

SEAT BELTS: NO WAY

Mike Crowhurst **responds to two viewpoints expressed in April's *Rail Professional*, concerning safety in the wake of Lambrigg – one of which suggested seat belts for passengers and the other airline-style overhead lockers for luggage**

Ian Hammond's article and Ian Turnbull's letter in April's issue call for a response from the passenger viewpoint.

Both focus on the issue of safe stowage of luggage, especially in overhead racks. Turnbull's suggestion of latched, not locked, lockers seems an eminently sensible one. Do remember, however, that aircraft have stewards who are specifically tasked with ensuring that all luggage is safely stowed before take off.

Trains do not have anything like the same level of staff. Having said that, the stupidity of a minority of rail passengers when it comes to stowing luggage is quite mind-boggling at times.

Some rolling stock design also contributes to the problem. Luggage space on Virgin Voyagers is notoriously inadequate, and they're used on a route that carries more than its share of leisure business – with baggage requirements to match.

The overhead racks on these trains are barely adequate for handbags, let alone my soft sports bag which fits easily into the overhead space of every other train – or plane – I have ever used.

But when it comes to seat belts, I'm afraid I have to disagree. Firstly, remember that air passengers are only required to use their seat belt during take off and landing, or when the captain anticipates turbulence. What is the equivalent on a train? Yes, belts could be provided, but how many would bother to use then? Would

the driver in a situation like Lambrigg or Ufton Nervet have had time to turn on a 'seatbelts' sign or make an announcement?

Hardly. And if compulsion is proposed, who is going to enforce it?

The prospect of the crew of an intercity train patrolling eight or 10 coaches trying to suppress the steady stream of buffet and toilet traffic, not to mention restless children, hardly bears thinking about. It would require at least one crew member per coach for a start.

Cars and aircraft are required to use seat belts because they are inherently less safe modes of transport. Oddly, coaches, but not buses – except on school runs – are also required to use them. But on none of these modes are standing passengers carried, except buses – and then only rarely.

If seat belts were to be obligatory on rail, standing passengers could never be carried and pre-booking for all rail journeys – as for Eurostar or TGVs – would be inevitable. Has Hammond thought through the implications?

Can you imagine the fisticuffs for the last seats on the 8.15 to Waterloo, or the delays while unseated passengers are 'persuaded' to alight? A huge increase in British Transport Police strength is indicated.

No, the solution to unsafe overcrowding is not seatbelts and strong arm tactics, it is more trains! Passengers do not choose to stand in cattle-truck conditions – they

are given no option. The widely publicised overcrowding on First Great Western services recently was caused by a combination of government mishandling of the franchise and operator's cost saving to meet DfT diktat.

My own experience on Virgin Cross Country, between Leeds and Birmingham during restricted service last autumn, is another example. The normal two trains per hour on the York and north-east corridor were replaced by a single train per hour, due to a shortage of paths on the diversion route via Leicester.

Fine, but this resulted in two trainloads packing into each train with totally predictable chronic overcrowding, entirely due to Virgin's failure to use the stock available to double the capacity.

Despite complaints, no explanation for this failure was ever forthcoming. After having twice endured standing for over two hours, I took to travelling via Manchester for the duration. Heaven help anyone trying to enforce a 'no-standing' rule in this situation without riot police to hand.

If demand for flights increases, more aircraft are put on – and the industry demands, and usually gets, more airport capacity. If demand for road space increases, the vociferous road lobby demands more motorway widening – and usually gets it.

But for some reason predict-and-provide never applies to rail.

The present shambolic structure of the industry seems incapable of responding to increased demand and resorts to trying to price-off the problem, while passengers are left to put up with intolerable conditions as highlighted by Transport 2000's Sardine Man campaign – and Hammond complains that trains are unsafe.

Forcing people off rail onto

road or air, by pricing or otherwise, is not going to make us safer. Meanwhile, the Government drags its feet on rail infrastructure projects like Crossrail, demands ever more studies and pulls the plug altogether on essential light rail schemes in cities. This is no way to run the country's transport system.

But there is a more insidious aspect to this. We have already learnt that there are those in the DfT who would like to see an all-pre-book railway system on the airline model. This would, of course, suit operators and the Government just fine, as the size of demand – and subsidy – would become predictable and controllable.

But it would be the end of the railway as a walk-on transport system. In short, it would suit everyone except passengers. And any prospect of rail taking more of the pressure off road and air would vanish. Banning standing and requiring seat belts in the name of safety would play into the hands of these people.

As so often with the insurance industry and safety lobby, a myopic concentration on risk reduction in one area in isolation produces mistaken priorities and increased risk elsewhere. Obviously, no passengers want an unsafe railway, but a realistic overview is needed of all forms of transport.

No, Hammond, if you are worried about standing passengers and overcrowding, persuade the Government and the City to fund more trains and more rail infrastructure, and concentrate on making less safe modes, such as roads, safer instead.

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