

Light at the end of the tunnel: is there hope for family friendly train travel?

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Executive Summary

This is the second scorecard to assess and rank train operating companies across the UK rail network for their provision of family-friendly services and facilities.

Overall, the research shows the ideas and technology exist to make train travel family friendly, but there remains a big gap when it comes to train operating companies implementing the ideas. However, since last year there have been some notable shifts in provision for families with young children, which suggests there is light at the end of a long tunnel for family friendly train travel in the UK.

- In 9 out of 10 categories at least one train operating company managed to gain a top score. This shows that making family friendly travel a reality across the UK rail network is not due to a lack of ideas or technology, but a lack of implementation.
- At the top of the scoreboard (5 out of 10 points) the two operators with the highest score are Merseyrail and LNER. The fact that a long-distance operator (LNER) and a commuter network (Merseyrail) have both taken significant steps towards introducing

family-friendly facilities and services illustrates the possibility for all train operating companies to make changes to improve the experience of families with young children.

- Merseyrail has tackled two of the biggest challenges for both families and train operators - dedicated space for unfolded buggies and level boarding from platform to train. Other train operators, especially commuter rail operators, should look to Merseyrail for inspiration and proof that these changes are possible.
- LNER has signed the Family Friendly Pledge never to order a new train or undertake a refurbishment without providing dedicated space for unfolded prams or pushchairs. Other long-distance operators should look to follow LNER's example in making this important commitment.
- Southeastern was the only company that said Passenger Assist is available for, and advertised to, families travelling with young children. The rail industry should make the bookable and 'Turn Up And Go' Passenger Assist service available to parents travelling with young children, particularly solo parents, and ensure the service is consistent across the network and clearly advertised to families.
- Down at the bottom of the pile are seven companies that have failed to respond to the family friendly travel questionnaire two years in a row. These operators are: Chiltern Railways, East Midlands Railway, Great Western Railway, Greater Anglia, London Northwestern Railway, South Western Railway, and West Midlands Railway. The lack of response suggests these operators are either not interested in the difficulties faced by families with young children travelling along their routes or it is a very low priority.

Leisure travel is still the biggest overall market with the largest share of revenue for the UK railway industry. Yet UK trains have been traditionally designed for business and commuter passengers, not for families with young children in pushchairs. The significant challenges of accessing trains with a pushchair exacerbates social exclusion, but when leisure trips drive rail revenue then the industry can no longer afford to overlook and undervalue the needs of families. There are still many opportunities for train operating companies across the UK to improve their offer to young families.

1. Introduction

The Campaign for Family-Friendly Trains is a grassroots group of parents and carers advocating for better facilities for children and families on the UK rail network. Across the UK rail network there is a high demand for leisure travel, compared to commuter and business travel. Between January and March 2023 data from [Great British Railways Transition Team](#) showed leisure travel is still the biggest overall market with the largest share of revenue for the UK railway industry. Yet UK trains have traditionally been designed for business and commuter passengers, not for families with young children and pushchairs. Many parents have negative experiences of travelling by train with young children in the UK and experiences can vary depending on which operating company is running the service.

The main challenges include storing prams/pushchairs, embarking and disembarking, booking appropriate tickets and using changing facilities for babies and toddlers. Yet these difficulties need not be the norm. When it comes to UK train travel, parents with young children have long been the forgotten segment of society - overlooked and undervalued. Over the past year, the Campaign for Family Friendly Trains has had discussions with operators and other actors in the UK rail industry which suggest there is light at the end of a long tunnel for family friendly train travel. Given that leisure travel provides the highest share of revenue across the UK rail network, train operating companies across the UK can no longer afford to feign ignorance about the issues that parents with young children face and some operators are taking important steps in the right direction to rectify the issues.

In 2022 we launched the first [family-friendly scorecard](#) to assess train operating companies (TOCs) against a series of family-friendly metrics, such as the availability of space for unfolded prams on trains. The report led to media coverage in national outlets such as [Sky News](#), the [Independent](#), and a [four-page feature in Rail magazine](#).

