Airline Communication with Passengers During Disruption

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> Foreword

Air travel disruption is occasionally unavoidable in the complex global aviation system and creates significant challenges for passengers, airlines and airports alike.

Effective communication between an airline and their passengers has the power to reduce the inherent uncertainty felt by passengers caught up in the disruption and to build trust between them and their airlines, who are both practically able - and legally expected - to provide assistance, process refunds and, in certain circumstances, pay compensation.

Information gathered by the CAA (UK Aviation Consumer Survey) and findings from reviews of disruption events (such as the independent review of the NATS outage in August 2023) highlight the need for improvements in the communication between airlines and their passengers. These reports suggest that the majority of consumers did not feel well informed, especially concerning their legal rights, and that poor communication aggravated the consumer harm caused by short-notice cancellations and long delays.

The CAA believes that timely information and clear communication are key for all parties to aid both understanding of the impact of disruption and knowing how to respond.

To build an understanding of the impact of existing industry practices and consumer preferences for communications during disruption, the CAA commissioned Yonder Research to undertake this independent, in-depth research project. Yonder were tasked with exploring both consumers' experiences of the current communication approach adopted by airlines and understanding what changes could have the greatest beneficial impact on the consumer experience moving forward.

From this, a clear set of findings has emerged which demonstrates the need for timely information and clear communication, based on some examples of good practice and lessons from scenarios which led to more negative consumer outcomes.

The CAA will be working with industry to establish guidelines which reflect the need to provide accurate and concise updates, delivered at the right time, to allow passengers to better understand the disruption situation and enable them to take action appropriate to their specific needs.

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> Section 1: Executive Summary

"You never know why a person is travelling, or their personal circumstances. Sometimes you can't help a [delay/cancellation] but airlines must have a duty of care when this is out of our control."

Delayed Passenger, Female, 19 years old, Wales

In December 2024, the CAA commissioned Yonder Consulting to undertake this programme of research into the communication preferences of consumers when they face flight disruption. In order to understand these preferences, we first looked to understand the current experience of consumers, identifying where this led to both positive and negative consumer outcomes. Views were then sought on changes which could be made to communications by airlines which would lead to improved passenger experience. Research was conducted between 3rd February and 3rd of April 2025.

The mixed-methodology research programme consisted of:

1. A qualitative exploration with 60 participants across the UK, consisting of an online community, a series of online group interviews and extended one-on-one interviews, examining pain and pressure points of the experiences of air travel.
2. A quantitative survey of 2,105 respondents about prior experiences of flight disruptions, as well as their needs and preferences should they face a disruption in the future. This survey was designed to quantify and further validate the qualitative findings.

Further detail on research methodology can be found in the Research Approach and the Appendix.

The findings clearly demonstrate that even minor disruptions can cause substantial passenger distress, with poor communication significantly contributing to negative experiences. With nearly two thirds of passengers left unsatisfied with communications and over 60% referencing airline communications (including updates, transparency, availability of airline representatives to speak with, and so on) as the number one area that could have improved their experience, there is considerable opportunity to transform a challenging situation into one that minimises harm and builds trust. This report aims to shine a light on the role of communications and provide actionable findings on how airlines can improve them across the disruption journey.

This research has identified 12 findings for airlines to improve their communications, broken down into Timings, Content and Channel.

How do airlines currently communicate with passengers?

This research indicates that there is currently no consistent approach toward disruption communications, even within the same airline. With uncertainty around how and when airlines will communicate with them, many passengers find themselves reliant on limited

boarding gate information, third party flight trackers or general word of mouth amongst fellow travellers.

With 57% of passengers desiring more information during disruption, and 56% wanting more frequent communication, there is a clear gap in what passengers expect from airlines, and what is being delivered.

Information gaps create considerable anxiety for passengers who are trying to navigate their options in a time pressured environment. Our research identified instances where a lack of information led to passengers missing opportunities for resolution (for example, not claiming due compensation, not understanding all options for alternative flights, and so on) and in some cases missing connecting flights, or being left without overnight accommodation or sufficient sustenance.

These experiences reinforce negative sentiment and distrust toward airlines. Interestingly, passengers who are not satisfied with their communications are more likely to claim for some form of compensation or reimbursement, compared to those who are satisfied with their communications (36% of those dissatisfied with communication attempted to claim for compensation, versus 27% of those satisfied).

Vulnerable passengers are especially exposed during disruption and may require greater levels of support in terms of communication.

Passengers with disabilities are less likely than other passengers to be satisfied with how disruption is initially communicated (28% vs 35% respectively). They can also experience heightened distress at the point of disruption as information regarding any planned special assistance can be lacking, leaving them exposed.

For digitally vulnerable or less digitally confident passengers a key concern is the impact of disruption on onward journeys that are usually booked in advance. These passengers are also significantly more likely to be concerned about not knowing their options during disruption than those more confident with technology.

Financially vulnerable passengers experience heightened distress around the need for additional, unbudgeted spending, even if this may be reimbursed at a later stage. Uncertainty around next steps is also a significantly higher concern for those who are financially vulnerable than those who are not.

In the event of disruption, some information is more important than others. Uncertainty about next steps (37%), impact on travel plans (33%) and potential additional costs (36%) rank as top passenger concerns during disruption. When it comes to priority information, length of delay ranks 1st for nearly half of all passengers (44%).

Providing a reason for disruption is also considered important, so that passengers can assess their options regarding rebooking and whether they are able to make any financial claims. Despite 52% claiming they believe they understand their rights during disruption, many incorrectly identify what these are, highlighting a need for greater clarity. 93% of passengers want this information to be sent to them either before or at first notification of a disruption.

Channel is also critical as passengers have different levels of access to online and digital resources.

Despite 92% of passengers claiming to check their flight's status before arriving at the airport, over 2 in 5 found out about their disruption through airport speakers / boards. Many passengers feel they should have been informed of their disruption sooner. However, while digital channels provide an opportunity to do so, there is 'no one size fits all' approach as circumstance has significant impact on where passengers can access information.

SMS text is the preferred channel at first notification of delay for 64% of passengers (as it does not rely on connection to the internet which many passengers abroad may not have). However, email, airline apps and in person support are still vital to share wider information options and support for those who need it across the wider journey.

Where do airlines get it right?

In examples where airlines have provided clear, timely and accessible communications, passengers are empowered to find suitable resolutions and are reassured they are being taken care of during uncertain times. Best practices include:

- Pro-active notification systems – giving passengers valuable time to adjust plans
- Transparent explanations – avoiding jargon and ambiguity
- Consistent cross-channel information – ensuring digital and in person communications are aligned
- Empathetic approach – acknowledging potential impact, even when airline is not at fault
- Regular status updates – even when there is no 'new news'
- Clear presentation and access to options – including rebooking, accommodation arrangements or eligibility to claim
- Personalised follow-ups – demonstrating an appreciation of their custom and relevant timelines for claims.

This report highlights that while disruption is sometimes unavoidable, communication is a critical component in passenger experience. Airlines that implement these best practices can transform loyalty-damaging experiences into trust building moments. Those who act cannot only reduce passenger distress but may gain significant competitive advantage.

Actions airlines can undertake to improve passenger communication

Timings – When should passengers receive communications about disruption?

When disruption occurs, inform passengers as soon as possible – the earlier the better

Currently it is felt airlines wait as long as possible before sharing information, which fosters frustration and can have a significant impact on individuals' onward travel. Airlines must be pro-active and transparent as soon as they know of any disruption.

After the first notification, ensure a consistent flow of information with updates at least every 30 minutes

Regular updates (even when there is no change) empower passengers and help them feel they are being looked after. Airlines should inform passengers how frequently they will be updated and by which channel, to remove uncertainty.

There are multiple opportunities to inform passengers of their rights during disruption, and many want this before disruption happens

While the first notification is a key touch point for this information, nearly half of passengers want to receive information on their rights before disruption even occurs, either at point of booking, or during check in.

Content – What information should be provided during a disruption?

The most important information for airlines to provide is the expected length of disruption or the new flight time

This enables passengers to assess their options and make any necessary arrangements. If this is not possible, airlines should be transparent and proactive at finding this information out, ensuring that passengers know the airline is treating this as a priority.

Airlines should provide a clear reason for the disruption, even if the airline is at fault

Transparency can reduce frustration and pressure on airport staff while also aiding passengers to make the right type of claim.

Available options should be clearly set out and airlines must set clear expectations for passengers to follow

Passengers generally do not want to cause an inconvenience but can feel anxious and overwhelmed during disruptions. Airlines need to help them understand their choices and set clear parameters of what they need to do to help them navigate the situation confidently.

Airlines should be pro-active and forthcoming about passenger entitlement

Passengers expect airlines to tell them what they are entitled to, rather than having to hunt down the information and navigate complex terms themselves.

Empathy should be displayed across the disruption journey

Disruptions can cause significant distress and while a follow-up apology is appreciated, it can feel tokenistic if passengers felt no sense of empathy during the event.

Communications need to be clearly identifiable and easy to navigate

Passengers are wary of scams and phishing emails / texts, especially when text is dense and difficult to read. Airlines can increase confidence by including identifiable information like flight numbers and ensure branding / sender details are professional and on brand.

Channel – How best to reach passengers during disruption?

Airlines must take an approach inclusive for all passengers, especially at first notification

There is no one channel that meets all passenger needs, so for these important, time critical messages, a multi-channel in-person and digital approach should be leveraged to account for channel preferences, varying levels of digital confidence, and accessibility barriers.

However, messaging must be consistent across channels

Passengers have come to expect real time app updates but often report inconsistencies with in-person and digital channels. This confusion can stop people using self-serve options and instead put pressure on airport staff.

Consider asking for passenger preferences at point of booking

Passengers have a range of abilities, preferences and circumstances and so asking for their channel preference at point of booking can help ensure they receive the information they need, when they need it.

Our research, detailed in the findings of this report, suggests that airlines that implement these best practices can transform loyalty-damaging experiences into trust-building moments. Across the board, those who are satisfied with the communications they receive from airlines are significantly more likely to also be satisfied with the options they felt were available to them throughout the disruption, the resolution of their disruption, and multiple other elements of their disruption experience.

Where passengers felt airlines had communicated well throughout a disruption, they voiced increased loyalty towards that airline and recommended flying with them to others. Those who were dissatisfied because of poor experiences of communication during disruption

provided examples of where, if they have the choice, they will avoid certain airlines. Airlines who act can not only reduce passenger distress but may gain significant competitive advantage.

The Research Approach

The research programme consisted of two phases:

- Qualitative exploration (n=60)
  Utilising a mixed method approach with 60 participants across the UK. As part of this phase, 48 participants first took part in an online community where they shared their disruption experiences. They then participated in a series of online group interviews (consisting of 4 respondents each) to explore preferences around disruption communications. 12 participants who face specific identified vulnerabilities (including financial, digital, personally having a disability and being a carer) took part in extended one-on-one interviews, with the option to complete via telephone, to share both their experiences and preferences around disruption communications.
- Quantitative validation (n=2,105)
  Consisting of both online and telephone surveys to develop a robust understanding of passengers' key pain points throughout their experience of flight disruption, and their needs and preferences in communication to mitigate those points. The telephone survey (n=100) was used specifically to access the views of those who are digitally disadvantaged.

