

Watchdog: more difficult to update rail passengers about works during pandemic

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An independent watchdog has said that rail operators found it more difficult to notify passengers of engineering works this year.

It says this is due to the pandemic, with its subsequent lockdowns and reduction in passenger numbers.

Transport Focus said it studied two projects between February and June. These centred on works on the West Coast Main Line (WCML), including at Euston and Bristol East Junction.

Before the pandemic, Transport Focus says rail operators had largely kept passengers informed at stations or on board trains, as well as when they bought tickets online. But with lockdowns and the reduction in passenger numbers, it became more challenging to warn of disruption to future journeys.

Transport Focus added that fewer people using train operator apps, websites, and social media made these approaches less effective too.

The findings overall suggest that passengers need information on engineering works to be:

- related to their journey
- spread in a variety of ways to have the best possible coverage
- available to them when needed, especially when researching a trip or buying a ticket.

Anthony Smith, chief executive of the independent watchdog Transport Focus, said: “Passengers tell us that they want accurate, honest information about delays and disruption, whether planned or unplanned.

“Rail operators need to use all channels at their disposal to reach travellers. The dates and the impact of any works must be prominent in communications to help people plan their travel appropriately.”

Its recommendations to rail operators include giving as much notice as possible ahead of planned projects, carrying out engineering works when they will cause the least disruption to passengers and, wherever possible, offering a rail alternative for passengers when a line is closed.

In better news, it was found many still recognised that works were essential and would provide long-term benefits.