

Virgin voted Britain's best train company



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Virgin topped the survey of rail operators. Picture: Ian Ruthertford

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THE RAIL firm running the West Coast Main Line has topped a poll on customer satisfaction – just months after it nearly lost the franchise.

Virgin Rail won a 67 per cent approval rating from thousands of passengers, while more than half of train firms scored 50 per cent or lower.

The Which? survey also found only 22 per cent of travellers felt their service was improving, despite above-inflation fare rises last month.

East Coast trains got 58 per cent and ScotRail was given a 53 per cent approval score, seventh in the table of 19 firms.

London Overground was second on the Which? table with 65 per cent, while the London to Tilbury and Southend company c2c and Merseyrail both scored 64 per cent.

Bottom in the table was First Capital Connect, with only 40 per cent of its passengers satisfied with its service.

The survey also found that 40 per cent of train travellers are likely to reduce the number of journeys they make as a result of the recent price increases which saw season tickets rise by an average of 4.2 per cent. But a third of commuters said they did not have an alternative way of getting to work and would just have to pay more.

ScotRail disputed the findings and pointed to research last month that found nine out of 10 passengers were satisfied.

The Which? survey, compiled from responses from 7,500 regular train users, came just months after Virgin initially lost the West Coast Main Line contract to FirstGroup, only for the decision to then be halted, investigated and reversed.

A spokesman for Virgin Rail said: "Our staff work hard to deliver an excellent service, and although the survey covered only a small sample, we are pleased it acknowledged their efforts."

The National Passenger Survey, released last month, said 90 per cent of ScotRail passengers were satisfied with their train services, while East Coast and Virgin recorded 92 per cent.

However, only 52 per cent of ScotRail travellers were satisfied they were getting value for money for the price of their ticket, the poll found.

A spokesman for ScotRail said the National Passenger Survey was a larger and more reliable measure, adding: "That 90 per cent rating in the key category of overall customer satisfaction was up one percentage point on last year and five points higher than the UK average for train operators. The survey also revealed ScotRail is rated more highly than UK train operators in 30 of the 36 categories, including the attitude and helpfulness of staff, punctuality and reliability, and ticket buying facilities."

In a separate investigation Which? found train ticket machines also gave travellers poor service. In a snapshot probe, looking at 11 London mainline station ticket machines, Which? found certain tickets not available or unclear information.

Which? executive director Richard Lloyd said: "With 1.5 billion train journeys made every year and eight rail franchises up for grabs in the next two years, customer service should be top of the agenda for every train operating company. It is good to see some are performing well on service, but customers clearly feel others need to do better."

A spokesman for the Association of Train Operating Companies said: "The watchdog Passenger Focus

surveys up to eight times as many people a year and last month reported 85 per cent of passengers are satisfied with their service – a record high.”

Bosses' pay stays high despite public facing huge fare hikes

Train bosses on the East Coast line are enjoying six-figure salaries at a time when rail passengers are enduring above-inflation fare rises, according to new figures.

The service between Edinburgh and London – despite being run in the public sector – has as many as eight directors on salaries of above £100,000 a year according to a Freedom of Information Act release.

One director – identified by the Press Association as managing director Karen Boswell, above – was on a salary of between £161,000 and £180,000.

Two other East Coast directors' salaries came within the £121,000 to £140,000 band, while five other directors were on between £100,000 and £120,000 a year.

East Coast's parent company is Directly Operated Railways (DOR), which was set up in 2009 by the then transport secretary to manage any train operations which return to the public sector.

DOR took over East Coast in November 2009 when National Express pulled out of the franchise.

Information obtained from DOR via the Department for Transport showed DOR chief executive Michael Holden, below left, had a salary for the year ending March 2012 of £156,100. CrossCountry, which runs some trains in Scotland, gave information covering 2011. It showed the highest paid director – named by the Press Association as managing director Andy Cooper, above, – on £222,000 including pension contributions.

The company said it had ten registered directors and their aggregate pay, including benefits, was £795,000.

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