For further details on the methodology, sample and overall approach, see the Appendix.

How to Read this Report

The report is split into two sections. The first section focuses on the experience of disruption for passengers and the impact communications can have on this. This section is broken down into five stages:

- Before disruption
- The first notification of a disruption
- Passenger updates during disruption
- Cancellations
- Resolution of disruption
- Follow-up after disruption

The second section focuses on communication preferences during disruption. This section is broken down into three areas of focus:

- Timing of information
- Content and priority information
- Channel preferences across passenger types

Definition of 'disruption'

While there are different types of disruption, for the purposes of this research, disruption refers specifically to delays and cancellations to flights. All experiences of delays included were at least 2 hours long, and all cancellations occurred on the date of the flight (that is same-day cancellations). Cancellations may be experienced in isolation (as their own disruption) or may be a secondary disruption (where the flight was initially delayed and then cancelled).

Passenger types

Throughout the report, subgroups of passengers will be referenced where these characteristics result in differences in the passenger experience or communication preferences (for example age, gender, location of residence,[1] circumstance while travelling, and so on).

Where case studies have been used to illustrate real passenger experiences, names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

Definitions of respondents and subgroups referenced throughout the report:

- Passengers: "Passenger" is the generic term used to describe all those who participated in this research study. All passengers cited in this study experienced either a 2-hour-minimum delay or a same-day cancellation (or both) within the past 5 years.[2]

- Financially Vulnerable (n=217): Those who have been designated "financially vulnerable" within the context of this research are those who self-report that in the event of a major travel disruption (such as a significantly delayed or cancelled flight), they would not normally be able to easily access sufficient funds (for example through a credit / debit card, cash, and so on) to cover unexpected costs as a result of the disruption.

- Digitally Excluded / Narrow Users of Technology (n=100): Those who conduct limited standard activities online (for instance, managing their finances/banking, looking for information on leisure activities, using streaming services, and so on), using Ofcom's Narrow Internet User definition.[3] Within the context of this study, the Digitally Excluded audience completed the survey via CATI.

- Technological Comfortability (n=107). Some passengers, despite not being designated 'Digitally Excluded' or 'narrow users of technology' still feel less comfortable using technology and finding their way on digital platforms. In this report, those who are designated 'less confident' users of technology are passengers who say they are "not very confident using technology" or "struggle to use technology and to perform simple activities on a smartphone or mobile device".

[1] Respondent location of residence was split between England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland – All respondents reside in one of these locations.
[2] Excluding those <100 narrow users of technology who completed a computer assisted telephone interview (CATI), a group which is particularly unlikely to have recent experience of travel
[3] Adults' Media Use and Attitudes report 2023

> Section 2: Passenger Journey Through Disruption

What is the impact of effective communications on the experience of disruption?

"Transparency builds empathy. Passengers are generally accepting of mistakes if you're kept in the loop, but so often with air travel it feels like a fight to get accurate information"

Cancelled Passenger, Male, 37 years old, N. Ireland

Travel disruptions can be distinctly negative experiences for passengers. However, with effective communication and a clear sense of next steps, negativity can be mitigated.

- The extent of this negativity is dependent on a number of factors, from the passenger's personal situation to the nature of disruption and how it was handled.
- More vulnerable passengers (that is, those who are financially vulnerable, those with less digital confidence, those with disabilities, those travelling with young children, and carers) are at risk of particularly negative experiences, such as:
    - Feeling excluded by airlines disruption comms strategies: For example assuming financially vulnerable passengers can afford to pay now and expense later for food items or alternative travel, or digitally vulnerable passengers being asked to engage with websites or apps for further information.
    - Being less able to adapt to change: For example disabled passengers need to rearrange special mobility assistance, digitally vulnerable passengers struggling to make changes to their pre-arranged onward journeys after disruption, or travellers with young children left to find last minute accommodation for larger party sizes.
- Within the quantitative survey, the nature of disruption and its impact varied from having to wait at the airport for a later flight (57%) to spending the night in the airport (7%) and nearly 1 in 10 (7%) passengers who experienced a flight cancellation (not a delay) ended up cancelling their trip entirely.[4] Furthermore, passengers are more likely to have missed a connecting flight (12% of total sample) than to have made it (8% of total sample) – 80% of passengers in the sample did not have a connecting flight on their journey.[5]

[4] Q4. Which of the following best describes what happened as a result of your delay / cancellation? Base: All (2,005), Cancellation (724)
[5] Q9. Did this [delay / cancellation] cause you to miss (or risk missing) a connecting flight? Base: All (2,005)

Effective communication is critical to passenger outcomes.

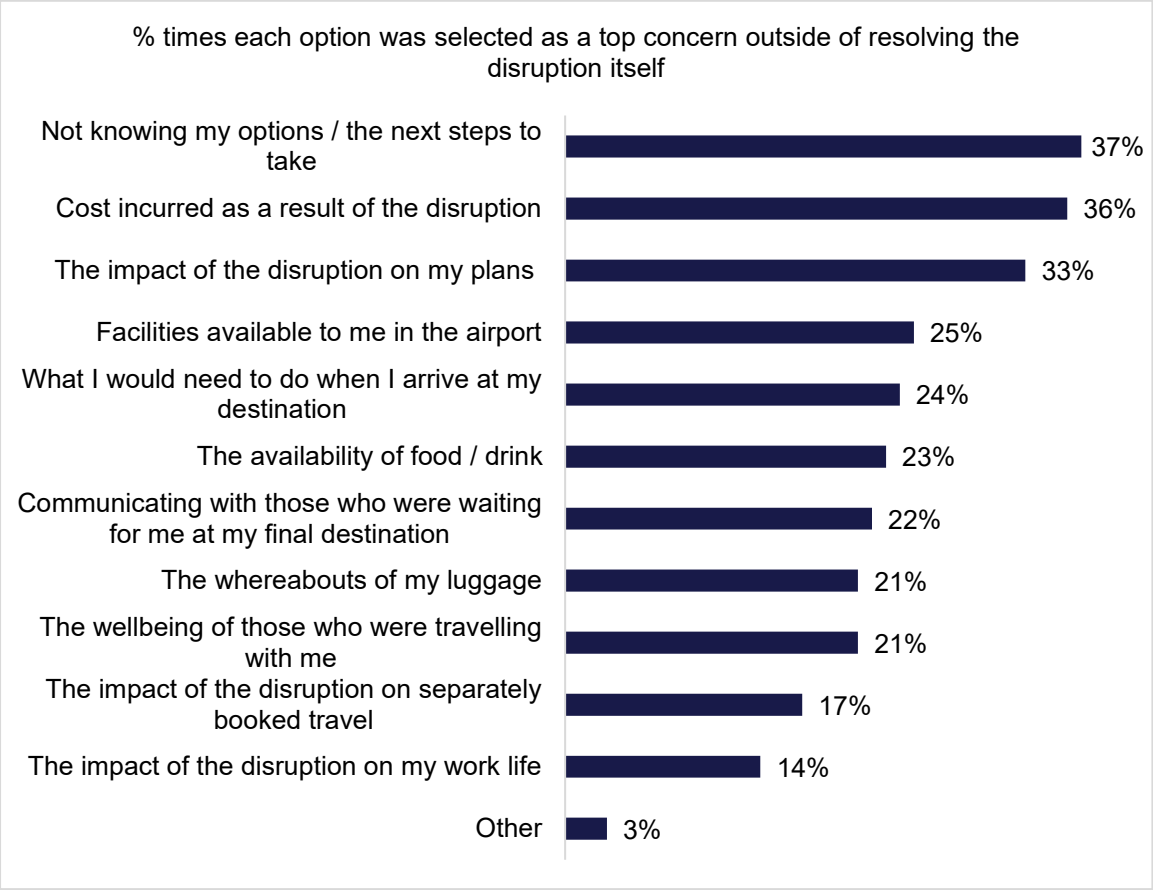
How airlines communicate disruption has a significant impact. Over half (57%) of passengers felt that airlines providing more detailed information during disruption would have improved their experience.[6]

Passengers lack awareness and understanding of passenger rights during a disruption, with only 1 in 10 passengers (10%) saying that they are fully informed about their rights in the event of a disruption.[7]

Poor communication can at best reinforce the idea of passengers being taken advantage of, and at worst lead to real passenger harm. On the other hand, clear, timely and empathetic provision of information can help offset the negative impacts of disruption and rebuild trust in airlines.

“They're offering a service, and they've not delivered on that service. They don't care, they've got our money, so they don't give a toss what we think."

Alongside resolving the disruption itself, not knowing their options / the next steps to take most commonly ranks in passengers’ top 3 concerns when facing a disruption:



Q16. Alongside resolving the disruption itself, what were your top 3 concerns when facing a travel disruption? Base: All (2,005)

[6] Q20. Overall, what (if anything) could the airline have done to improve your experience of the disruption? Base: All (2,005)
[7] Q29. To what extent are you aware of your rights as a traveller when it comes to facing a flight delay or cancellation? Base: All (2,005)

It is clear that uncertainty is many passengers' most common concern (most commonly ranked as both top priority and third priority), and that minimising this uncertainty is key to improving the passenger experience of disruption.

In the following sections, we will look at the experience of disruption and role of communication across the passenger journey.

Before disruption - When do passengers begin to consider the possibility of disruption?

"I'd love to say I plan for the worst, do my research, but when I'm booking a holiday… Don't rain on my parade"

Cancelled Passenger, Female, 56 years old, England

When searching for flights, some passengers will take measures to minimise their chance of disruption.

Preventative measures include:

- Prioritising certain airlines where possible. It's often assumed disruption is more common when traveling with budget airlines and passengers anticipate less access to customer support in the event of a disruption compared to premium airlines.
- Avoiding flying at certain times of day where the impact of disruption is heightened (for example late evening flights).
- Factoring in contingency time to travel plans so that a disruption wouldn't significantly impact onward journeys (for example booking early flights so delays won't cause them to arrive at their destination at night, when public transport is reduced).

Those with disabilities or digital vulnerabilities are more likely to put stricter preventative measures in place to avoid the potential of disruption and its impact, with even minor disruptions posing significant challenges to managing their onward journey.

Choosing preferable airlines or flight times can come with an increased cost. Despite anticipating increased chances of disruption with cheaper airlines, it's a risk many have to accept, and passengers feel resigned to the notion that flight disruption is out of their control.

"You know that some airlines are less reliable than others, but if that is your only choice, you just have to accept it and hope for the best with your flight"

However, when it comes to the actual process of booking, passengers are less likely to consider the risk of disruption.

