

SOROPTIMIST INTERNATIONAL OF
YORKSHIRE

RAIL SURVEY REPORT

November 2003

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SOROPTIMIST INTERNATIONAL

Soroptimist International is a global organisation for women, in professions and management, whose aim is to advance the human rights and status of women through service to local, national, and international communities, through active participation in decision making at all levels of society, and through international goodwill and understanding.

This report is the Yorkshire SI contribution to a national survey of railway stations. It originated with a study carried out by South East England SI. (Rail Safety Task Force *Safe and Sure: A “quick wins” agenda for Britain’s railways* Soroptimist International of South East England, October 2002.) Their work inspired us to look at the conditions at stations in our own region, using the questionnaire they developed. (A copy of the questionnaire is given in Appendix Two.) As requested, we have followed the format of that report in presenting our findings.

Like the original report, we are concerned mainly with the “problems experienced by women, by those with children or luggage, by older or arthritic people, and when using railway lines in rural or run-down areas.” (Railway Safety Task Force, p.1) Our report is based on 59 returns from SI clubs throughout the Yorkshire region (A full list of the stations covered is given in Appendix One). These stations covered the full range of rural and urban settings, and were a mixture of everything from big mainline stations to the smallest rural halt with a single platform.

As well as filling in the questionnaires from visits to the stations, our members frequently wrote comments as well on what they had seen and their reactions to the conditions at the stations. Many of these members are far from regular rail users and what they found clearly surprised – and shocked – many of them.

1. THE STATIONS

In both West and South Yorkshire there are Passenger Transport Executives to oversee and coordinate all aspects of public transport. Until recently they have been quite active in opening new stations to encourage more people to use the trains. For funding reasons most of these are no more than ‘halts’ – a platform in each direction with a shelter on it, and a nearby car park. However, where funding permits older stations (typically those where the original Victorian buildings are still standing) are being upgraded. As well as better waiting facilities this often includes re-opening and staffing the ticket offices for at least part of the day.

Aspect 1: Who was in charge?

(a) Staff on the spot

The first point to stress is that of the 59 stations covered, only eight (the main stations of Leeds, York, Doncaster, Bradford, Harrogate, Hull, Rotherham, and Sheffield) were fully staffed whenever train services were operating. On these stations, in addition to the staff in ticket and information offices there were usually others on the platforms (but not on every platform) to provide advice and assistance to passengers.

Thirty were completely unstaffed, and the remaining fifteen only had staff (usually in the ticket office) for part of the day (typically weekday mornings). In many cases there was only one person in the office. As many members pointed out, this has obvious implications for any passengers requiring assistance, of whatever kind, and for passenger safety.

I would not like to encounter problems on the platforms of this station. No emergency phone. No emergency contact number available.

Too many warnings about dire consequences of not buying ticket – not enough about personal safety.

Where staff were present, they were visible (albeit only in an office in most cases) and identifiable from their uniforms. Only one station had photographs of staff. However, except at the mainline stations, the staff were only there to sell tickets and give information. They were not responsible for the platforms or to give any other assistance to passengers, unless they were disabled (see below). Indeed, at many stations the siting of the ticket offices meant that staff could not see, or be seen from, the platforms.

Only a fifth of the stations were recorded as having “a prominent notice on display or other information to say who is responsible for all aspects of safety at this station and around?” In fact, talking to members and friends who are regular rail users, it appears that all the stations in our region do have signs with the name of the operating company who is responsible, (in most of our region it is Arriva Trains Northern).

However, there are two problems with these notices. Firstly, they are not very big (less than a foot wide; indeed, they are some of the smallest signs around!) and usually not prominently displayed. Secondly, the signs usually just give the name of the company, without any further information. They do NOT say that the company is responsible; it would be easy for a visitor who is unfamiliar with the current railway system (probably most of us!) to assume that they just run the trains.

When we came to write this report, we sent someone to have a closer look at some of the stations in West Yorkshire. She discovered that they do have signs stating that Arriva Trains operate the station. However, these signs are **very** inconspicuous (she went round several times before noticing them, even though she was looking out for signs) and in **very** small writing.

(b) Whom to approach?

The South East report noted in this respect: “many [posters] fell into the trap of wordiness, with too much material burying key items of information.” We noticed the same in our region. The standard practice of Arriva Trains (at least outside the mainline stations) is to put up one large poster (about 2 feet by 3 feet) that contains information about almost everything except train times. This includes telephone numbers for British Transport Police, getting help for disabled passengers, reporting problems, getting information, etcetera.

Several members commented that the most prominent posters on the platforms were those stating that the company did not tolerate attacks on staff or passengers (with a contact number). As they said, this immediately gave the impression that such attacks were commonplace!

