

A demand for family-friendly trains

As the post-COVID railway focuses on leisure travel rather than commuting, a pressure group hopes to improve the journey for families – especially those with pushchairs.

It is developing a scorecard to rate how good each train operator is from the perspective of passengers travelling with young children. “I live in London,” explains Joe Thomas, one of the group’s founders.

“I’m a lawyer with two children. I don’t have a car because I really don’t need one in the capital. I also have family in Cornwall and Wales.

“The only time I need a car is to visit them. Hiring one costs £600 a week, so we tried the train. Each time was a nightmare. There was

A campaign has been launched which aims to make travel with babies and young children easier and less stressful. PAUL CLIFTON finds out more

nowhere for the pram.”

Thomas found others in the same situation and decided to do something about it: “I did what any good Millennial does – I complained on Twitter asking Great Western Railway: ‘I’ve got a sleeping 18-month-old in a pram,

What am I meant to do?’

“There was a response from other rail users and the group was formed.”

GWR suggested a meeting. Others followed: The Campaign for Family-Friendly Trains has had discussions with LNER, East Midlands Railway, West Midlands Trains, Avanti West Coast, ScotRail, CrossCountry, and the Rail Delivery Group.

“It is difficult to negotiate the barriers holding a ticket, carrying a suitcase, pushing a pram and dealing with a toddler,” explains Thomas.

“You get to the train and try to put the pram on. Get the child out. Surrounded by a bunch of grumpy commuters or on one occasion, the entire London contingent of Welsh rugby fans

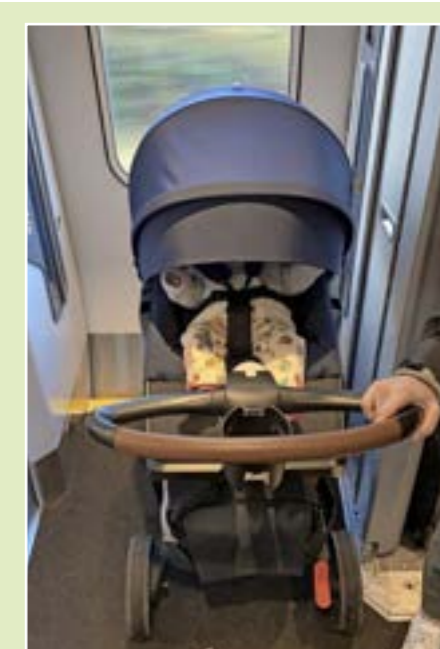
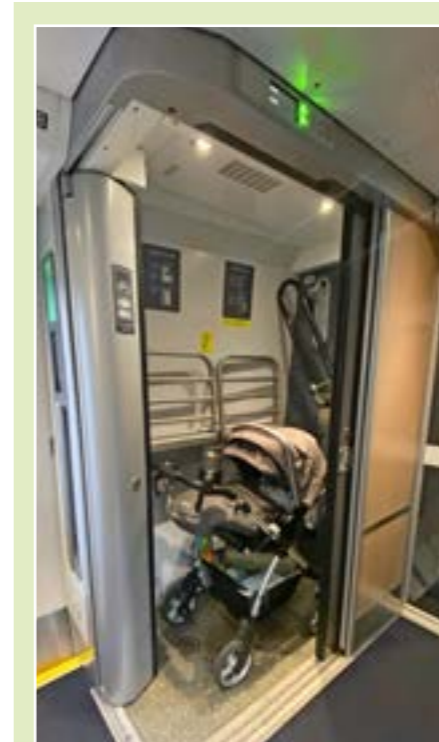
You try to collapse the pram. There isn’t room!

“You aim for the wheelchair space, but obviously you give it up if a wheelchair user comes along. Where do you go then? And standing on the platform, you have no idea where that wheelchair space is on the train.”

“To be fair to GWR, it had no role in designing or specifying its trains – the flying cucumbers that I’ve been using. They were procured by the Department for Transport with the aim of getting as many bums on seats as physically possible.”

The campaign group’s main requests are: Dedicated space for unfolded prams on trains.

Extension of seat reservation to include space for unfolded prams.