At point of ticket purchase, complex booking pages that promote paid optional extras can lessen passenger attention and engagement with any disruption-related information, with some viewing this as an intentional tactic from airlines and others acknowledging that it may not be the best time to explain these rights and responsibilities.

"They don't need to tell us then. I don't know what information they could tell us that point. I wouldn't read it at that point because my focus is on the ticket and flight information"

Once booked, passengers don't tend to consider the potential for disruption until they are preparing for travel.

Receiving flight reminders and check-in details in the days before travel can prompt many to review the status of their flight. Certain on-the-day circumstances can also encourage proactive checking of flight status, such as adverse weather, news coverage of travel delays, previous flight issues, travelling with children, or disabilities.

- 69% of passengers claim to always check their flight status before leaving for the airport.
- This increases to 80% among passengers travelling with children under 5, but drops to 46% for those who feel less confident using technology.[8]

"Yes, I always check, and I even check my friends' and families' flights just from curiosity. I just like to be prepared and if there is a delay it could mean I don't need to get to the airport as early and especially when I am in another country it means I have more time on holiday"

First notification - How do passengers first become aware of flight disruption?

"No communication is the worst type of communication. That's how the rumour mill starts swirling, that's when resentment kicks in!"

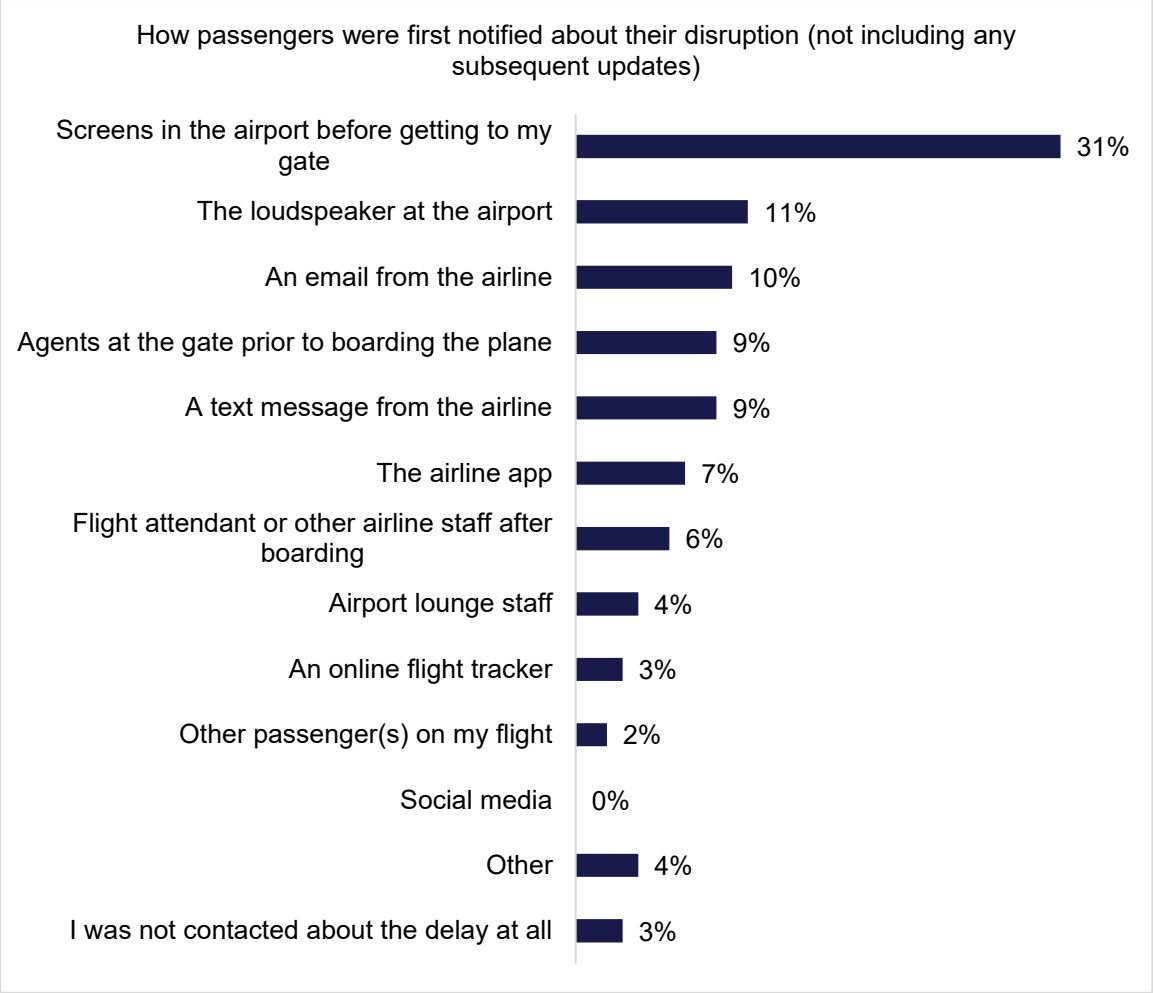
Delayed Passenger, Male, 24 years old, Scotland

First notification is a critical moment to get right, with nearly half (45%) of passengers being actively dissatisfied with how the disruption they faced was initially communicated.[9]

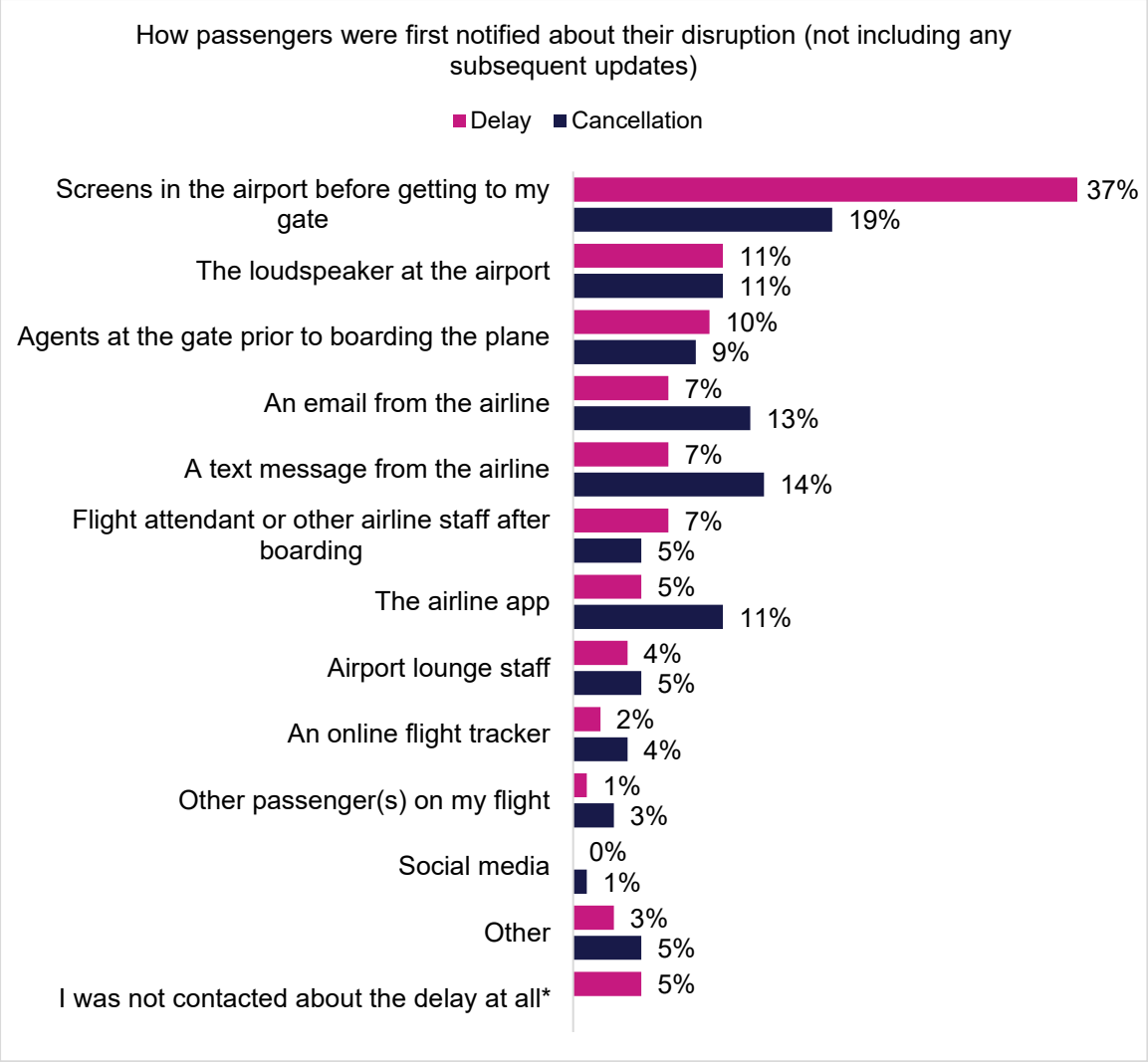
Despite many people checking their flight status before setting off, airport screens are the primary channel where people are first alerted.

Departure boards are the main port of call, considered the most accurate and trusted source of flight status information. This is most common among both those who experienced a delay and a cancellation, though significantly more so amongst delays. There is more of a spread in first notification channels when it comes to those facing a cancellation, with an email or text message from the airline, or a notification on the airline app, all being significantly more likely sources of first notification compared to those who faced a delay.

[8] Q13. Do you check the status of your flight before going to the airport? Base: All (2,005) Travelled with children under 5 (125), Less confident with technology (107)
[9] Q18. Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with each element of your [delay / cancellation] experience? Base: All (2,005)



Q14. How were you first notified about your [delay / cancellation]? Base: All (2,005)



Q14. How were you first notified about your [delay / cancellation]? Base: All (2,005), Delay (1,281), Cancellation (724)

*"I was not contacted about the delay at all" was not asked to those answering about a cancellation

Passengers are frustrated that information across airport and airline channels is often out of sync.

Passengers report that airline channels such as apps and emails are often slow or not aligned to channels at the airport. This can lessen trust in airline-owned communications and push passengers to rely on traditional channels, such as in-person support or departure boards.

"You get different information from different sources and you know, the app might not have been current compared to other information available at the airport. I've also seen situations where people who dealt with the staff got different information from what was available from other airline sources. So I think consistency is the most important aspect"

Airline communications can help alleviate feelings of distrust, as a lack of transparency led to many passengers stating that they felt trapped and unable to act.

At the first notification of delay, 61% of passengers say that the reason for the disruption is one of the top 5 most important pieces of information (overall 2nd after length of delay/new flight time – 81%).[10]

- This can, in some circumstances, help passengers understand how long a resolution is likely to take and therefore allows them to make informed decisions on what to do next; for example, whether they have time to get a meal or make arrangements for ongoing travel.

