

# Eurostar Inquiry : Submission from London TravelWatch

January 2010



**London TravelWatch** is the official body set up by Parliament to provide a voice for London's travelling public.

Our role is to:

- Speak up for transport users in discussions with policy-makers and the media
- Consult with the transport industry, its regulators and funders on matters affecting users
- Investigate complaints users have been unable to resolve with service provider and
- Monitor trends in service quality.

Our aim is to press in all that we do for a better travel experience for all those living and working in or visiting London and its surrounding region.

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## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 London TravelWatch's role and remit in respect of Eurostar

London TravelWatch's function is to represent the interests of the users of transport services provided by or on behalf of Transport for London, and of the National Rail network in and around London, including Eurostar. It fulfils this responsibility by:

- Acting as the appeals body for complaints from or on behalf of transport users that have not been dealt with to the complainants' satisfaction
- Responding to consultation exercises initiated by service providers, regulatory bodies, central and local government and others on matters relating to services within its remit and to transport policy in general
- Undertaking pro-active research into transport needs in its area

The general duties of London TravelWatch (except in relation to fares and to closure proposals) were extended by the Channel Tunnel Act 1987 to international rail services such as Eurostar. The 2005 Railways Act re-defined London TravelWatch's remit in relation to rail services generally, and confirmed the boundary of the "London railway area" within which this applies. St Pancras and Stratford are within the London railway area, and users of international services to and from these stations therefore fall within London TravelWatch's constituency.

### 1.2 Background to the events following 18 December 2009

On Friday 18 December 2009 five Eurostar services broke down in the Channel Tunnel. Their passengers were stranded until 19 December, some spending more than 15 hours in trains in the tunnel. The reason given for the technical breakdowns is that the temperature differential between the air outside and that in the tunnel caused snow in the air intake louvres to melt and form condensation on the electrical systems of the locomotives. Services were unable to run for four days, when a partial service was reintroduced. An independent investigation led by Christopher Garnett and Claude Gresier has been launched to learn lessons from these events, including their management on site and the handling of passengers elsewhere.

### 1.3 The basis of London TravelWatch's evidence to the inquiry

London TravelWatch's evidence to the Eurostar independent inquiry is informed by:

- Feedback received from members of the public about the events following 18 December
- Discussions with Eurostar staff on the service provided to passengers during and in the aftermath of 18 December
- The experience of a staff member directly involved in the incident as a passenger on an affected Eurostar service, and
- Observations made and discussions with staff and passengers held on two visits to St Pancras, between approximately 13:15 and 15:45 on Wednesday 23 December and 09:25 and 10:20 on Thursday 24 December

London TravelWatch is not able to comment on the technical causes of the failure of five trains in the Channel Tunnel. This submission is therefore largely directed to the passengers' experience of the incident and, in particular, to the communication of information to travellers.

## 2 Particular areas of concern

London TravelWatch's specific areas of concern arising from the breakdown of Eurostar's services on 18 December 2009 are listed below.

### 2.1 Speed of recovery of service

London TravelWatch appreciates that Eurostar was obliged to run trials to ensure that there would be no further breakdowns, but questions why it should have taken four days to restore any service. We are surprised at the length of time taken to identify and rectify the problem. In particular, we are concerned at the lack of clarity in messages to passengers about when any services would return, even in a reduced form.

### 2.2 Evacuation of passengers in tunnel

We are very concerned at reports that some passengers were evacuated from a train within the tunnel on the instructions of a member of the public who was an off-duty police officer, not a member of either Eurostar's or Eurotunnel's staff.

It is standard advice that unless there is an immediate risk of injury to passengers, it is always safer to remain on a train rather than to attempt to leave it other than at a station. How was it apparently possible for an individual to over-rule staff and initiate an evacuation?

If there were no staff in the particular carriage(s) concerned, why did staff elsewhere on the train not realise what was happening and intervene, once the doors were opened, if only by making an announcement instructing passengers to stay on board?

London TravelWatch is therefore concerned at any non-adherence to company procedures by Eurostar staff during the incident.

### 2.3 Luggage

We understand that it was Eurostar which decided that passengers should take their luggage with them when they finally left the stranded trains. As there was no immediate risk to the safety of the passengers, so that the speed of evacuation was not critical, the advantage of not having to rescue and store luggage before restoring it to its owners is apparent. Enforcing a decision that luggage should be abandoned could also have been difficult and led to confrontations. Therefore London TravelWatch does not question this decision.

