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Rail users suffer as fare rises outstrip salaries

By Rose Jacobs

UK rail users are increasingly unhappy with the cost of their journeys, as fares rise faster than salaries.

A semi-annual survey by Passenger Focus, the official watchdog for rail passengers, found that the proportion of people satisfied with their rail expenditure fell from 49 to 46 per cent. Satisfaction with cleanliness of trains and stations, ticket facilities and availability of seats held steady.

More than 30,000 people were polled between September and November last year as passengers braced for an 8 per cent rise in fares in 2012. The chancellor used his autumn statement to reduce that increase to 6 per cent.

But the survey makes clear that rail users – whom the government wants to bear the brunt of the cost of the rail system – were already feeling the pinch.

Satisfaction in value-for-money terms fell among passengers in London and the south-east as well as those on long-distance services; only on regional rail were levels flat from the autumn 2010 survey.

On long-distance trains, satisfaction with reliability and punctuality also fell.

Anthony Smith, the chief executive of Passenger Focus, said: “Performance remains the key passenger priority. Train companies and Network Rail [the infrastructure owner] must keep up a relentless attention on getting trains on time . . . Passengers are still paying above inflation fares rises and have every right to expect the industry to keep its basic promise to get them there on time.”

The group pointed out that responses varied widely across individual routes. On value-for-money scores, the portion of satisfied passengers swung from 36 per cent on Southeastern trains to 80 per cent on Grand Central, an open-access network connecting cities such as Bradford, York and Sunderland.

Overall satisfaction ranged from 72 per cent to 95 per cent. Grand Central, run by Arriva Trains, a division of Deutsche Bahn, won the highest rating, while

passengers on East Anglia, run by National Express, and FirstGroup's First Capital Connect services were among the least satisfied.

Grand Central's performance was "a ringing endorsement of open access as well as a testament to the skill and hard work of our dedicated and friendly staff," said the managing director.

Open-access operators are given access to track at a lower rate than franchised operators provided they do not compete with franchised routes.

Analysts at Hay Group, which tracks salary trends, said it was no surprise that rail users were unhappy about value for money on trains.

"As train fares continue to rise above inflation, and salary increases remain subdued, commuting costs are set to take up more of UK employees' pay packets," said Stuart McMillan, a consultant at the group.

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