"It helps you understand how long the delay will actually be, but it also builds empathy. Like a mechanical issue, you think 'okay fair, take time to fix that' – But even staff shortages, broken carousels, it's giving me information so I don't need to go searching for it"

- Many passengers feel information given by both airports and airlines is intentionally vague, that is 'runway' or 'operational issues'. This can be seen as a tactical move to limit passenger outrage, limit media attention or avoid compensation claims where airlines are at fault.

"It's in their best interest to give you false hope. They don't want people to be upset or give people a reason not to fly with them again. If it's something silly or a mistake they've made, you can probably tell because they give a more generic reason"

Failures in digital communication can push passengers towards in-person support, but this is often limited, which adds to distress.

Presence of airline staff in the event of a disruption is highly reassuring as it shows action is being taken and can provide needed empathy. 51% of passengers report that increasing availability of staff to answer questions in person would improve their experience of disruption.[11]

But experiences of in-person support vary, particularly where in-person touch points are overloaded during a disruption.

- Where information is not clear at point of first notification, this often results in a surge towards help desks. This can create tense and aggressive spaces where more passive passengers fear that travellers who are more forceful will secure better accommodation or rebooking options.

"It was chaos. Everyone was shouting, jostling and pushing to get in front. I found the whole thing extremely overwhelming. I thought surely there has to be a better way to get people the information they need."

- Airline staff are believed to possess more relevant information, authority and accountability in managing disruptions than digital resources, particularly if passengers are seeking reassurance around compensation. However, the location of

[10] Q22. What are the most important pieces of information you want to receive when first notified about a travel disruption? Base: All (2,005)
[11] Q20. Overall, what (if anything) could the airline have done to improve your experience of the disruption? Base: All (2,005)

in-person support is often poorly signposted, leading passengers to feel lost and that airlines don't care about their welfare.

"We were walking around the airport trying to find airline staff to help us. We even walked back through security, but then someone told us that there was no desk or staff for that airline in the airport! In the end another airline was having to help us, which was ridiculous given we had questions about refunds"

- Staff lacking additional information beyond what is communicated by apps or airport boards, or only advising passengers to refer to apps for information, can amplify passenger outrage.

"Well, the biggest thing is lack of information and trying to find somebody who's responsible if your flight is delayed. There is no substitute for telling people what is happening and keeping them updated...But again, it goes back to, well, we've taken your money, and we don't care whether you sat here for five hours, ten hours or whatever."

- Staff changing shifts without briefing new workers or closing stalls in the midst of disruptions strengthened the view that airlines don't take disruptions seriously.

"One staff member said she would be back in ten minutes, closed down her desk and we never saw her again! I think she had just had enough of us".

Vulnerable passengers are especially exposed at first notification and may require greater levels of support in terms of communication.

Digitally vulnerable or less digitally confident passengers

A key concern is the impact of disruption on onward journeys that are usually booked in advance. Digitally vulnerable or less digitally confident passengers identify a need for support with rebooking onward travel, but feel airlines are unprepared or do not see this as part of their responsibility.

Those who feel less confident with technology are significantly more likely to be concerned about not knowing their options during a disruption (48% of those less confident with technology selected this as a top 3 concern compared with 36% of those more confident using technology).[12]

Case Study: Wendy (Digitally Vulnerable) – Age 70, South East

Flight Context: Chicago → Traverse City → London

What happened:

Wendy's connecting flight from Chicago was cancelled. She learned this through a Tannoy announcement directing passengers to the airline's website for further details. Wendy had no device with internet, and she was unable to get through to family for help due to the time zone.

[12] Q16. Alongside resolving the disruption itself, what were your top 3 concerns when facing a travel disruption? Base: Those more confident with technology (1,896), those less confident with technology (107)

To complicate matters, her second flight to London was booked with a different airline. She feared she'd be labelled a no-show and lose any reimbursement rights or eligibility for alternative travel. As she was unable to rebook/purchase new tickets digitally, Wendy hoped to find staff to help but couldn't access them because of her mobility impairment, as she didn't feel able to join a long queue. With staff overwhelmed and no clear process to follow, she became upset and broke down in tears.

Eventually, a member of staff from a different airline noticed her distress and intervened. They helped her contact the second airline, arranged a discounted fare, and scheduled Wendy on an alternative connecting flight. While incredibly grateful, Wendy remained uneasy—there was no formal confirmation beyond hand-written instructions that the staff member had given her. Though she was relieved to find airline staff waiting for her in Traverse City, she couldn't relax for the entire journey, unsure whether the arrangement would actually be honoured.

Impact:

Wendy felt overwhelmed and unsupported in a moment of high stress. She felt in-person support was her only option but unfairly used by others seeking quick resolution.

Wendy also felt more formal confirmation of alterations to journeys is needed for those without access to digital resources, to assist with any later claims and help with onward journeys.

In her own words:

"Everyone kept saying 'use the app', or 'more information can be found online'. People were being really unpleasant to members of staff and cutting in front of us, you feel so helpless in those situations. I just don't know what would have happened if that person hadn't seen me laid on the floor in tears and offered to help me"

Financially vulnerable

Financially vulnerable passengers may have heightened distress around the need for additional, unbudgeted spending, even if this may be reimbursed at a later stage. This may include:

- Sustenance (often at inflated airport prices)
- Emergency accommodation
- Rebooking onward travel / plans

Those who are financially vulnerable (unable to access additional funds and finances in the event of a sudden or extended disruption) are significantly more likely to rank the cost incurred as a result of the disruption as a top concern (costs incurred ranks in the top 3 for 48% of those who are financially vulnerable vs 34% of those who are able to readily access funds).[13] Uncertainty around next steps is also significantly more likely to be a top 3 concern

[13] Q16. Alongside resolving the disruption itself, what were your top 3 concerns when facing a travel disruption? Base: Financially vulnerable (217), All others (1,788)

for the financially vulnerable (45% of those who are financially vulnerable vs 35% those who are not).[14]

Financially vulnerable passengers are also less likely to know their rights, however they are more likely to request reimbursement and refunds.

I requested this	Access to funds	No access to funds
Compensation	30%	32%
Reimbursement	17%	26%
Refund	15%	26%
Vouchers	10%	13%

I received this	Access to funds	No access to funds
Compensation	18%	7%
Reimbursement	14%	14%
Refund	7%	8%
Vouchers	19%	14%

Q7. We would now like to understand the steps taken to resolve your [delay /cancellation]. Below, please select whether each of the options was offered by the airline, requested by you, and ultimately received. Base: Access to funds in a disruption (1,788), no access to funds in a disruption (217)

Case Study: Dani (Financially Vulnerable) – Age 42, Northern Ireland

Flight Context:

Dani, a part-time hairdresser and mother of two, was returning home from a five-day self-catering holiday in Portugal.

What Happened:

On the day of returning, Dani checked out of her accommodation and immediately received an email stating that her flight had been cancelled. The email provided no rationale for the cancellation, only confirmation that the next available flight was 5 days later.

Dani and her family were left stranded in Portugal with no money remaining after their trip. They had budgeted carefully and did not anticipate needing additional funds for extended accommodation or meals. In desperation, Dani contacted her aunt to borrow a credit card so they could book another hotel. They opted for an all-inclusive package to

[14] Q16. Alongside resolving the disruption itself, what were your top 3 concerns when facing a travel disruption? Base: Financially vulnerable (217), All others (1,788)

ensure access to food and drink during the unexpected extension of their stay. She was refunded for this stay but this took several weeks to process, and she was anxious she may not be able to pay her aunt back.

Impact:

Dani mentioned the immediate panic after the first notification was incredibly distressing. Finding accommodation and alternative flights using just a mobile phone in a foreign country - while entertaining children - was extremely challenging, in addition to the other concern of how they would pay for it.

In her own words:

“We had no money left, absolutely none. It was just panic at first, like what are we going to do? How are we going to manage? You feel stranded and helpless."

Disabled passengers

Passengers with disabilities were less likely than other passengers to be satisfied with how the disruption was initially communicated (28% vs 35% respectively).[15]

Disabled passengers can also experience heightened distress at the point of disruption as information regarding any planned special assistance can be lacking, leaving them exposed.

These passengers have a higher preference for in-person communication channels but also rely on a broader mix of channels than other passengers, indicating a strong need to stay on top of information and updates and minimising the risk of any one channel falling short:

After being first notified of your delay, how would you prefer to receive updates about your delay?	Total	Disabled
A text message from the airline	64%	68%
Screens in the airport before getting to my gate	43%	54%
An email from the airline	41%	37%
The airline app	37%	33%
Agents at the gate prior to boarding the plane	30%	36%
The loudspeaker at the airport	28%	34%
Airport lounge staff	28%	36%
An online flight tracker	11%	12%
Social media	3%	3%
Other	*	*

“Screens in the airport before getting to my gate”, “agents at the gate prior to boarding the plane”, “the loudspeaker at the airport”, and “airport lounge staff” are all in person channels that are preferred to a greater extent by disabled passengers.

Q23. After being first notified of your delay, how would you prefer to receive updates about your delay? Base: All (2,005), Passengers with a disability (591)

Case Study: Cheryll (Carer) – Age 19, Wales

Flight Context:

[15] Q18. Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with each element of your [delay / cancellation] experience? Base: Passengers with a disability (591), without a disability (1,414)

Cheryll was travelling to Alicante with her grandparents, who both require special assistance due to mobility challenges.

What Happened:

Given her grandparents' mobility challenges, they arrived at Bristol Airport four hours before departure, to secure more comfortable seating and had paid for airport lounge access to make the wait more manageable.

Later, the family left to proceed to their gate—only to discover via the screen that the flight was delayed by an hour. Upon returning to the paid lounge, they were denied re-entry so found seating in the main departure lounge but had to sit apart from one another.

After an hour had passed, they travelled to the boarding gate again only to be informed of another two-hour delay at the gate, but no staff were present to assist or provide further updates. Cheryll recalls only receiving a text from the airline confirming the delay once the gate had re-opened, but even this was only accessible through clicking on a link, which she felt excluded older audiences. The lack of digital communication meant Cheryll was responsible for standing for the entire length of delay to check departure boards for updates, and in the time it took for her family to make the journey to the boarding gate, another delay was announced.

Impact:

The disruption caused significant stress to Cheryll, who had to manage her grandparents' mobility needs without clear or timely updates from the airline. With no staff present and only screen updates or texts linking to online information, she felt unsupported and anxious. The inability to re-enter the lounge after discovering the delay added to their frustration, especially given their tight budget.

More timely communication would have prevented Cheryll and her family making unnecessary journeys to boarding gates, made more difficult by their mobility challenges.

In her own words:

"We'd booked special assistance for my grandparents who can't walk easily, but with no communication they had us walking from gate to gate. We didn't even get an apology, it was just 'it's out of our hands, there's nothing we can do'"

Waiting periods and information updates – What is the passenger experience in the interim?

"You're just glued to the departure board waiting for them to announce something, so you can't switch off and relax."