This year we carried out the family-friendly scorecard again, with some important changes to the questions we asked 23 train operators across the UK. Although this year's scores cannot be compared directly to the previous year, it nevertheless highlights the network-wide picture of family-friendly services on offer and illustrates the leaders and laggards across the UK rail industry.

2. Methodology

We invited 23 train operating companies in the UK to score themselves against ten questions relating to four areas of concern, and provide a rationale for these scores. Up to one point could be allocated for each question, and the maximum number of points that could be scored was ten.

We assessed train operating companies on the following four key areas:

- 1) Facilities on the train
 - a) Dedicated space for unfolded prams/pushchairs with seating nearby for parents/carers
 - b) Extended seat reservation system for unfolded prams/pushchairs or, where seat reservations do not exist, multi-use space is clearly marked as priority for prams/pushchairs
 - c) Clean and spacious toilets with baby changing facilities on board trains
- 2) Facilities at the station
 - a) Step free access to the platform
 - b) Level-boarding from platform to train
- 3) Support for families
 - a) Passenger Assist/early boarding facilities available to parents travelling with children
 - b) Customer services staff trained to assist families with young children.
 - c) Policies in place to support families with young children at times of travel disruption (cancelled services, delayed services etc)
- 4) Information for families
 - a) Family-friendly facilities are easy to locate by clear signs on the outside of the train or on the platform
 - b) Information about travelling as a family is easy to find

For the complete questionnaire and scoring matrix sent to train operating companies please see the annex. Responses and self assessment scores were gathered between February and May 2023. We then looked at the self-assessment scores and the accompanying information provided by operators and compared practices across the industry.

In some cases it was necessary to adjust the self-assessed score provided by the operator to align with the scoring matrix and similar answers from other operators. We then sent each operator who had responded to the questionnaire their final score before publication. This provided an opportunity for the operator to provide additional information.

The final scores are colour coded in the table below as follows:

7-10	High score
4-6	Medium score
0-3	Low score
	Failed to respond

Due to the change in some questions and the methodology, this year's scores cannot be compared directly to the previous year. Over the course of 2022 we learnt a great deal from meetings with several TOCs and made important and necessary changes to the scorecard process to be more transparent with operators about what we are looking for. By providing additional detail as part of the scorecard process we believe operating companies will develop a greater understanding of how to gain a high score and we hope they are encouraged to make progress on family friendly metrics as a result.

3. Scorecard

Train company	Scores										TOTAL
	Dedicated buggy space + seating nearby	Buggy reserve system	Toilets	Step-free access to platform	Level boarding from platform to train	Passenger Assist/ early boarding	Customer service trained to assist families	Policies to support families during disruption	Family friendly facilities easy to locate	Family info easy to find	
Merseyrail	1	1	0	0.5	1	0	0.5	0	1	0	5
LNER	0.5	0	1	1	0	0	1	0.5	0	1	5
Avanti West Coast	0	0	0.5	1	0	0.5	1	0	0	1	4
Northern	0.5	0	1	1	0	0	0.5	0	0	1	4
ScotRail	0.5	0	1	1	0	0.5	0.5	0	0	0.5	4
Cross Country	0	0	1	N/A	N/A	0.5	1	0	0	1	3.5
Hull Trains	0	0	1	1	0	0	0.5	0	0	1	3.5
Southeastern	0	0	1	0.5	0	1	0	0	0	1	3.5
TransPennine Express	0.5	0	0.5	1	0	0	0	0	0	0.5	2.5
Transport for Wales	0	0	0.5	0.5	0	0.5	0.5	0	0	0	2
Eurostar	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Failed to respond	c2c, Govia Thameslink Railway, Grand Central, Lumo, TfL Rail, Chiltern Railways, East Midlands Railway (EMR), Great Western Railway (GWR), Greater Anglia, London Northwestern Railway, South Western Railway, West Midlands Railway.										

4. Analysis

a) Overview

Half of the train operating companies we contacted (11 out of 23) responded to the questionnaire. In 9 out of 10 categories at least one train operating company managed to gain a top score, showing that the ideas and technology exist but require operating companies to implement them.