Where to put prams on trains? Pushchairs are routinely placed in areas designated for cycles and a doorway. CHRISTIANELCOCK/TOMWILSON.



Ahead of the game: the new Alstom DART+ trains in Ireland come equipped with a ‘family space’. ALSTOM.

Clean spacious toilets with toddler toilet seats.

Extension of passenger assistance to include families with young children.

Level access between train, platform and station entrance.

It is aiming to publish its scorecard for train operators in the next few weeks, rating each one for its ability to handle the demands of travelling families.

The campaign then wants to take that scorecard to the DfT to show officials the scope for modest investment that could encourage more passengers.

The expectation was that long-distance operators would do best, but that has not necessarily been the case.

“Ironically, it is easier for us to travel on Thameslink trains. They were designed for a large number of standing commuters, so there is space for us to load a pram without annoying everyone else,” says Thomas.

He adds: “There is a lot of talk about prioritising leisure journeys. I’d suggest that visiting family is an essential journey, not a nice, fluffy, discretionary day out.”

“Rail will have to become more customer-focused. An entire sector of the market is being neglected.”

“I don’t enjoy driving. My wife hates driving. But we wonder: should we invest in a car for these trips? Once we sink money into that car, we are not going to look at a train.”

“We are a key demographic for the railway because I would use the car until the children grow up, to the point where they don’t travel with us, and I no longer need the car.”

“Lose us now, and you lose us for the next 15 or 20 years.”

Campaign co-founder Nick Flynn says: “An environmentally conscious generation of parents knows that train travel is the better choice for the environment.”

“However, parents are often left feeling frustrated by train travel, since they are expected to fold prams, toilet facilities can be inadequate, and boarding can be stressful with parents relying on the kindness of strangers. The clear priority is dedicated space for unfolded prams.”

Thomas adds: “I think change will be harder for commuter operators like South Western.”

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Joe Thomas, Campaign for Family-Friendly Trains

► Railway: They've always existed for commuters. Now they have to focus on people going to Bournemouth beach for a day out. "The sense we get is that some operators see this as an opportunity, but appreciate that it requires investment. Others see it as a nice-to-have that can be covered by a bit of customer service training for staff. Fundamentally, the pram cannot be dealt with by staff training - it needs physical changes."

What will success look like for the campaigners?

Thomas: "When I was a student, I would run into Paddington with a rucksack and jump on the first available train. The highest target would be to have that flexibility for families as well."

"That is what it's like travelling around London right now. I don't need to worry about getting on and off with children. It is not an issue, as long as I know where the lifts are. I don't need to pre-book. I don't need to plan. I just do it."

"There is a level of success below that. For a

trip to Cornwall. I go on the website and find there is a special page for families where I can reserve a space for my three-year-old, even though the child is not paying for a ticket. I can specify a place on the train near the toilets because children need to go to the toilet a lot more often than adults.

"I will know this is not in the 'quiet carriage' because I don't want the stress of keeping the children silent. There will be a bookable space for the pram. And I will know where to stand on the platform before I roll the pram onto the train."

"Travelling as a family is higher stakes than travelling solo, so I'm likely to arrive in plenty

of time for the specific service I have booked. That means I will need somewhere to wait and maybe have a coffee while the children play."

"You know what Paddington is like when it's absolutely heaving. There is nowhere for kids. You're holding their hands, you're holding the luggage, you're trying to move the pram, you're working out where to go. It really is quite stressful."

"On the train, I want to be in a carriage where other passengers understand there may be children. I need somewhere to plug in their screens, because giving the children games on their screens does make the journey easier for

everyone. I want a table, and more room than airline seats offer."

"Then, when I get off - in my case, Truro - I want a pre-booked taxi waiting. One that has a secure child seat, because I really don't want to travel all the way from London clutching one of those as well, just for the last couple of miles. I've had to do that before."

"On the journey back, joining from a small country station, I want a nice big painted sign on the platform showing the right place to stand with a pram, so that I don't hold up the train as I clamber on with a toddler who doesn't understand the concept of a two-minute dwell time."

"One of the things I've suggested to train companies is the ability to update me by phone, so that if the train arrives in reverse formation, I can be warned to stand at the other end of the platform - especially if there's a train formed of two units joined together with no way to get from the front to the back inside, like GWR has."