Cancelled Passenger, Male, 40 years old, Wales

44% of passengers report dissatisfaction with airlines' communications to them while working to resolve their disruption.

Passengers often lack clarity on how frequently airlines plan to communicate further updates, leaving them 'on edge'.

Following first notification of disruption, not knowing how or when airlines plan to provide further updates creates uncomfortable waiting periods where passengers are in a constant state of alert for new information. Just one third (34%) of passengers were satisfied with the frequency of updates they received from their airline.[16]

"You get there on time, and are put in those glass holding pens for hours, not knowing if you can leave to get food or even to use the toilet…"

During this time, there can be distrust in digital channels to convey important information, resulting in passengers being 'glued' to trusted channels (for example departure board), and close to boarding gates, so they can respond quickly to sudden announcements to their flight.

Certain vulnerable groups may be dealing with additional anxiety during this period, which is compounded by a lack of information:

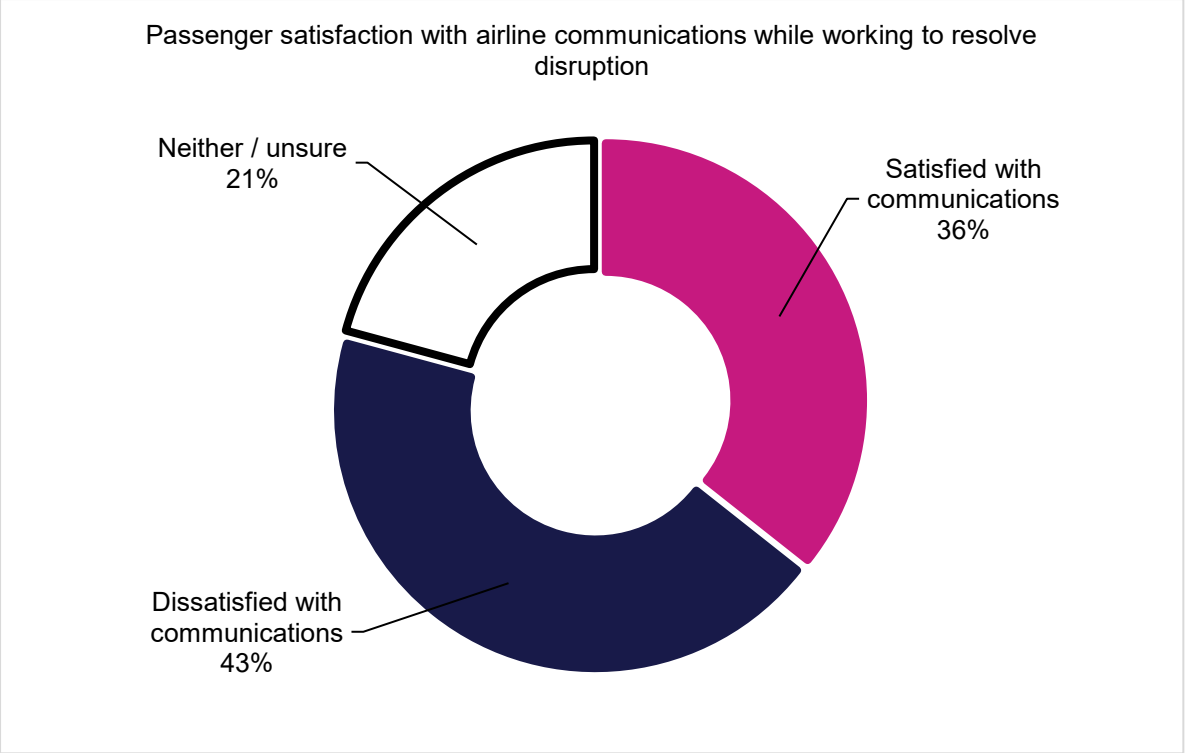
- Digitally Excluded or less digitally confident passengers often feel nervous they will miss vital information others receive via their emails / apps.
- Mobility impaired individuals may not want to risk 'stampedes' of people rushing in response to boarding announcements, so may sacrifice their designated disability waiting areas to be positioned closer to the gates.
- Those with medication schedules report struggling to plan when to take medication or worry they haven't packed enough medication for extended delays.
- Passengers with young children often consider missing their trip all together where no clear timeline is provided, causing upset and significant financial loss.

"My sister is in a wheelchair, and what was a relatively minimal delay of I think 2 hours ended up being 7 hours for us, as no one seemed to inform the staff on the other side, so we were waiting on the plane to disembark for another hour waiting for staff, then there was no staff by the time we got to passport control. It was really shocking." - Sibling of disabled passenger.

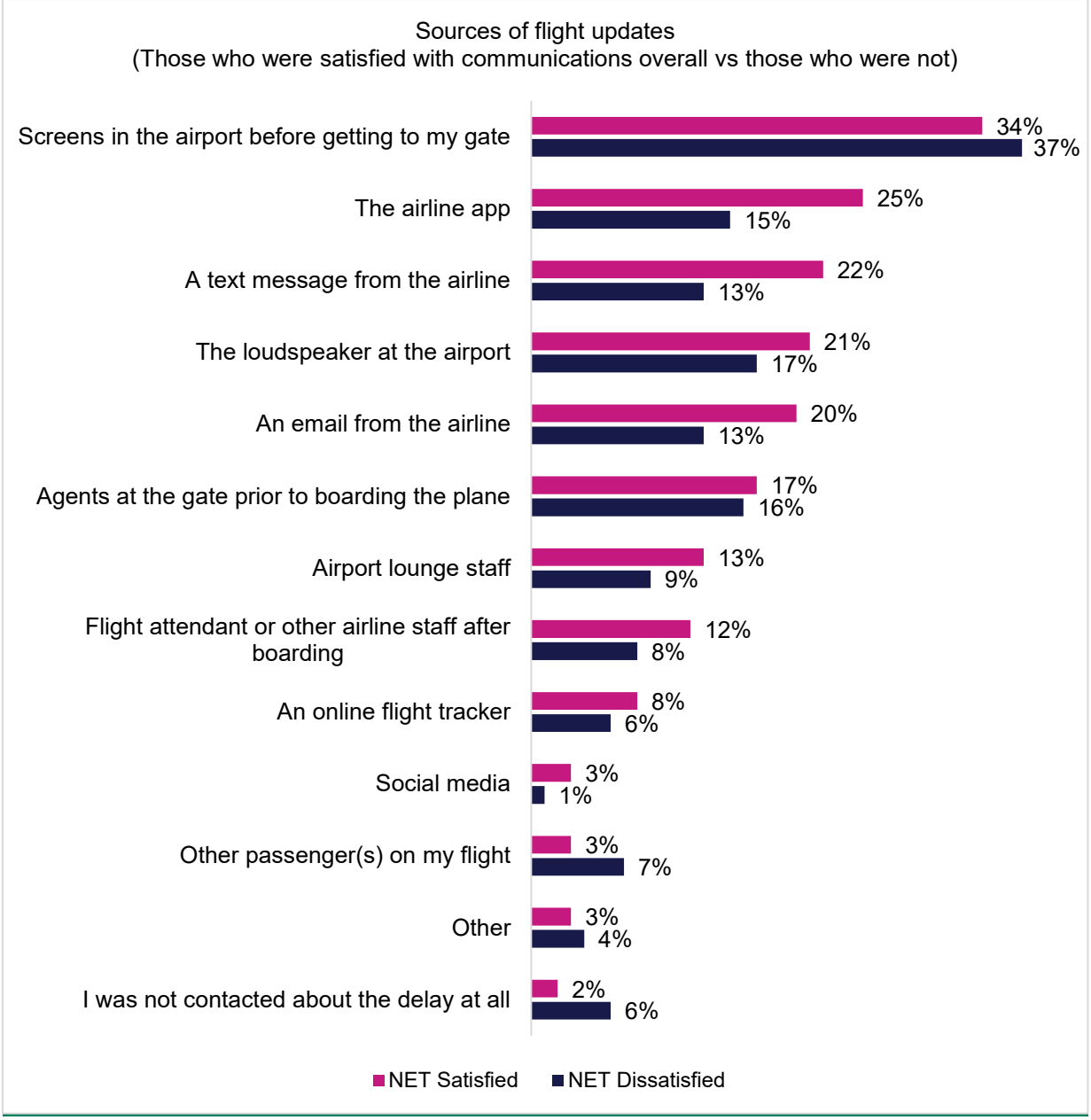
Regular communication at this stage allows passengers to feel more in control and creates a much more positive experience. Overall, more customers were dissatisfied (44%) with the communications that they received than were satisfied (36%).

Where passengers do receive regular updates, and are told how often to expect these, they are able to make more informed decisions and feel a sense of agency in a situation that is largely out of their control, thus minimising stress and increasing satisfaction.

[16] Q18. Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the frequency of updates you received from the airline? Base: All (2,005)



Q18. Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with each element of your [delay / cancellation] experience? - The airline's communications to me while working to resolve the [delay / cancellation]. Base: NET Those satisfied with airline communications (721), those dissatisfied with airline communications (872). N.B. % scores add up to >100% due to rounding.



Q15. How did you receive updates about your [delay / cancellation]? Base: Those satisfied with airline communications during disruption (721), those dissatisfied with airline communications during disruption (872)

Spotlight on Reimbursement

While passengers are generally aware of some right to reimbursement for their flight, they are less clear on reimbursement rights for unplanned expenses during disruption.

Passengers' assumptions about reimbursements are often based on their perceptions or past experiences of an airline's customer service, rather than official policies. For example, people may assume budget airlines won't reimburse them, while premium airlines might.

- Cost incurred as a result of disruption is ranked 2nd in top 3 concerns for passengers when facing disruption.[17]

In this context and where clear information is not given, airlines are viewed as guarding reimbursement policies or being intentionally vague. Terminology like 'reasonable' expenses is unclear to some (with food, contact lenses, deodorant and water all examples of expenses passengers were unsure if they are able to claim reimbursement for).

How airlines reimburse expenses is also often unclear, meaning some passengers go without.

"I can't really afford to have unplanned spending come out of my account and as there was no information, I didn't know if I'd be out of pocket for a week or two months or never see the money again. In the end I got by on water as airport food is so expensive."

Uncertainty over when unplanned expenses would be reimbursed, or limits on how much is reimbursed, often results in limited spending or going without completely, not wanting to 'overclaim' and risk not getting anything back.

Major expenses are often prioritised (for example flight and hotel costs) in reimbursement claims, with some foregoing less costly expenses (such as food or taxis) believing it may weaken the chance of payout.

"We only submitted expenses for the hotel and taxis, but none of the meals we'd paid for, because we thought it was already so much money we were asking for that we didn't want to push our luck"

Case Study: Mario (Financially Vulnerable) – Age 43, London

Flight Context: London → Istanbul (4-hour delay) → Sri Lanka

What happened:

Mario was flying from London to Sri Lanka with a layover in Istanbul. Upon landing at 10pm, he discovered his connecting flight was delayed by three hours. Most shops were closed and the only open restaurant exceeded his tight budget. Although aware of potential reimbursement for food, he couldn't find clear information on when or if the airline would actually pay him back – leaving him uncertain and frustrated.