Aspect 2: Was desired information available and easily accessible?

Basic information such as timetables (98%), general information (88%), and loudspeaker announcements (63%) was well provided for. On the other hand, only about a third (37%) of stations provided information about help for disabled travellers, and only 24% had any information about security on the station or train. (It does appear from some of the comments that the layout of the questionnaire may have led to some confusion here, with some respondents interpreting the last to item to refer to the provision of the help or security itself, rather than the information about it. In fact, the standard general information notice on the stations does provide some information; the trouble is that it is buried amidst a lot of other information.)

It was pointed out that the positioning of notices might make them difficult for some people to read.

Height of timetable made it difficult to read so wheelchair users would have found it impossible. Also numbers and lettering small so partially sighted people would find it impossible.

There was a heavy downpour when I visited this station which made the reading of the timetable difficult as it wasn't under cover... Also it took time trying to decipher all the different symbols and letters over the top of the times.

Aspect 3: Did CCTV deployment help security?

Half (51%) of stations had CCTV (as far as respondents could ascertain – others may have had CCTV but it was not apparent). Of the 30 stations with CCTV, only fifteen had prominent signs to that effect. To put it another way, at the very best any possible deterrent effect of CCTV would only be felt at a quarter of the stations that were surveyed. It seems that at staffed stations pictures from the cameras are displayed on a screen in the ticket office. We do not know what happens to pictures from cameras at unstaffed stations.

however, the main exit remains poorly lit and passes the old booking office and this section is not served by CCTV, a sharp contrast with the rest of the station

One of our members was so struck by a notice at one of the stations she inspected that she took a photograph of it (Appendix Four). As she said, this was one of the larger, better-staffed non-mainline stations in our region, with CCTV, yet an assault like this could take place at a busy time. (Several other respondents commented that the station they inspected had a police notice concerning a recent assault on passengers or railway staff. This did not inspire confidence!)

There had been a problem with beggars in the past and it would be intimidating for ladies if the ticket office had shut and they were waiting for a train alone or had just disembarked from a train

Aspect 4: Could help be sought in a hurry from police?

It was reported that less than a third (31%) of stations had the new BTP/Railtrack number on display. (However, after referring to the South East report, we think this question may have been misinterpreted. The Report refers to special high visibility posters dedicated to the Rail Crimewatch number 40 50 40. Conversations with regular users suggest that these posters are largely absent from our region. We think the members who filled in the forms may be referring to the standard general information posters that do include a BTP number.) On the other hand, most (73%) did display some other help number.

Like the South East Region, we were not able to find out how fast the response is if anyone does call the British Transport Police or the local police. However, we would make two points. Firstly, it appears that the BTP only have a presence at the mainline stations in our region. Secondly, when one of our members discussed this with a female member of staff in a ticket office she was told that in their experience it took nearly 45 minutes for the local police to respond to a call, and even longer for BTP; this was in a fair-sized town. The woman stated that she and her colleagues were unhappy about their own safety in the office!

Only eight of the stations (all mainline) (14%) had a clearly marked Emergency Help Point.

A telephone is available in the sheltered waiting area on the platform away from the carpark. There is no indication at all that this is sited there!

I would not like to encounter problems on the platforms of this station. No emergency phone. No emergency contact number available.

Emergency help point was vandalised: speaker removed.

Unfortunately you have to leave the station to walk into ... village to find the phone box.

One platform has a BT (card) payphone (also vandalised, not working).

Aspect 5: Did it feel safe leaving the station?

Most of the stations (78%) were reported as having a safe place to wait for a car, etc. At 66% there was information and a telephone for calling a taxi. At 75% of stations respondents felt there was a safe route to the car park. However, there were stations with problems, in both rural and urban areas.

Station is 15 minute walk from town centre/bus station (I would not get off a train here after dusk) and signs for town centre are non-existent. For strangers this would be a difficult place to find your way around.

There aren't any taxis – but there is a telephone number for a local taxi firm. Don't know what you do if you do not have a mobile!)

Lighting was a particular issue, sometimes within the stations as well as around them.

Not enough lighting on way from car park to platforms. No help available in any form, no phone. I wouldn't want any woman or young person to use this station at night

Very dark under railway bridge, up the stairs to platform

The station is below street level and abuts the tunnel at one end, thus making it dark.

Going up one ramp very little overhead lighting could be seen

Exit from station is under a poorly-lit bridge.

... line involves unsafe walk through tunnel; to be avoided when station unstaffed and anyway alarming after dark

2. SIGNS and INFORMATION

We have noted some points about this issue above (under Aspect 1). The South East Report stressed four points concerning the presentation of information:

Failure to categorise information by type and importance
Poor “flagging up” to catch the eye
Inappropriate locations
Precedence for commercial undertakings.