The railway has reacted positively to these

CASE STUDY

"We value their opinions. We want to work with them."

When the Campaign for Family-Friendly Trains contacted Great Western Railway, head of customer experience Samyutha Bala asked for a meeting:

"I wanted to hear their experience," she says.

"It's really useful to have a group of people we can go to and say: 'Here's what we're thinking. We'd value your opinion.' They can help shape our policy."

Some of the campaign's aims require physical changes to the layout of carriages. Surely in the current climate, that isn't going to happen?

"When our Intercity Express Trains were designed, we had a problem with not enough seats. People were standing in the aisles. The focus was all about commuters."

"On the old HSTs, we had Coach C, where there was space for an uncollapsed pram, and it was next to the big toilet where a parent and two children could go in. Now COVID has changed the world, and we would like to make sure our trains are fit for purpose."

"Any change to train interiors takes a lot of money. It isn't there - we just don't have it. But we can have a long-term aspiration. And we can make it known to the Department for



Every little helps: GWR has recently provided a family waiting room at Reading, GWR.

Transport."

However, GWR has managed some cheaper, quicker and easier changes to help passengers with young children. One is at Reading station, where there is now a room where families can wait for their train.

Bala explains: "We did some journey

mapping. We asked: at each point in the journey, what are the specific pain points? Transferring from one train to another there is often 20 minutes in the middle at Reading, where it is hard to keep children occupied."

"Network Rail had an empty retail unit on the overbridge. We thought it could be a safe

and warm place to take away a bit of the stress."

"Last summer, I drove to B&M myself and bought some things for kids. We got a kids' activity pack and stocked up on it. The staff got really excited and volunteered to look after the room. It has been a huge success, on very little investment."

Another change is at Paddington, where families can now book special assistance.

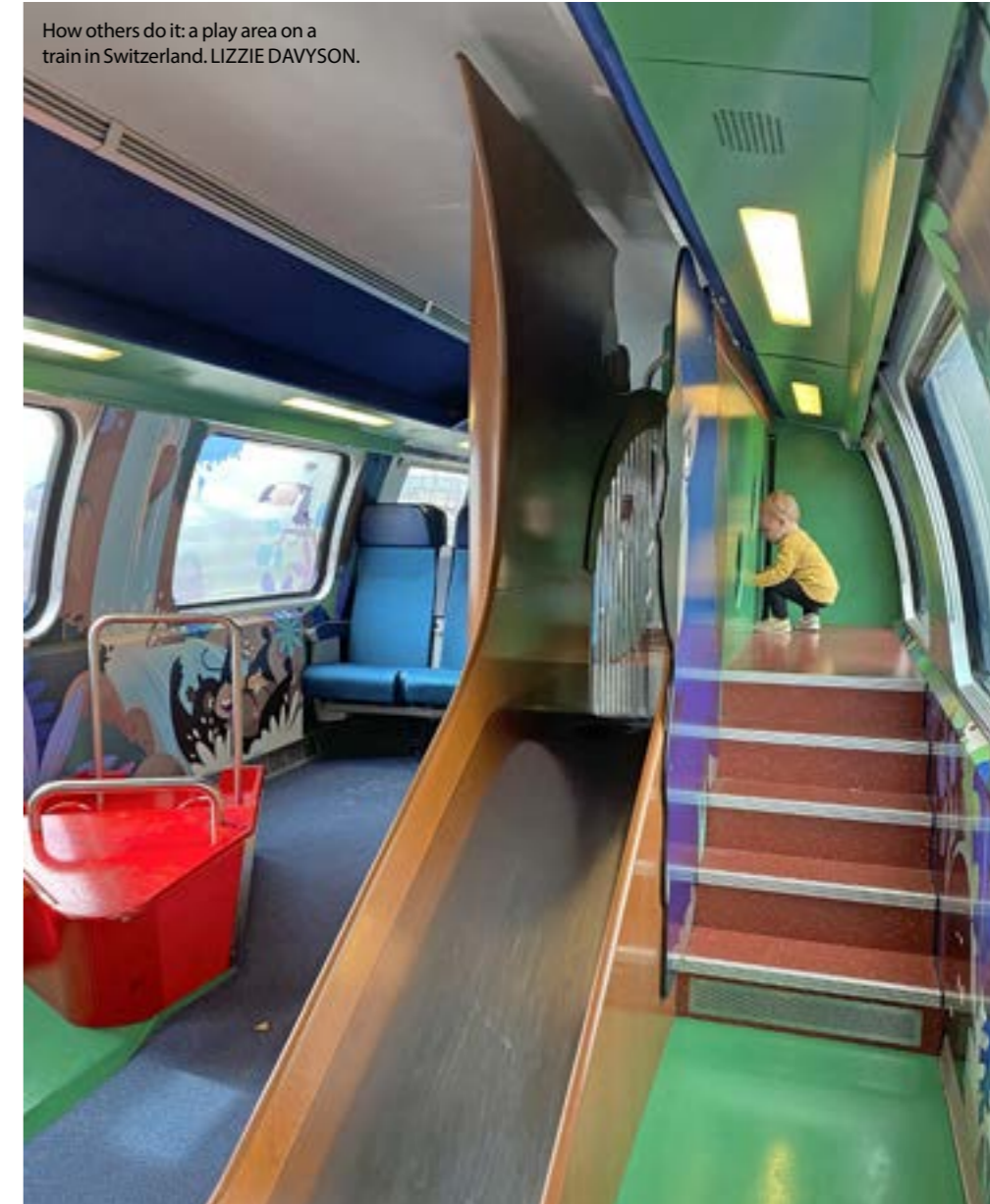
"I started my career at Paddington as a dispatcher. I always noticed how stressful it was for parents with toddlers and buggies, as everyone hurried for the train. And the platform/train interface is where a lot of accidents happen. People feel more reassured, more confident, when they know there will be someone they can turn to for help."