Impact:

Worried he'd miss his pre-booked taxi in Sri Lanka—secured in advance at a lower cost—Mario chose not to risk spending money on food. The prospect of paying for a far pricier airport taxi outweighed his immediate hunger. He got by on biscuits and mints brought from London, feeling both anxious and hungry. He later expressed a need for clearer guidance on reimbursement policies and better in-person support from airlines during disruptions.

In their own words:

"I was so hungry, but I couldn't justify paying for a meal at the airport. I had a fixed sum of money for my holiday, and I thought I might need the money for more important things like

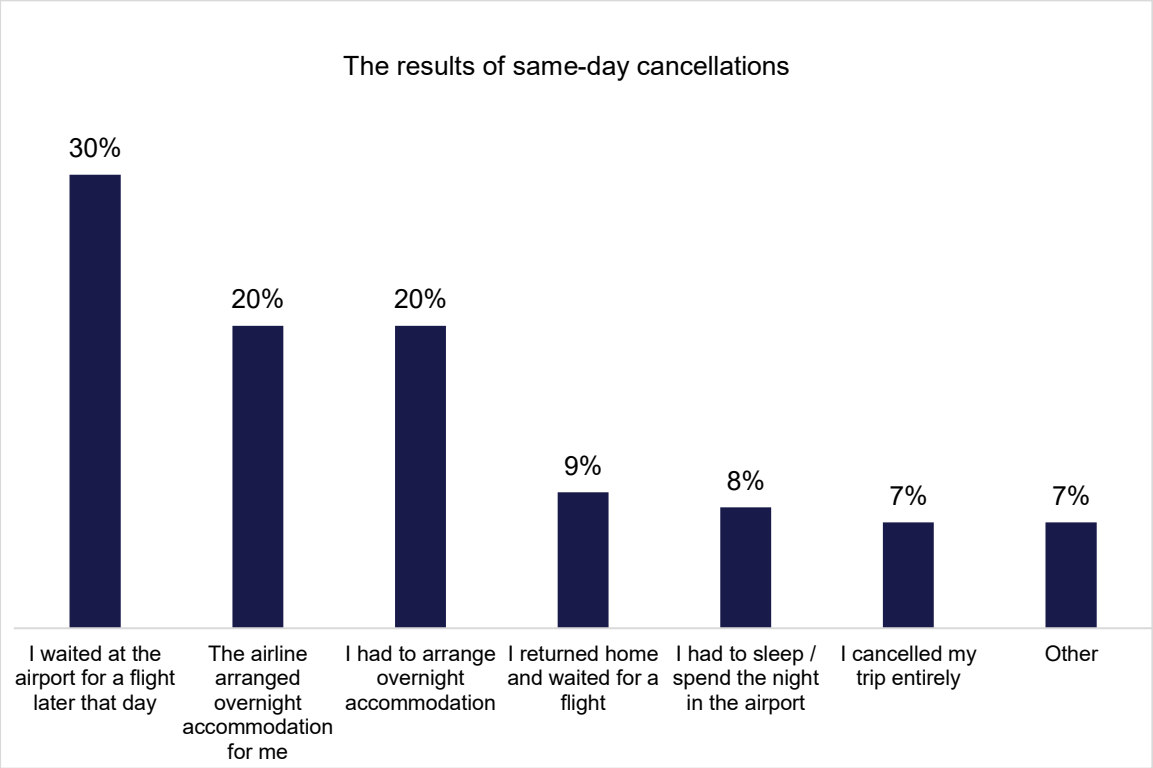
[17] Q16. Alongside resolving the disruption itself, what were your top 3 concerns when facing a travel disruption? Base: All (2,005)

my transfer. The airline website said I was entitled to a hot meal, but not how they'd honour that policy. It didn't say if I had to pay for it up front, or when they would pay me back. At those late times in airports, it's quite lonely, and I was just wandering around to keep myself busy and not think about food."

Cancellation – How do passengers deal with this more severe form of disruption?

"It was pretty much a slap in the face because we went from this positive energy that we're going on holiday, we're going to the resort, we're going to have fun to then 'turn back around and go home, it's all cancelled."

Cancelled Passenger, Female, 37 years old, England



Q4. Which of the following best describes what happened as a result of your cancellation? Base: Passengers who experienced a same-day cancellation (724)

Initial worry over cancellations can be abated when an airline takes ownership of the rebooking process.

While immediately distressing, passengers praise airlines that take full accountability and ownership of managing logistical aspects of a cancellation process. This includes:

- Presenting multiple options for new flights that passengers could select based on their preferences.
- Automatic booking of hotels and transfers.
- Providing comprehensive information on compensation rights at point of cancellation.
- Significant in-person support throughout the whole process.

Follow-up communication to ensure all passengers arrive at their accommodation is also valued and increases positive sentiment toward airlines.

“Actually, despite us being initially worried, our airline sent an email with our options, and we were easily able to book into a hotel for the night. Luckily, we checked our email or we may not have booked on time, but without that, I think I may have just panicked.”

Failure to provide passengers with clear options in the event of a cancellation creates feelings of abandonment, where passengers have to manage the fallout themselves.

While about half of passengers are able to wait for a flight later that same day (57%),[18] for those needing to book unplanned overnight accommodation (when necessary), this is of greatest immediate concern. Many feel a sense of urgency to make arrangements before hotels are booked up or there is a surge in price.

- 1 in 5 passengers experiencing a cancellation report having to manage the overnight accommodation process themselves.[19]
- Older passengers are less likely to spend the night in the airport as a result of their disruption, with 18-24 year-olds more likely to make do (13%) when compared with other groups (8-9% of 25-44, 6% of 45-64, 2% of 65+).[20]

“It’s the absolute lack of responsibility for customers. We were given no food, no water, no vouchers, no hotel, no transfer, nothing whatsoever. No communication. I had to ask to find out what was happening and one person was fobbing off another person, staff wise. And then to just put the sign up and just not deal with it. And left a huge queue of people who just could do nothing.”

Case Study: Laurence (General Passenger) – Age 22, Yorkshire

Flight Context:

Returning flight from Amsterdam to Manchester

What Happened:

Laurence was returning from his first holiday abroad when his flight from Amsterdam to Manchester was cancelled. With his first day at a new job the next morning, panic set in. He had limited funds and no experience handling flight cancellations. Attempts to get in-person help were negated by long queues, and overwhelmed by the chaos, he gave up—feeling pressured to book a new flight quickly.

His friends, booking individually, managed to secure same-day flights, but Laurence was too late and ended up left at the airport alone. He considered flying to other UK cities but couldn’t find clear information on whether train travel back to Manchester would be reimbursed. While looking for in-person support at the airport, he accidentally exited through

[18] Q4. Which of the following best describes what happened as a result of your [delay / cancellation]? Base: All (2,005)
[19] Q4. Which of the following best describes what happened as a result of your [delay / cancellation]? “I had to arrange overnight accommodation” selected by 20% of those who faced a cancellation (724)
[20] Q4. Which of the following best describes what happened as a result of your [delay / cancellation]? 18-24 year olds (97), 25-44 year olds (735), 45-64 year olds (714), 65+ year olds (459)

security and found himself unable to re-enter, with no airline staff in sight. Eventually, another airline helped him rebook—on a flight to London, not Manchester.

Impact:

Laurence felt completely abandoned. He was frustrated that another airline had to explain policies that his own airline never communicated. He believed early, clear communication on his rights could've helped him secure a better outcome. Instead, he borrowed money from his parents to cover new flights and a train, arriving home exhausted before his first day of work.

In his own words:

"It was crazy how airlines can just leave you to work it all out yourself. I wasn't in a position to just pay for new flights and get it back at a later date. I was walking around the airport by myself trying to find someone who might be able to help me. Eventually staff from another airline saw how distressed I was and offered to help. They were telling me what my airline would 'probably' reimburse, which wasn't that reassuring!"

Resolution – How is the disruption resolved, and correct entitlement(s) claimed by passengers?

"It's quite faceless and they hit you with quite legal sounding stuff. They use air flight terminology and talk of 'legal acts."

Cancelled Passenger, Male, 22 years old, Wales

Just over 1 in 4 are satisfied with the options available to them to resolve their disruption, whether online or in person. [21]

[21] Q18. Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with each element of your [delay / cancellation] experience? Base: All (2,005)



Q18. Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with each element of your [delay / cancellation] experience? Base: All (2,005). Percentages in the chart above are displayed in the order demonstrated in the legend, from left to right: Very satisfied to Very dissatisfied, followed by I'm not sure.

Spotlight on Compensation

Passengers have a mixed understanding of their rights to compensation versus reimbursement and often fail to claim their entitlements.

Only 10% of passengers say they are completely aware of their rights in the event of a disruption, and this falls to 2% among those who are Digitally Excluded. This confidence in rights varies by the type of disruption, gender, age and whether the passenger has a disability: [22]

- Overall, passengers who have experienced a delay are less likely to know their rights than those who have faced cancellation (6% of those who faced a delay are completely aware of their rights vs. 17% of those who faced a cancellation).
    - This may be a result of same-day cancellations being more explicitly or effectively communicated, therefore leaving customers more satisfied with airline communications while working to resolve that cancellation (39%) compared to satisfaction with airline communication amongst those who experienced a delay (34%).[23]

[22] Q29. To what extent are you aware of your rights as a traveller when it comes to facing a flight delay or cancellation? Base: All (2,005), Digitally Excluded (100), 18-24 (97), 65+ (459), passengers with disabilities (591), passengers without disabilities (1,414)
[23] Q18. Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with each element of your [delay / cancellation] experience? - The airline's communications to me while working to resolve the [delay / cancellation]. Delay (1,281) Cancellation (724).

- 18-24 year olds feel the most informed (21%) vs. 3% amongst 65+ year olds.
- Those with disabilities also feel less informed (only 7% completely aware vs. 12% of those without disabilities).

Airlines are not believed to be forthcoming with information about rights and outcomes are felt to be dependent on the individual airline's discretion.

Airlines are generally not seen to instigate the compensation (or reimbursement) process, leaving it up to passengers' own level of knowledge and proactivity.

- Airline-generated information on compensation policies is expected to be 'buried' in dense small print, which limits use of these sources.
- Many passengers become aware of their rights through word of mouth (including media stories), past experiences and 3rd party sources, such as Martin Lewis, open forums (that is Reddit) or legal firm websites.
- The reimbursement and compensation outcomes are felt to be down to each airline's discretion, with certain airlines expected to be more generous with 'payout' amounts than others.

On the other hand, stand out positive experiences involved airlines proactively distributing compensation policies and ways to claim at the same time as communicating the delay or cancellations, minimising financial worry.