But this experience does raise the issue of how, in the event that passengers had been told to leave luggage on the train, it would have been returned to them. London TravelWatch suggests that Eurostar should emphasise the need for passengers to fill in the luggage tags with which they are provided, so that in the event of an emergency evacuation luggage can subsequently be reunited with its owners more easily.

## 2.4 Risk assessment

London TravelWatch understands from discussions with Eurostar that its risk assessments did not cover the possibility of multiple train simultaneous failures within the tunnel. Clearly, while not all eventualities can necessarily be planned for or even anticipated, flexibility is a basic requirement in safety training and emergency planning, so that all events can be handled effectively. In reality all incidents are unique and will have different characteristics. We are concerned that Eurostar's risk assessment and training arrangements may not have had the flexibility needed to cope with this situation.

It is also questionable whether Eurostar's emergency planning sufficiently covers multi-agency working.

On the National Rail network clear protocols are in place for dealing with emergencies, which prescribe the roles of the different rail industry partners (Network Rail and train companies) and how they align with the command structure of the emergency services. London Underground follows similar safety training and planning structure. Frequent reviews and exercises ensure that an effective multi-agency response can be delivered in close cooperation with emergency services.

In the case of this particular incident, there have been questions about the precise roles of the infrastructure manager and the train operator (Eurotunnel and Eurostar respectively) in handling the event. The public war of words between them in the immediate aftermath of the event did nothing to increase passenger confidence or dampen down alarmist media reporting.

London TravelWatch recommends that any deficiencies in this relationship are identified and addressed, because of the serious safety consequences that can result from any lack of a coordinated response to such incidents.

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## 2.5 Provision of information to passengers

### 2.5.1 On trains

London TravelWatch appreciates that Eurotunnel is responsible for communications with trains in the tunnel, but we have two basic concerns about the on-train communication:

- The need to keep passengers accurately informed about what was actually happening and what to expect.
- The need to ensure that there is effective communication with and between staff on board.

What is the standard advice that should be given out in the event of a breakdown in the tunnel?

London Underground has become a model of good practice in keeping passengers informed during all stages of service disruption. It has target times for information to be relayed to passengers in the event of a delay. It has conducted extensive research into the levels of anxiety experienced by passengers when delayed underground, and the value of information as a means of alleviating these.

### 2.5.2 At stations

We understand that no announcements were made to passengers boarding trains at Paris after the first train had broken down in the tunnel. There was therefore a lack of communications at stations about what was happening and when passengers with tickets could travel.

### 2.5.3 Announcement of compensation arrangements

The compensation arrangements do not seem to have been announced to passengers, and certainly not on every train. London TravelWatch is concerned that passengers unfamiliar with their rights might not know they were entitled to compensation. Lessons could be learned from other operators. For example:

- Deutsche Bahn gives out postage-paid claim forms on board when delays that trigger an entitlement to compensation occur
- London Underground gives out pre-printed cards with reference numbers to passengers affected by severe disruption on the Underground



- EasyJet gives out a printed sheet containing a summary of compensation arrangements, vouchers for hotel and meals if eligible, and a list of passenger bodies in different countries.

## 2.6 Provision of support to passengers

### 2.6.1 Availability of refreshments on trains

London TravelWatch understands that Eurostar trains are loaded in London with supplies for the round trip. We suggest that additional contingency supplies should also be loaded at Paris and Brussels to ensure that these do not run out if there is a lengthy delay on the return trip.

We have been advised by the British Transport Police (BTP) that initially Eurostar made no arrangements to provide any support for passengers waiting in lengthy queues inside and outside St Pancras station, despite the low temperature both indoors and out, and the fact that the weather was wet. We understand that it was Network Rail which initially arranged and paid for one of the coffee shops to serve refreshments to the queue. Later, however, Eurostar staff could clearly be seen to be going up and down the queue distributing water, hot drinks, croissants, crisps, sweets, etc.

Although it was apparently suggested to Eurostar that it should distribute the children's activity packs given out on trains to Disneyworld, this suggestion was not taken up. We believe that the BTP distributed colouring sheets etc to provide some entertainment for children.

The Gymnasium building outside St Pancras was made available (apparently by Network Rail) for passengers who chose to queue through the night on Wednesday, once it was announced that services would be resumed. In the event, not many passengers did queue through the night and most began to arrive after 05:00 when the Underground started to run.

