealt with by train companies without the need for people to turn to an appeals process, according to the Office of Rail and Road (ORR). However, rail companies together are supporting and funding the Rail Ombudsman to build greater confidence in their services and deliver on their commitment to increase customer satisfaction.

If customers have a complaint about an event occurring from today and they are unhappy with how it has been dealt with by a rail company, they can now appeal to the Rail Ombudsman. This new body has expertise in consumer law and alternative dispute resolution and will review appeals with a view to resolving them by mediation or by issuing a formal, binding ruling if no agreement between the customer and the company can be reached.

Rail companies will continue to do everything they can to resolve complaints directly with customers. Now, customers have the added assurance that the Rail Ombudsman is overseeing the process with the power to make rail companies act if it identifies failings. That means it will no longer be possible for a complaint to remain deadlocked between a rail company and a customer.

Customers can go to the free-to-use Rail Ombudsman if they are unhappy with the final response from a rail company (sometimes called a 'deadlock letter') or if their complaint has not been resolved within 40 working days of the rail company receiving it.

Jacqueline Starr, Managing Director of Customer Experience at the Rail Delivery Group, said:

"I'm pleased to announce that the independent Rail Ombudsman is launching, as part of our commitment to improving customer experience. This new nationwide process will put the customer at the heart of resolving complaints and give them even greater confidence that we're doing as much as we can to get to a fair outcome."

The scheme fulfils a Government commitment to support the establishment of a new, independent Rail Ombudsman to improve passengers' experience.

Andrew Jones, the Rail Minister, said:

"This is a significant step forward for passengers' rights. This independent ombudsman will make sure passengers are heard and that they get a fair deal when train companies fall short.

"Rail firms must take this opportunity to improve their complaints process and to increase customer satisfaction."

The service will be provided by the Dispute Resolution Ombudsman, which has a strong track record of alternative dispute resolution in the retail sector.

Kevin Grix, Chief Executive and Chief Ombudsman at the Dispute Resolution Ombudsman, said:

"We are excited to start as the new Rail Ombudsman and to provide an independent service that can resolve disputes between consumers and the rail industry. With our legal foundation and decades of experience we are well placed to support rail companies to better listen to their customers and help to improve their services."

The new Rail Ombudsman will build upon the important work that the Statutory Appeals Bodies (Transport Focus and London TravelWatch) have pursued for many years, with a great deal of success, but without any powers to compel operators to come up with a binding resolution for a disputed complaint. The performance of Dispute Resolution Ombudsman will be closely monitored by the Office of Rail & Road, Transport Focus and London TravelWatch.

Anthony Smith, Chief Executive of independent watchdog Transport Focus, said:

"The introduction of free, binding and independent dispute resolution for deadlocked rail complaints is a welcome step forward for rail passengers – and something we have called for over many years. Its arrival will also drive wider improvements in complaints handling. We will continue to deal with many issues

raised by passengers that fall outside the remit of this scheme and we will monitor closely the way the Ombudsman operates to make sure it really works for passengers.”

Janet Cooke, CEO of London TravelWatch, said:

“We are pleased that the Ombudsman scheme extends passenger rights and builds on our previous success in advocating for them when there is a dispute with train operators. This process introduces binding contractual resolution that will help passengers get a better deal.”

Darren Shirley, Chief Executive of Campaign for Better Transport, said:

“Millions of people rely on the railway each day; when things go wrong they deserve to have confidence that their complaints will be heeded. We welcome the new Ombudsman which will help to give them this confidence.”

The new Rail Ombudsman is part of the railway’s plan to change and improve. Working in partnership, the industry will secure £85 billion of additional economic benefit, increase customer satisfaction, boost local communities and create more and better jobs in rail.