"I received a link via email when I was notified of the delay. It was a link to a web page where you just upload any travel related expenses. Food, drink, whatever. It's clear what they say you can and can't get. I was able to submit my expenses at the airport, and I think I got money in my bank account the next day."

Airlines are accused of using complex compensation processes to discourage passengers claiming.

The processes to make claims are suspected to be designed to intentionally dissuade passengers and the research findings suggests that many are indeed dissuaded. Passengers report experiencing:

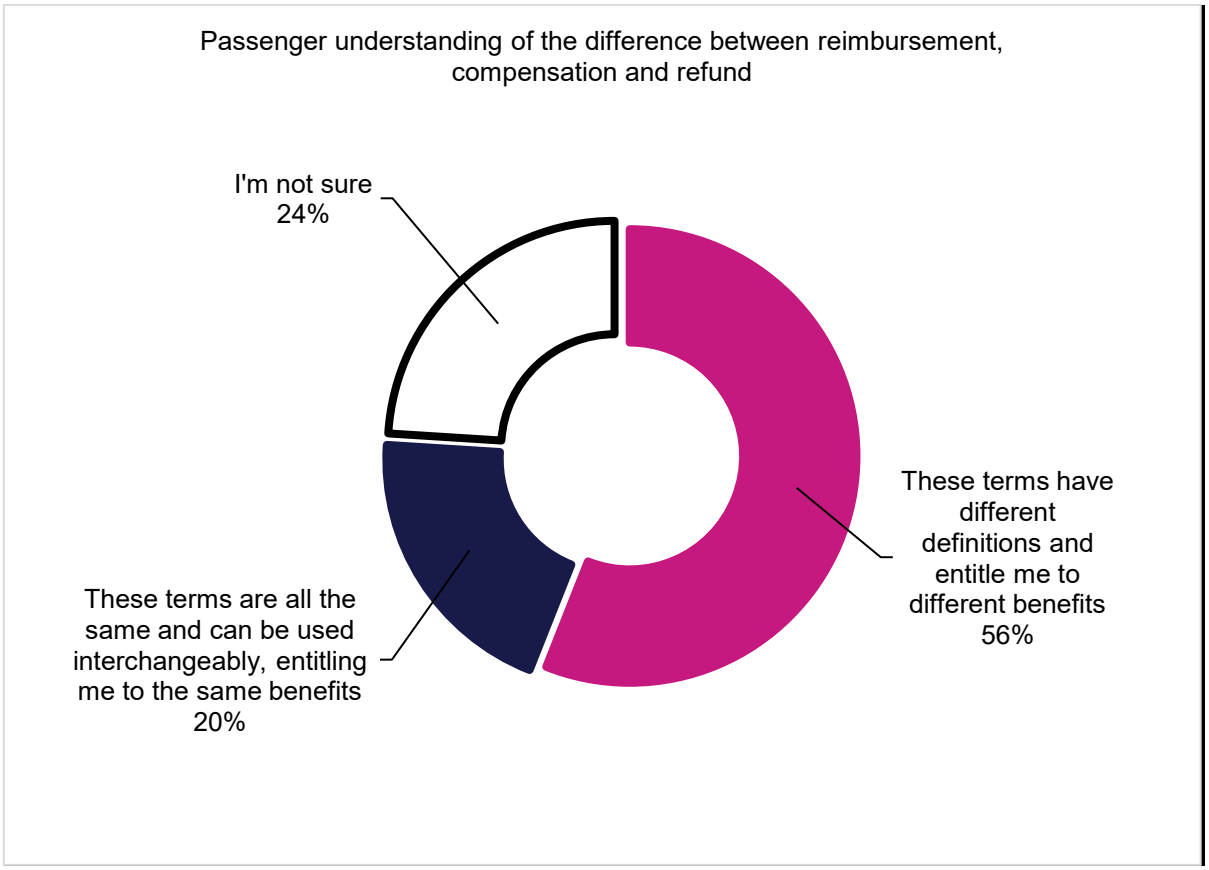
- Difficulty finding the right page / link / contact information to submit claims.
- Frustration in filling out 'needlessly' lengthy forms and the need to input significant personal or flight information.
- Airlines using paper-based methods of collecting passenger information in the event of cancellations is widely criticised, given their potential to be lost, passengers' inability to track their progress and digital barriers to scanning paper-based resources onto digital ones.

"It doesn't reassure you that your claim's going to be resolved quickly. It feels old-school. Just making it harder to actually do."

Passengers can use terminology around entitlements interchangeably, which could result in them losing out if airlines take advantage of or do not correct passengers' mistaken use of terminology.

When presented with the three terms (reimbursement, compensation and refund), only about half (56%) of passengers think these terms are distinct and entitle them to different benefits. It is important to note that these passengers have all experienced a delay or cancellation

themselves, which may make them more likely than the general population to understand the distinction between these terms. For 18–24-year-olds, awareness of the distinction between these terms drops to 38%.[24]



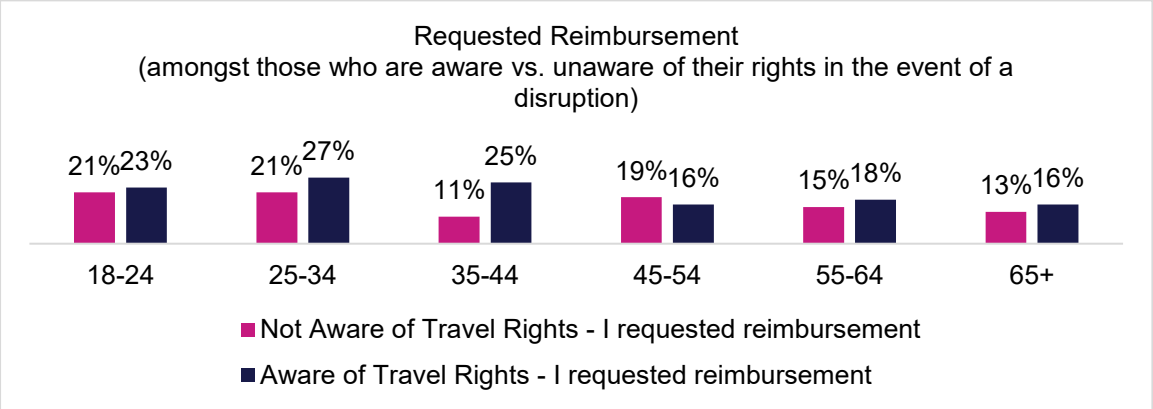
Q5. In the context of air travel, passengers who have experienced delays often refer to: compensation, reimbursements and refunds. What is your understanding of these terms? Base: All (2,005)

For those who do think there is a difference, many are unable to define what each term means when asked,[25] and others define the terms incorrectly. For example:

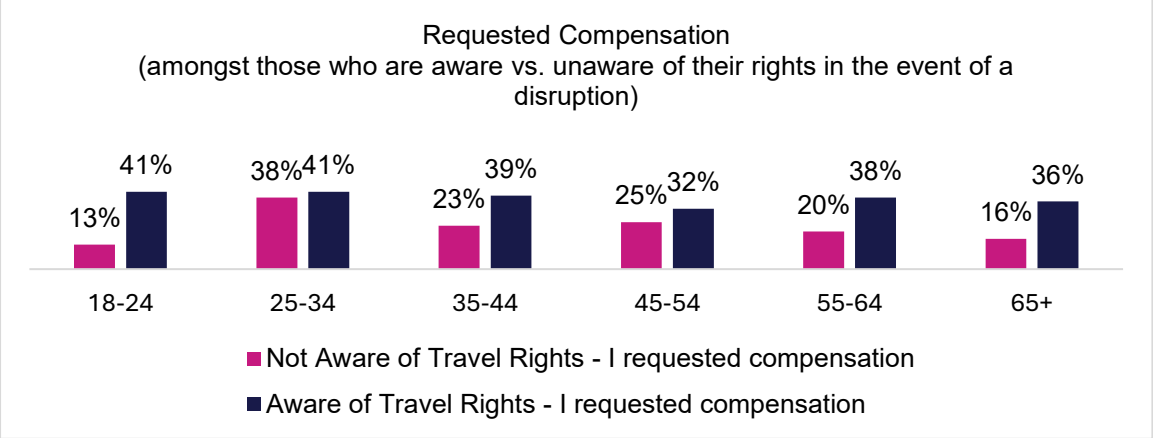
- "Compensation would be a payment towards additional costs."
- "Compensation is a limited amount based on what happened, for example, like food vouchers. Refund is the full amount and reimbursement is for having to do something and claim it back."
- "I think of refunds or reimbursements being monetary/financial in nature, but compensation is more general and can take other forms, such as receiving a benefit you can use in the future, rather than a monetary amount."
- "It seems to be totally dependent on what caused the flight delay as to what one receives in any form of compensation/ reimbursements, refunds from the airline. There doesn't seem to be a logical definition."

[24] Q5. In the context of air travel, passengers who have experienced delays often refer to: compensation, reimbursements and refunds. What is your understanding of these terms? Base: All (2,005), 18-24 year olds (97)
[25] Q6. What is your understanding of the difference between these terms (compensation, reimbursements, refunds)? Base: those who say they understand the difference between all three terms (1,135 verbatim comments)

Older passengers are less likely to be aware of their rights and are the least likely to request reimbursement.



We see the same pattern for compensation, though requests are generally higher across all groups.



Q7. We would now like to understand the steps taken to resolve your [delay /cancellation]. Below, please select whether each of the options was offered by the airline, requested by you, and ultimately received. Base: All Passengers. Aware of rights (1,034), Unaware of rights (971)

There is high potential for passengers to feel dissatisfied by compensation and reimbursement outcomes.

- Passengers are often disappointed by lower-than-expected payments which lack explanation of how their compensation or reimbursement amount has been calculated.

“It seems like potluck what you get back… There’s no explanation on how they’ve arrived at that number. It’d be great if there was some kind of automatic calculator that gives you an idea of how much you’re entitled to.”

- Compensation paid to passengers in future airline discounts or flight points is widely criticised. There are instances where this hasn’t felt like a choice and is particularly disappointing, causing the passenger to not wish to fly with the airline again.

“After the cancellation we said we’d never fly with them again, so what good is that compensation [flight points] to me”.

- In some instances, as passengers are in the midst of disruption, they receive information from customer services and staff that is then contradicted when they come to claim.

"We called their customer services, and they said, yes, you can get a private transfer and we'll refund you. Cost is £250. Next day we rang for the refund. They said, 'absolutely not, we never do this, our colleague was wrong to say that."

Despite dissatisfaction with outcomes, passengers can lack awareness of who to turn to for help and how to further escalate disputes.[26]

- Airline customer service is the most common avenue passengers are familiar with when seeking to dispute the outcome of their flight disruption (66%, increasing to 81% amongst Digitally Excluded passengers).
- Only 26% of passengers are aware of alternative dispute resolution schemes to escalate / resolve these issues. This is higher for male passengers compared to female passengers (30% vs. 21% respectively), dropping to only 9% for those who are Digitally Excluded.