"It's based on the assisted travel that we already had. We saw airlines had done this successfully. It's a free service - you book online or through the social media team."

"We ask people to arrive a little early to be met by one of our ambassadors. They'll give out a kids' activity pack and help you onto the train. If we can, we do that before everyone else boards. But that isn't always possible."

"We introduced a family ticket last year, just on flows to and from London. It provides significant savings for one or two adults and up to four children. We've seen more people travelling on those services than in the previous two years, so we think it has made a difference with people choosing to use rail rather than driving. So, we are planning to expand it this year."

"The campaign group has mentioned to us the idea of having markings on the platform, showing families where to stand. That's an interesting point - something we can work on. I'll take that one away."



How others do it: a play area on a train in Switzerland. LIZZIE DAVYSON.

suggestions. Jacqueline Starr, chief executive of the Rail Delivery Group, tells RAIL: "We want everyone to be able to benefit from travelling by train because it's more than just a journey, it's a way to connect families and the places they love."

"We look forward to continuing to work with the Campaign for Family-Friendly Trains to help improve people's journeys and make the railway more accessible for all."

A real promise, or just a trite soundbite? The campaigners clearly understand how to attract attention to their cause. And their timing is impeccable, as train operators attempt to adjust timetables and marketing to what they believe will be the new post-pandemic normal.

However, any investment in altering rolling stock interiors is likely to be severely constrained by the DfT, making the more ambitious changes appear unlikely.

"When things go wrong on a journey, the stress rises to a whole new level when you have a small child with you, when they're tired and they need the loo," concludes Thomas.

"We have different needs to other

passengers - and we come with a pram."

"If you're travelling as a single parent, you're going to have lots of stuff hanging off that pram. And you don't want to have to go through the rigmarole of collapsing that pram and storing everything, while still holding your baby in your arm."

"And let's not even get started on bus replacement! What we actually want is a service that is as reliable as electricity. We want it to be boring, and just work. We want a railway for customers, and not one run for engineers or politicians." ■

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Samyutha Bala, Head of Customer Experience, Great Western Railway



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Paul has been the BBC's transport correspondent for southern England for 25 years. He is one of the country's most experienced transport journalists. He is a Fellow of both the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport and of the Chartered Institution of Highways and Transportation.

