

Rail industry launches immersive VR experience to encourage bystander reporting to combat sexual harassment

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An immersive virtual reality (VR) experience will be launched at Waterloo Station between 10am-4pm on Thursday 6th April by the rail industry and British Transport Police. The event is aimed at tackling all forms of sexual harassment by educating people to recognise how these situations occur for passengers and empower them to intervene safely and report perpetrators.

Sexual harassment is a real and far-reaching issue in British society with seven in ten (71%) women in the UK having experienced some form of sexual harassment in a public space, the latest survey commissioned by UN Women UK finds.

Education and empowerment are two key ways in which train companies are working together to encourage witnesses to take small steps to help stop perpetrators.

Recognising sexual harassment

Research has found that many of us are unaware of what constitutes sexual harassment and therefore may not recognise this behaviour when confronted with it. Through its campaign, the rail industry is shining a light not only on various forms of sexual harassment but also how it develops and how a small action by a bystander can prevent further escalation in the moment.

Over three quarters (79%) of UK adults agree that they would feel relieved if someone intervened or helped in any way whilst they were experiencing sexual harassment on public transport.

The most frequent forms of sexual harassment experienced by women aged 18–34 on public transport are sexual comments (27%), intrusive staring (25%) and persistent questioning (19%). Nearly one in six (15%) of have also experienced stalking or being followed.

However, when it comes to identifying this behaviour, a third of adults (35%) did not consider persistent questioning to be a form of sexual harassment, with 28% and 21% doing the same for catcalling and intrusive staring respectively. All these behaviours are key examples of sexual harassment which can be frightening, intimidating and, most importantly, can often lead to more serious offences occurring.

Because of this, the rail industry and British Transport Police use a more wide-ranging definition of sexual harassment than is standard. This enables the recording and monitoring of sexually motivated behaviours that would not reach the threshold of a sexual offence as embodied in current legislation.

Role of the bystander to help stop perpetrators

From those surveyed, over half of men (54%) say that a member of the public has intervened when they have been harassed, however this number more than halves for women – less than a quarter of women (24%) say that a member of the public has stepped in.

When it comes to bystanders intervening, those who have experienced sexual harassment would most appreciate someone interrupting the situation (45%), while having someone simply ask ‘are you okay?’ would be appreciated by a third (32%). According to the research, 85% of women would feel relieved if someone intervened.

Train companies and British Transport Police are providing advice and tips on how bystanders can safely intervene and report a situation before police or rail staff are able to get involved. The VR experience demonstrates that this does not have to be physical contact but could be as simple as asking the targeted person if they would like to swap seats or asking the perpetrator a distracting question.

Jacqueline Starr, Chief Executive of the Rail Delivery Group comments, “The Rail Industry is actively tackling all forms of sexual harassment and we are committed to making people feel safe. As a bystander, it is likely that you could help before rail staff or police can get directly involved. Whether you see it or experience it, you can safely report anything that makes you uncomfortable by texting 61016 or using the Railway Guardian app. Our customers have a right to feel safe on Britain’s railways and to feel confident to call out this behaviour without fear. Reporting really does make a difference and doing so on public transport is simple, secure, and safe. Please help us to help you.”

Rail Minister Huw Merriman said: “Everyone should feel safe and confident using our public transport but, unfortunately, this research shows there is still a lot of work to do to achieve this.

“Through this innovative VR experience, Rail Delivery Group and the British Transport Police are showing that even small actions – such as alerting rail staff – can make a big difference, empowering passengers to speak up when they witness sexual abuse and creating a safer railway for everyone.”

Graham Goulden, bystander intervention expert and ex-Criminal Chief Investigating Officer in the Scottish Police comments, “Knowing what to do is a big motivator for bystanders as harmful acts are witnessed every day. Some people don’t realise that harm is taking place whereas others, rightly so, fear for their own safety. Not only do we help people see the harm in likes of language and other behaviours, but we also provide them with tools to act. One person can make a difference so it’s important that people believe that they can help.”

Detective Chief Inspector Nia Mellor, from British Transport Police said: “Reports from bystanders provide crucial intelligence. You can help stop sexual harassment by reporting anything that makes you uncomfortable and thinking about how you can be an active bystander.

“We’re not asking people to police the railway, that’s our job. But small actions such as offering someone your seat if you notice them looking uncomfortable, alerting rail staff, or reporting to police can make an enormous difference.”

How to report

By reporting all incidents that occur, bystanders can help the British Transport Police to identify perpetrators and reduce potential harm for others in the future. Following initial awareness-raising campaigns by Rail Delivery Group, British Transport Police and Transport for London, reports of sexual harassment and sexual offences to British Transport Police have risen by 175% since before the pandemic (2019/20 compared to 2021/22).

To report an incident, contact the British Transport Police by texting 61016 or using the [Railway Guardian app](#). In an emergency, always call 999.

To watch the full VR film please visit National Rail YouTube channel [here](#).

Photo credit: Rail Delivery Group