At the top of the table, with five points out of a possible ten, jointly sits Merseyrail and LNER. Merseyrail is a commuter rail network operating across the Liverpool City region and Merseyside, while LNER operates long distance services that run up and down the East Coast mainline from London up the east side of England and onto Inverness in Scotland. Although still some distance from a high score, the fact that a long-distance operator (LNER) and a commuter network (Merseyrail) have both taken significant steps towards introducing family-friendly facilities and services indicates that it is possible for all train operating companies to make changes to improve the experience of parents with young children.

We recognise that not all the demands of the Campaign for Family Friendly Trains can be achieved immediately but it appears that both Merseyrail and LNER have a strong drive and commitment to making train travel inclusive and accessible for families with young children. This gives hope that there is light at the end of a long tunnel for family friendly travel on the UK rail network.

However, many of the other scores were disappointingly low. Only five out of 23 operators (22%) achieved a medium score. Aside from Merseyrail and LNER, there were three other operating companies with a medium score: Avanti West Coast, Northern and ScotRail. There were six out of 23 operating companies with a low score (26%): CrossCountry, Hull Trains, Southeastern, TransPennine Express, Transport for Wales, and Eurostar.

Eurostar responded to tell us it was in a transition period as it merges with Belgian high-speed operator Thalys and as part of the merger it will look at the needs of families and take best practice of both existing companies. Eurostar did not provide a self-assessment score nor information for this year's scorecard and has therefore scored zero, but it would be unfair to say the operator failed to respond.

Interestingly, a handful of operators that responded last year did not reply this year, which could suggest the operators have made little progress towards family friendly travel in the intervening time. These are: c2c, Govia Thameslink Railway (GTR), Grand Central, Lumo, and Transport for London.

Down at the very bottom of the pile are seven companies that have failed to respond to the family friendly travel questionnaire two years in a row. These operators are: Chiltern Railways, East Midlands Railway, Great Western Railway, Greater Anglia, London Northwestern Railway, South Western Railway, and West Midlands Railway. The total lack of response suggests these operators are not interested in the difficulties and challenges faced by families with young children travelling along their routes or it is a very low priority.

b) Best in class

Across the 11 operating companies that responded, there were several answers which stood out as best-in-class. Merseyrail is the only train operating company that scored highly for having dedicated space on its new fleet of trains for unfolded prams/pushchairs. Merseyrail informed us that the roll out of its new fleet began in January 2023 and is due to last 12-18 months. The new fleet was developed alongside customers through a two year co-created design process led by the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority, which involved a panel of 40 people from across the community including many parents. Rather than having dedicated spaces for prams/pushchairs, the whole train has been designed to be buggy friendly, with features such as wide aisles, single seats with a space to the side that could fit a buggy, and dedicated bays with tipping seats that could allow two parents/carers to travel with an unfolded pram or pushchair.

Merseyrail said: *“we don’t believe there is any circumstance on our trains which would require a pram to be folded unless this was the parent’s preference”*

Although Merseyrail, as a metro-style network, does not have a reservation system for any passenger on any of its trains, there are dedicated bays which are clearly signed areas for buggies. Similarly, Merseyrail’s new fleet does not have signage on the outside of trains indicating where family friendly spaces are located, but Merseyrail received a high score for this question considering the whole train is designed to be pram/pushchair friendly and the areas are signed clearly internally. We believe the areas would be easy to locate whichever external door families used. While we recognise Merseyrail’s approach would not necessarily be appropriate for long-distance services, other metropolitan commuter rail operators should look to Merseyrail’s example when it comes to providing suitable space for unfolded buggies and the associated signage.



Photo: Merseyrail's new fleet of trains have been designed to be pushchair friendly, with dedicated bays where tip seats allow parents to sit alongside an unfolded pram/pushchair. (Credit: Merseyrail)

As to long-distance services and dedicated space for unfolded prams / pushchairs on board, LNER has signed the Family Friendly Pledge never to order a new train or undertake a refurbishment without providing dedicated space for unfolded prams or pushchairs. While LNER recognises the commitment requires significant development and investment to achieve, the operating company told us the matter was already being considered within LNER for future development.