The Salvation Army set up a refreshment van outside the station that seemed to be in use until the queue cleared outside around 10:30 on Thursday.

London TravelWatch would like to understand better how the process of providing support to passengers is activated when the need arises.

## 2.6.2 Crowd management at St Pancras

Eurostar was clearly taken by surprise at the numbers of queuing passengers on the Wednesday and had inadequate plans to cope. No arrangements were made for passengers to queue outside the Eurostar departure area.



We understand that the BTP was on the verge of closing St Pancras because of the size of the crowd in the station which was spilling out onto Midland Road, an action which would have led to further delays for passengers. In the event this did not happen, but it took two hours to form a queuing system and restore order to the situation. The picture above shows the extent of the queue outside St Pancras International station at about 1.50 pm on Wednesday 23 December.

Although Eurostar did bring in extra staff from its customer service centre when it realised the scale of the crowd on Wednesday, it was the afternoon before they arrived. Members of staff from other rail operators based at St Pancras were needed to help control the situation.

London TravelWatch is concerned that Eurostar's staff at St Pancras International were slow to react to the situation, perhaps because they do not normally work outside the departure area managed by Eurostar itself. Crowd

management at stations is a recognised area of risk, on which the Rail Safety & Standards Board has published a good practice guide. Although the risk is greater on platforms than on concourses, the safety issues that could have resulted mean that we believe that Eurostar's relevant procedures and staff training should be reviewed as a matter of urgency.

Further photographs of the crowds at St Pancras International can be seen in the appendix to this paper (Appendix – St Pancras International photographs).

### 2.6.3 Communication with ticket holders

Eurostar was unable to contact everyone who had booked to travel. It had no contact details for holders of tickets bought outside Britain or via an agent. We would encourage Eurostar at least to request mobile (or other contact) phone numbers at the point of sale, so it could reach passengers directly at times of disruption.

### 2.6.4 Information once the services had resumed

Overly pessimistic instructions to people about when they could travel apparently resulted in trains leaving on the Tuesday with unoccupied spaces, yet passengers who had tickets for that day were urged not to travel until the following day - and then when they turned up they had no guarantee that they would get onto a train.

People joining the queue outside the station on Wednesday were discouraged. The queue 'closed' at about 1.30 pm and people who continued to wait were told they did so at the risk of not travelling - even though one member of Eurostar staff said she thought there was a very good chance they would get away. By about 2.15 pm 'at own risk' queue had cleared, and it seems that everyone left did get away. But the people who listened to the official advice and left were clearly ill-served.

A suggestion was made to us that passengers could be given numbered tickets to secure their place in the queue. This would allow them to leave the station for a few hours, helping to keep down the numbers as well as enabling those remaining to wait in a more comfortable environment. London TravelWatch would encourage such an approach to be incorporated into Eurostar's procedures in such circumstances. We observed that on Wednesday at about 3.15 pm passengers who had reached the head of the queue (i.e. the Eurostar check-in point) had their tickets marked for the 7.15 pm departure and were told to go and come back later as the departure lounge was too full.

## 2.7 Compensation for missed connections

Where international trains are cancelled or delayed, causing onward connections to be broken, the carrier is required to reimburse the reasonable costs of accommodation and/or of a taxi. The carrier is also responsible for notifying people meeting passengers at destinations if they are not able to complete their journey the same day or if continuation of the journey cannot reasonably be expected in the circumstances.

We are aware from discussions with Eurostar's customer relations staff on previous occasions that a particular problem arises from the fact that many Eurostar passengers buy a combination of tickets to complete their journey, rather than buying through tickets (which are in any case only available to/from a restricted range of origins/destinations). Therefore passengers who buy tickets for their onward journey which have restrictions on the time of travel - such as advance purchase tickets that are valid on only one particular train - can find that they are faced with buying another ticket for their onward journey. This problem arises because Eurostar is not covered by the provisions of the National Rail conditions of carriage which oblige train companies to honour such tickets if the delay has been caused by disruption on an earlier stage of the same journey.

We recognise that Eurostar has tended to be relatively generous in compensating such passengers, but we believe National Rail companies should recognise the difficulties passengers face and enable them to travel on alternative trains on such occasions. In addition, we consider that there is a need to promote more heavily the benefits to passengers of buying through tickets which are covered by the CIV (international rail travel) regulations.