Our observations concur with these. To give a concrete example, one of our members (while waiting for her train) did a systematic list of the notice boards on her station (a relatively large non-mainline station). She counted 35 in all.

12 advertisements
9 warnings about the penalties for non-payment of fares
7 timetables
3 maps of the train network
1 local street map
1 general information notice
1 sign with the company name

Only the general information notice gave any helpline numbers and it was the hardest to find (stuck in an alcove). Even there, most of the board was taken up with advertising. As another member said, about a different station:

Too many warnings about dire consequences of not buying ticket – not enough about personal safety

3. TRACK LITTER

Many of our members commented on the poor physical state of some of the stations, especially in regard to litter and lack of toilet facilities.

This station has disgusting unlit smelly waiting room on one platform and glass shelter on the other. Not enough lighting on way from car park to platforms.

No rubbish bins, therefore platforms and waiting rooms disgusting i.e. cans, newspapers, etc.

There is a waiting room on each platform containing a bench, but no other facilities. Often they contain beer cans.

Saw a rat on opposite platform where litter had been discarded.

There was a lot of litter and no outside litter bins only in the locked up ticket office/waiting area. The station desperately needs litter bins.

Until recently, none of the stations in the region were provided with litter bins. They were removed a few years ago, apparently out of concerns that the IRA might plant a bomb in one. However, some members told us that new litter bins were installed at some stations in West Yorkshire over the summer. Hopefully this will become standard, otherwise many passengers will go on just dropping their litter on the stations or on the trains.

It is still the case that apart from the mainline stations it is very rare to find a station (even amongst the partly-staffed) that has any toilets.

Only toilet facilities pub (rowdy) next to exit onto road or nearby shopping centre (closed late evening).

4. PASSENGERS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

As far as our respondents could tell, only about half (54%) of the ticket offices had induction loops. About a third (31%) of stations provided visual and aural information (but if we exclude the 'no answers' that goes up to 58%). Only three stations were recorded as having dot matrix signs. The question about new ticket barriers was irrelevant in our region – the stations don't have any!

Many members commented on the difficulties that would face disabled people trying to get on the platforms.

Disabled people couldn't catch train as 36 steps to get to one platform and very steep steps to the other

Passengers wishing to travel north ... must cross the line over a footbridge to the second platform. This is impossible for wheelchair users.

There are no aids for handicapped except for a portable ramp for wheelchairs. I am told that the train conductor will help with this if necessary. There is no notice informing wheelchair users of this facility. It would appear to me that most knowledge of the station is passed on by word of mouth!

Man I spoke to wished that access to northbound platform was safer in wet weather. Disabled passengers who cannot use the staircase are escorted over the line by a member of staff. This is wooden in part – which becomes really slippery in wet weather.

Wheelchairs and motorised wheelchairs have access to trains but not motorised scooters (which are used by many people in ...).

Steep incline for access to the platform would cause problems for disabled/ heart problems, especially anyone needing assistance in the late evening.

Station is between two different rail tracks with considerable walk between them. ... the 'up' line is across a bridge. The station is unsuitable for anyone with a physical disability or women travelling alone.

There are no disabled parking spaces available.

To access the northbound platform from the carpark it is necessary to climb a flight of stone steps, cross the main road by a pelican crossing ... cross a metal footbridge and go down a ramp path or paths and then steps to the platform. Disabled (wheelchair users) must exit via the pathway from the carpark, cross the main road junction via two pelican crossings and then use the opposite footpath (slight uphill gradient) to access the metal footbridge above.

The company responsible for most of the stations in our region – Arriva Trains – does issue a “Guide for Disable Passengers” and we have reproduced its contents in Appendix Five. We think the second paragraph (“Our services call at ...levels of accessibility and assistance vary considerably”) is a masterpiece of official-speak!

RECOMMENDATIONS

Probably the most depressing part of this exercise was to read the South East Report again in order to write our report – it was *déjà vu* all over again! Therefore, our recommendations are much the same as theirs.