On the question of level-boarding from the platform onto the train, Merseyrail is leading the scoreboard again. The operating company told us that once its new fleet of trains is rolled out by the end of 2023, 100% of stations in the network will be accessible from platform to train by the means of a sliding step that will meet the platform edge. This will significantly improve the experience of embarking and disembarking the train with a pram/pushchair which is currently a major challenge for parents travelling with young children, in addition to being hugely beneficial for disabled passengers and other people requiring step-free access to the train.



Photo: Merseyrail's new fleet of trains have a sliding step which allows level boarding from platform to train at all stations in the operator's network (Credit: Merseyrail)

Since the last scorecard it appears there have been improvements on the issue of step-free access to station platforms. This is an area where operating companies rely on the Department for Transport to fund a programme of platform corrections, however operating companies have a vital role to play in calling the government's attention to the improvements that are needed at each station. Several operating companies including LNER, Avanti, Northern, ScotRail, Hull Trains, and TransPennine Express told us that at least 75% of stations on their routes offer step-free access to and between all platforms. ScotRail said 80% of their stations were fully step-free and for Northern and TransPennine Express this figure rose to 89%. Hull Trains said all the stations they called at had step-free access to platforms with the exception of Selby that is currently having lifts installed.

Southeastern was the only operating company that told us Passenger Assist is advertised for families travelling with young children - the information is clearly displayed on their webpage '[travelling with children](#)'. Southeastern explicitly said their team would book assistance for parents/carers with a pushchair. A number of other operators scoring half points for this

question told us that Passenger Assist could be used by families travelling with young children but the service was not proactively advertised as being available to families.

Three operating companies scored highly for their prominent inclusion of families in their customer service training. LNER told us they have recently refreshed their training in this respect to include a specific family module in the induction training programme for new staff. The module covers the needs of different age groups of children, provides staff with ways to assist families to board the train, and services to offer families once on board. Furthermore, LNER said that existing staff are also receiving this training module to ensure every member of the frontline team has received the training prior to the start of the summer holidays. CrossCountry also includes young families prominently in their accessible travel module and provides staff with details about specific needs of different ages of children. This training includes information about how to safely assist families getting on and off the train. CrossCountry also told us they deliver County Lines and safeguarding training to their staff in relation to identifying vulnerable people, including older children, who may be travelling on their trains. Avanti also told us the needs of families with young children are part of their training modules and this includes information about specific needs of different ages of children, such as babies, toddlers and school-age children.

Although not part of the scorecard questions, LNER should be recognised for ongoing work to identify and address challenges for families and individuals travelling with children. As a result of focus groups involving parents, carers and children, LNER developed the UK railway's first "family-friendly lounge" which opened at London King's Cross in October 2022.



Photo: LNER family waiting lounge at King's Cross station, London which opened in October 2022 (Credit: LNER)

c) Worrying trends

In the responses from train operating companies there were two concerning trends that it is necessary to highlight in this analysis to make it clear these practices are not considered by the Campaign for Family Friendly Trains to be an appropriate solution to the challenges faced by parents travelling with young children on the UK rail network.

A number of operating companies attempted to claim that the dedicated space for wheelchair users on trains - space which is prioritised for wheelchair users by law - is multi-use space. Several of the responses appeared to suggest that these spaces are suitable for unfolded pushchairs / prams. This is a deeply worrying attitude for a number of reasons. Firstly, dedicated spaces for wheelchair users are hard won by disability rights and justice advocates; they are spaces protected by law for wheelchair users and not genuine multi-use spaces. For operating companies to suggest otherwise pitches people with different accessibility needs directly against each other. Secondly, it is problematic for a wheelchair user to ask a parent with an unfolded buggy to move from the space, and the time it takes for a buggy and accompanying luggage to be relocated can mean a wheelchair user is not secure in the space by the time the train moves. Thirdly, these spaces are not suitable for parents to comfortably and confidently place an

unfolded pushchair or pram for the duration of the journey. We are aware that parents often use the spaces on long-distance journeys for unfolded prams/pushchairs when there are no wheelchair users on board the train because there is a woeful lack of other space, however this is a cause of worry and anxiety throughout the journey for a parent who may rightly be asked to move the pram/pushchair by a wheelchair user or member of staff. We are advocating for dedicated space for unfolded prams and pushchairs on UK trains, but these spaces *must* be separate and distinct from dedicated space for wheelchair users.