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### **3 Positives**

#### **3.1 Website**

On the previous occasion that there was major disruption to Eurostar services, following a train fire in the Channel Tunnel, its website was unable to cope with the volume of traffic and London TravelWatch received numerous calls from concerned passengers who were unable to contact it. We were pleased that on this occasion only one passenger found it necessary to approach us for information because he was unable to contact Eurostar (and he was in Brussels).

In discussions with the company after the Channel Tunnel fire, Eurostar admitted that it had had to rely on staff from other bodies - particularly Network Rail - to help manage the situation at St Pancras, but the majority of these staff were only able to speak English. On this occasion we were pleased to note the presence at St Pancras of staff from other bodies who could speak French.

#### **3.2 St Pancras International**

We were pleased to note that Eurostar staff took passengers needing additional assistance (such the frail elderly, those with obvious mobility difficulties and those travelling with children) out of the main queue and prioritised their departure.

We observed that in response to the very low temperatures inside the station large heaters were provided on Wednesday night to help improve conditions for people waiting, we believe that Eurostar procured these items.

We are not aware that there were any injuries suffered by passengers, and have been advised that only one crime was reported at St Pancras International during the period of disruption.

#### **3.3 Processing compensation claims**

We were please to learn that Eurostar immediately recruited extra staff to deal with the volume of compensation claims.

It was made clear on its website what compensation would be paid to passengers affected by the disruption. The website also supplied details of the enhanced compensation arrangements for passengers who had been travelling on the trains which broke down.

We received an early complaint from a passenger who had applied for reimbursement of their tickets and hotel costs but was told that they had to make separate claims to Eurostar and the hotel company, even though these had been booked as a package through Eurostar itself. This was drawn to the attention of the traveller care team, which immediately arranged to deal with it as a single request. We have had no similar complaints since.

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## 4 Conclusion

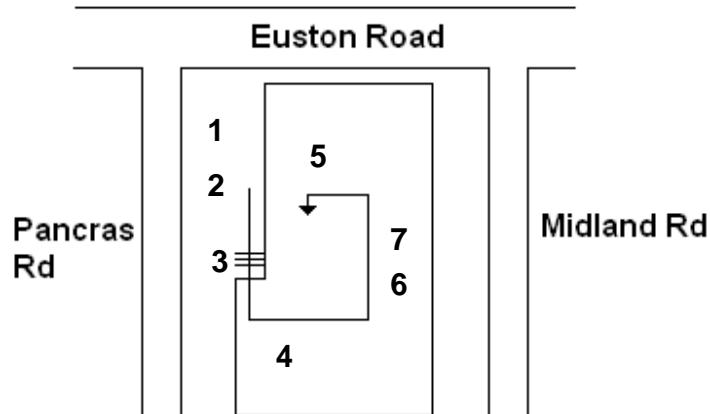
Our impression is that Eurostar generally reacted appropriately once it had been provided with direction from other parties involved. But London TravelWatch would have expected Eurostar to have taken a lead in managing the situation and to have been proactive in anticipating the needs of its passengers.

London TravelWatch recommends that:

- Risk assessments and emergency planning arrangements should be reviewed to ensure that they are sufficiently robust to cope with a wider range of eventualities
- Information should be provided more effectively to passengers both on trains and stations, and better arrangements made to communicate with ticket holders yet to travel
- Support and help should be swiftly given to passengers held in trains or awaiting travel at stations
- Sufficient basic supplies should be carried on board Eurostar services for use in the event of an incident at any location
- Greater awareness should be developed of techniques for managing crowds at stations, so that staff are able to react and to take charge of situations more quickly
- Compensation arrangements should be communicated to passengers on trains, and written material summarising the key information should be distributed to passengers at the time of disruption.

## Appendix – St Pancras International photographs

The photographs in the appendix were taken by a London TravelWatch member of staff on the 23 and 24 December 2009. They provide an impression of the situation at the station. The diagram below shows the locations at which the photographs were taken.



**Photograph 1 – Passengers outside the Pancras Road entrance**





**Photograph 2 – queue into the station from the Pancras Road**



**Photograph 3 – BTP assisting passengers up the steps into the building**



**Photograph 4 – Station staff and BTP by the queue in the station entrance**



**Photograph 5 – Passengers queuing at the Eurostar check-in**



**Photograph 6 – Passengers queuing to reach the Eurostar check-in**



**Photograph 7 – Passengers queuing in station concourse**

