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Rail complaints on the rise

Watchdog reports 30% rise in complaints, with East Coast Trains the main culprit

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Passengers' complaints about rail services are increasing fast. Photograph: Frank Baron for the Guardian

Complaints about train companies by passengers rose by more than 30% last year, according to [Passenger Focus](#), which named East Coast as the worst train company to deal with by an extraordinary margin.

Of the 3,000 complaints that the rail user watchdog took up over the last 12 months, 774 involved East Coast, which operates the main line between London, Newcastle and Scotland. The next most complained-about rail firm, Virgin, was the subject of 277 complaints, even though it is a bigger company.

East Coast accounted for more than a quarter of all complaints, suggesting that something has gone seriously wrong at the state-owned franchise.

Passenger Focus, which has no enforcement powers, says it was contacted by a total of 14,687 passengers during the last financial year. From that group, it deemed 3,069 complaints worthy of being taken up with the rail company concerned because the firm had failed to handle the matter correctly. Despite an overall fall in the number of complaints made to the rail industry, Passenger Focus says it has seen an increase of 31.5% in the number of rail appeals it has taken up this year.

It said the number of appeals received about East Coast is up 80% from the previous year's 429. The majority involve ticketing problems, penalty fares and complaints about the way staff treated passengers.

Passenger Focus chief executive, Anthony Smith, says: "A large part of our work involves working with train operators to help them improve the quality of their complaint handling and thereby reducing the number of complaints they receive converting to appeals received by us."

Earlier this year Guardian Money featured the case of [KC of London, who had arrived at](#)

King's Cross to take an East Coast train to Dundee. The ticket printing machine wasn't working. Platform staff advised her to board the train, but the guard gave her an unpaid fares notice of £162.50. When she appealed, East Coast apologised but refused a refund until Money intervened.

An East Coast spokesman says it has since satisfactorily resolved all the complaints referred to in the report. "We are heavily promoting to customers how they can make a complaint, and how they can get in touch with Passenger Focus, but we must also ensure that we are robust when we investigate claims, as we have a duty to the taxpayer."