The other concerning trend in responses that we noticed is that several operators appear to believe staff operated ramps are sufficient to deal with the problem of gaps and the lack of level boarding when embarking/disembarking from a train. The Campaign for Family Friendly Trains does not consider staff operated ramps an adequate substitute for level boarding because in the frequent instances when a ramp or trained member of staff is not available, parents with young children in a buggy who rely on them aren't able to get on or off the train safely. There seemed to be a distinct lack of understanding from a number of operators about the frequent challenge of embarking/disembarking trains with a buggy. From a safety perspective, it is deeply worrying for those operators - such as Northern, TransPennine Express, and Hull Trains - who do not have level-boarding provision at most stations along their routes, who have told us Passenger Assist is not available to families with young children, and also do not appear to prominently include ways to assist families to board the train in their customer service training modules.



Photo: the large gap between the train and platform at a Northern operated station. The large gaps can make it very difficult for parents, especially solo parents, travelling with a young child in a buggy to get on and off the train safely. (Credit: Campaign for Family Friendly Trains)

d) Areas for improvement

There were also several areas for improvement where train operators could make relatively straightforward improvements to assist families with young children. For operators that told us they already have dedicated space for bicycles on their trains - Northern, ScotRail and TransPennine Express - from our perspective these areas could be clearly marked as multi-use spaces to be used by either bicycles, luggage or unfolded prams/pushchairs. Unlike spaces dedicated by law for wheelchair users, spaces for bicycles are not protected by law and re-signing these areas could give parents confidence that these spaces are usable for unfolded buggies. It would not, however, solve the problem on a long-term basis as it could bring parents into conflict with cyclists on busy services.

There seems to be confusion among train operators about whether Passenger Assist, particularly the service that can be booked in advance, is available for families with young children or not. Southeastern told us the service was available to parents with young children and advertised it as such. Several operators told us the service is available to parents, albeit not proactively advertised, whilst others told us the bookable Passenger Assist service and Passenger Assist app is only available for people with a disability. Yet when we called the Passenger Assist line to seek clarity on the issue, Campaign for Family Friendly Trains was told parents with young children could indeed book the service in advance. Parents travelling with young children UK trains, particularly solo parents, deserve more consistency and reliability across the rail network with regard to the availability of this service. We strongly recommend the rail industry take necessary steps to make the bookable and 'Turn Up And Go' Passenger Assist services available to parents travelling with young children and ensure the service is clearly advertised to families.

Finally there could be significant improvement to the policies and practices of train operators in respect of providing support to families with young children at times of travel disruption, for example when services are delayed or cancelled. From the information train operators provided we found policies and plans to support families during times of travel disruption sorely lacking. The majority of operators' plans appeared to provide generic assistance to all customers or referenced support for the most vulnerable customers without mentioning that this is inclusive of young families. Only one operator, LNER, told us that their disruption action plans contained elements bespoke to each station and provided instructions on dealing with vulnerable customers which included people travelling with young children. The Campaign for Family Friendly Trains would like to see better and more consistent support for families with young children during times of travel disruption. Train operators should have policies and procedures in place which cover a range of eventualities and explicitly provide ways staff can support families with young children during times of travel disruption.

5. Conclusion

This is the second scorecard which ranks train operating companies on the facilities and services available for family friendly travel across the UK rail network. Overall, the responses reveal a few notable shifts in provision for families with young children which suggests there is light at the end of a long tunnel for family friendly travel.