- **Clear responsibility:** Passengers need to know exactly who is responsible for the security of stations and their general condition. This information needs to be properly and prominently displayed at every station.
- **Station safety and access to help:** The fact that so many of the stations in our region are completely unstaffed, and most of the rest are unstaffed in the evenings, is a cause for concern. Obviously there has to be a trade-off between having a lot of stations (and therefore easy access to one) and having adequate levels of staffing. But we think that much more should be done about security at the unstaffed stations. This must include better lighting and clearly-signed – and working – emergency telephones (not everyone has a mobile phone).
- **Cleanliness:** Passengers should not have to face a station that is dirty and littered. We welcome indications that litter bins are being restored, but bins alone will not keep stations clean and tidy. They need regular cleaning.
- **Waiting facilities:** Again, we were pleased to see that some stations are being improved in this respect. However, there are still too many without a comfortable, clean place to wait for the train.
- **Signs and information:** It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the needs of the train companies (and advertisers) take priority over those of the travelling public when it comes to putting up signs. Arriving at a strange station can be a bewildering experience; there needs to be more thought given to providing basic information clearly and prominently.
- **Special needs:** Too many of our stations do not yet meet the needs of disabled people. At the very minimum every station should have ramped access to the platform(s); it is not enough to provide a ramp to help passengers on and off the train if they cannot get onto the platform in the first place.

These issues are just as much in the interest of the train companies as the public. If the companies want more people to use their trains, they must provide them with safe, comfortable, and accessible stations.

APPENDIX ONE – LIST OF STATIONS SURVEYED

West Yorkshire

Micklefield
Crossgates
Leeds
Headingley
Burley Park
Mirfield
Batley
Ilkley
Ben Rhydding
Burley-in-Wharfedale
Menston
New Pudsey
Guiseley
Dewsbury
Shipley
Saltaire
Bingley
Knottingley
South Elmsall
Pontefract (Monkhal)
Outwood
Wakefield Westgate
Fitzwilliam
Featherstone
Keighley
Steeton & Silsden
Crossflats
Bradford Interchange
Bradford Forster Square
Castleford
Garforth

North/East Yorkshire

Pannal
Cattal
Weeton/Huby
Snaith
Cononley
Malton
Northallerton
York
Thirsk
Knaresborough
Starbeck
Hornbeam Park
Hammerton
Harrogate

South Yorkshire

Sheffield
Doncaster
Thorne
Hatfield/Stainforth
Conisbrough
Adwick le Street
Kirk Sandal

APPENDIX THREE: ANSWERS TO YES/NO QUESTIONS

1. CLEAR RESPONSIBILITY FOR PERSONAL SAFETY

Is there a prominent notice on display or other information to say who is responsible for all aspects of safety at this station and around?

Yes 12 No 35 No answer 12

2. VISIBLE AND SUFFICIENT STAFF (Note: 33 stations were unstaffed)

Do all staff wear visible uniforms and name badges?

Yes 21 No 4 No answer 30

Are there station photos of them?

Yes 1 No 25 No answer 29

3. WHERE TO REPORT PROBLEMS

Is the new BTP/Railtrack number for reporting vandalism on display in an obvious place?

Yes 18 No 40 No answer 1

Or any other number ditto for help and information?

Yes 43 No 13 No answer 3

4. EMERGENCY ACTION

Is there a clearly marked Emergency Help Point?

Yes 8 No 49 No answer 2

5. QUALITY AND LOCATION OF ON-STATION INFORMATION

Are the following clearly visible?

Timetables

Yes 58 No 1 No answer 0

General information board

Yes 52 No 7 No answer 0

Help for disabled travellers, including partly sighted and deaf

Yes 22 No 33 No answer 4

Any aspect of security on the station or on the train

Yes 14 No 30 No answer 14

Is basic information crowded out by advertisements, engineering information?

Yes 3 No 51 No answer 4

Do the surroundings/frames/colours of information boards help people sort out the important and the inessential?

Yes 37 No 19 No answer 2

Are station loudspeaker announcements apt and clear?

Yes 37 No 5 No answer 7

CCTV FACILITIES

Is there one installed?

Yes 30 No 25 No answer 4

Is it working?

Yes 18 No 0 No answer 41

Is it being continuously monitored?

Yes 8 No 5 No answer 46

Does it show clear pictures?

Yes 10 No 2 No answer 47

Are there prominent signs throughout the station saying it is in operation?

Yes 15 No 11 No answer 43

7. SAFE EGRESS FROM STATION

Is there a safe well lighted place to wait for a car, taxi or bus?

Yes 46 No 12 No answer 1

Is information shown about calling for a taxi and a telephone?

Yes 39 No 18 No answer 2

Is there a safe route to the car park?

Yes 44 No 7 No answer 8

Has railway property been disposed of for “uncomfortable” uses e.g. nightclubs?

Yes 3 No 37 No answer 19

8. PARTLY SIGHTED AND DEAF

Are there induction loops at the booking office?

Yes 14 No 6 No answer 39

Is both visual and aural information provided on the station?

Yes 18 No 13 No answer 28

Are new dot matrix signs easily readable/at the right height?

Yes 3 No 17 No answer 39