However, there is still considerable work to be done to ensure the UK rail network is family friendly. This year's scorecard is starting to reveal a clearer picture of the leaders and laggards across the industry. Train operating companies across the UK can no longer feign ignorance about the issues that parents with young children face, yet seven train operating companies (Chiltern Railways, East Midlands Railway, Great Western Railway, Greater Anglia, London Northwestern Railway, South Western Railway, and West Midlands Railway) have failed to engage with the Campaign for Family Friendly Trains scorecard two years in a row - this is to their detriment in the long term.

Crucially, operators like Merseyrail and LNER are taking important steps in the right direction to rectify the issues and it is encouraging to see their direction of travel. Merseyrail has tackled two of the biggest challenges for both families and train operators - dedicated space for unfolded buggies and level boarding from platform to train. Other train operators, especially commuter rail operators, should look to Merseyrail for inspiration and proof that these changes are possible. LNER on the other hand has signed the Family Friendly Pledge never to order a new train or undertake a refurbishment without providing dedicated space for unfolded prams or pushchairs. Other long-distance operators should look to follow LNER's example in making this commitment.

Leisure travel is still the biggest overall market with the largest share of revenue for the UK railway industry. There are still more people travelling by train on weekends than before the pandemic. Yet UK trains have been traditionally designed for business and commuter passengers, not for leisure travellers with luggage and families with young children and pushchairs. The significant challenges of accessing trains with a pushchair or pram exacerbates social exclusion, but when leisure trips drive rail revenue then the industry can no longer afford to overlook and undervalue the needs of families with young children.

We firmly believe that train travel has the potential to be a convenient and enjoyable choice for parents. It is possible to breast or bottle feed a newborn, have a meal, visit the toilet or change a nappy on a train without having to pause a journey. On a train families can enjoy the time together and make the journey part of the adventure. We recognise the significant societal and environmental benefits of rail travel. For many parents, there may be no suitable alternative, for example those without access to a car or unable to drive for medical reasons. There are still huge opportunities for train operating companies across the UK to improve the offer to parents with young families.

6. Recommendations

We want the rail network to be designed with the needs of families in mind. We are asking train operating companies to sign up to five commitments:

- 1. Design trains with unfolded buggy spaces with seating for parents/carers nearby.**
 - Train operators should never order a new train or undertake a refurbishment without providing dedicated space for unfolded prams/pushchairs. These spaces must be separate and distinct from dedicated space for wheelchair users.
 - On long distance services these spaces should be reservable and on metropolitan commuter routes where reservations do not exist these spaces should be clearly marked as priority for prams/pushchairs.
- 2. Ensure clean and accessible toilets with baby changing facilities.**

- Train operators should consider the needs of young children and parents when designing toilets on trains and at stations. At the bare minimum, all toilets should be clean, accessible with a pram/pushchair and have baby changing facilities.
- We strongly recommend operating companies consider other features such as a toddler toilet seat and a child seat with a restraint that allows parents to put their young child somewhere other than the toilet floor whilst using the toilet themselves.

3. Improve staff training and assistance for families with young children.

- Operating companies should prominently include the needs of families in their customer service training by the end of 2023. Customer service training should encompass the specific needs of different ages of children (babies, toddlers, school-age children etc) and it should be made available to both new and existing staff.
- Passenger Assist services - both bookable and 'Turn Up And Go' services - should be extended to parents travelling with young children (under 5s), and advertised for parents travelling alone with young children.

4. Improve communication and engagement for families with young children

- Train operators should have a dedicated page on their website with information for families, detailing the facilities and services available and how to access them.
- Train operators should provide live information on where best to stand on the platform through clear signposting of family-friendly spaces - on the outside of the train and on the platform - allowing for speedy boarding
- Train operators should have detailed policies and plans in place to cover a range of eventualities and provide different ways staff can support families during times of travel disruption.

5. Support breastfeeding on the UK rail network

- Train operators should sign up to the BfN Breastfeeding Friendly Scheme and display the BfN Breastfeeding Friendly logo in stations and on trains.

We also ask train operating companies to work with other UK rail industry bodies to:

1. Ensure step-free access to the platform and level board from platform to train.

- We support the Campaign for Level Boarding target to achieve level boarding across the UK rail network by 2040.

Annex

[Questionnaire and scoring matrix](#)
[2022 scorecard](#)

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