Case Study: Eric (General Passenger) – Age 20, London

Flight Context:

Eric was returning from a short city break when his flight home was cancelled at short notice. The initial disruption was stressful, but what stood out most to Eric was how poorly the airline communicated after the event. While he understood that cancellations can happen, he expected better follow-up support.

What Happened:

After the cancellation, Eric quickly arranged and paid for an alternative flight with a different airline, as no rebooking options were offered that worked with his schedule. Back home, he submitted a claim via the airline's website, attaching receipts for the additional costs. Weeks went by with no update. When the airline responded—over a month later—it was a generic email acknowledging his claim, but no clear timeframe for resolution. Eric followed up twice, but each response seemed automated and vague. After a few months, he received partial compensation, but key expenses – like the replacement flight—were excluded, with no explanation.

Impact:

Eric was left feeling brushed off. What frustrated him wasn't just the out-of-pocket costs, but how impersonal and unclear the process was. The airline's lack of transparency and slow, generic communication made him feel like his case wasn't being taken seriously. By the end of the process, he had lost confidence not just in the airline's disruption handling, but in their willingness to treat customers fairly.

[26] Q30. If you are not satisfied with the outcome of your flight disruption, which of the following are you aware of that can support you to resolve the dispute? Base: All (2,005), Male passengers (1,123), Female passengers (870), Digitally Excluded (100)

In his own words:

“I didn’t expect miracles, but I did expect a proper reply. Instead, it felt like they were just hoping I’d give up.”

Follow up – What do passengers experience in the aftermath of a disruption?

“It just makes you feel seen. Of course it doesn’t change anything, but it does make you feel heard.”

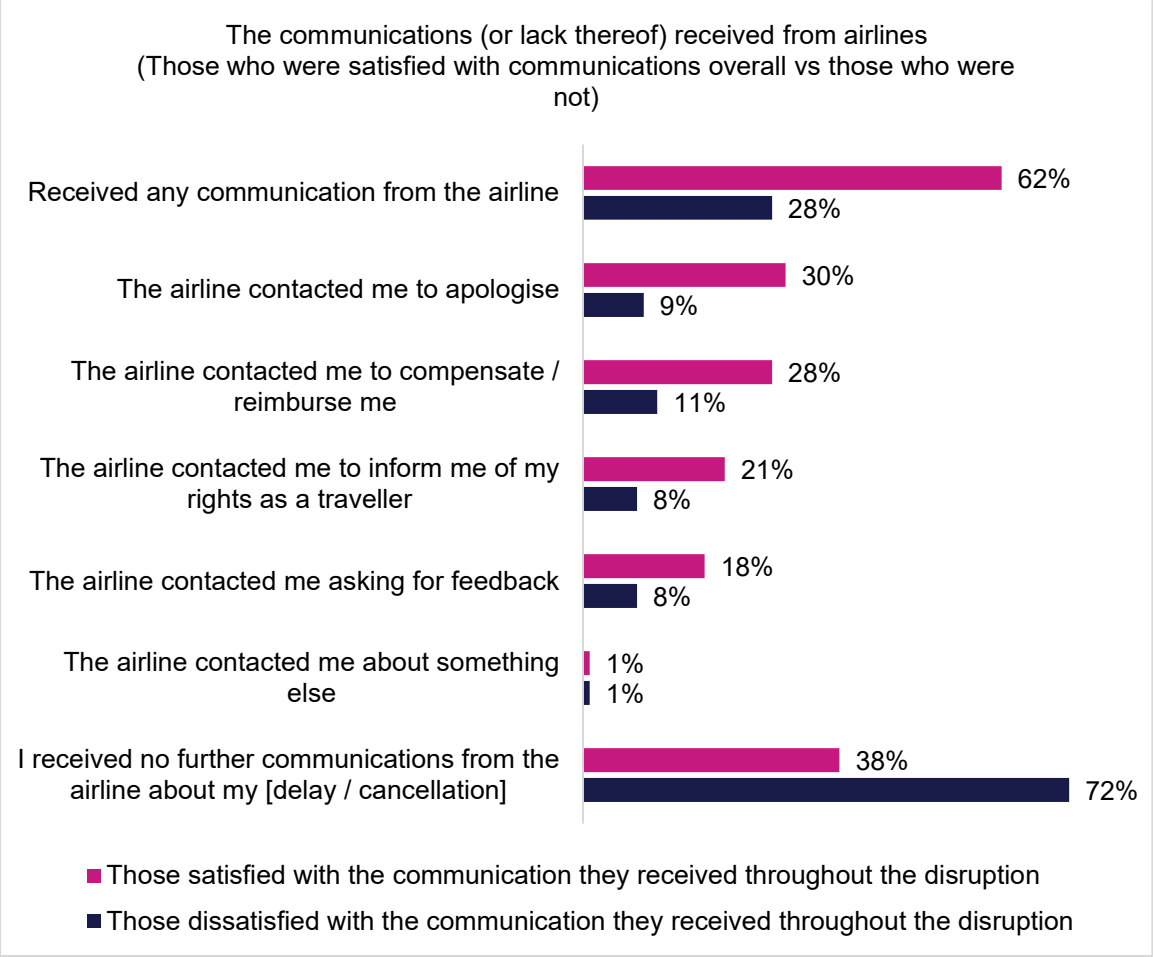
Delayed Passenger, Female, 56 years old, England

Airlines lack of follow-up communication after a disruption can amplify passenger resentment.

Passengers expect some acknowledgement of disruption and its impact on their journey, including:

- An apology for inconvenience caused
- An explanation of the cause of disruption (even if not the airlines’ fault)
- Detail on passenger rights and ways to claim

However, only 43% of passengers report hearing from their airline after the disruption – those who don’t, tend to feel airlines are trying to avoid having to pay claims.



Q17. Which of the following describe(s) the communications you received from the airline after your delay / cancellation was resolved (that is in the days / weeks following the disruption)? Base: Those satisfied with airline comms throughout (721), those dissatisfied with airline comms throughout (872)

There is a correlation between follow-up communications and overall satisfaction with communications. Those who were dissatisfied with communications are far less likely to report having received any communications from the airline at all after the disruption itself had been resolved. This suggests a very strong connection between effective follow-up communications and an overall positive lasting impression of the airline from passengers.

Equally, some passengers expressed dissatisfaction with the tone used in airline follow-up communications. In some cases, airlines attempted to inject humour into messages about disruption, which came across as making light of the situation and felt inappropriate to those affected. Additionally, some communications felt dismissive—either implying that no further response from the passenger was expected or stating that the matter was closed – despite the fact that some passengers felt their concerns remained unresolved.

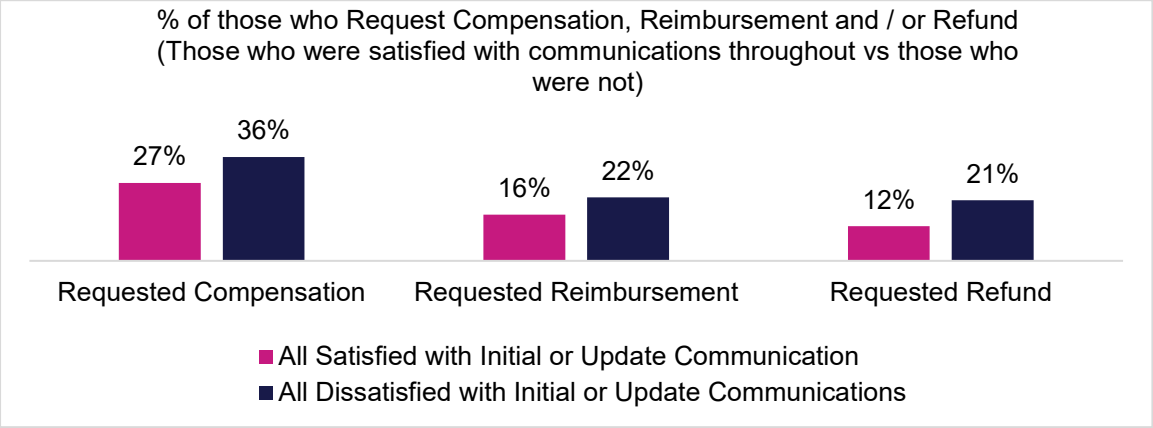
“I mean, [receiving a follow-up] doesn’t bring back that time… But it does just make you feel like they want your custom, that you’ve not been taken for granted, that they take it seriously. You never know why a person is flying and these disruptions can have a huge impact.”

Summary of experiences

It is clear that while disruption can be distressing by itself, communication can play a key role in either exacerbating or relieving passenger stress. When done well, communication

empowers passengers to make more informed decisions, take the best action for their situation and feel supported by their chosen airline.

When communication is lacking or inconsistent however, passengers may feel frustration, isolation and even panic. In fact, poor communication can actually lead to an increase in likelihood to seek compensation or reimbursement. Passengers who were satisfied with communications from airlines – either the initial communications or communications throughout disruption – are less likely to have requested compensation, reimbursement, or refunds from airlines compared to those who were dissatisfied with communications.[27]



Q18. Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with each element of your [delay / cancellation] experience? (Base: NET Satisfied 904, NET Dissatisfied: 691)

So, what does good communication look like and what do passengers need?

Through this research, we have identified passenger preferences across three key communication areas:

- Timing – when to communicate
- Content – what information people need
- Channel – how best to reach them

All three areas are important to consider and the following section of this report looks at each of these in order to draw tangible findings for all airlines to improve their service.

[27] Q7. We would now like to understand the steps taken to resolve your [delay /cancellation]. Below, please select whether each of the options was offered by the airline (compensation, reimbursement, refund)

> Section 3: Passenger needs and communication preferences

Timing preferences – When should passengers receive communications during a disruption?

"You're just sitting there waiting, penned in, afraid to leave."

Cancelled Passenger, Male, 40 years old, Wales

Communication at each stage of the delay/cancellation journey (initial notification, update and resolution) has incremental impact on satisfaction. When asked what airlines could have done to improve the passengers' experience, more detailed information (57%) and communicating more frequently (56%) were the top choices across the majority of key groups.[28]

Nearly half of passengers express dissatisfaction at how the disruption was initially communicated (45% dissatisfied) and the airline's communications while working to resolve the disruption (44% dissatisfied) – far fewer (38%) were dissatisfied with the resolution itself.[29]

Timing is key and, when disruption occurs, passengers want to know about it as soon as possible.

'It is never too early' is a common sentiment amongst passengers, who tend to want the ability to adapt their plans as soon as possible. This enables them to take better advantage of holiday time, adjust onward travel, cancel reservations, protect deposits, update family and friends of arrival expectations, notify work, manage childcare and pet arrangements, and so on.

This is particularly important for passengers with time-sensitive connecting flights, or those with accessibility arrangements as part of their onward journey.

Even before disruption occurs, passengers express a desire for airlines to promote flight tracker tools that allow travel plans to be managed early.

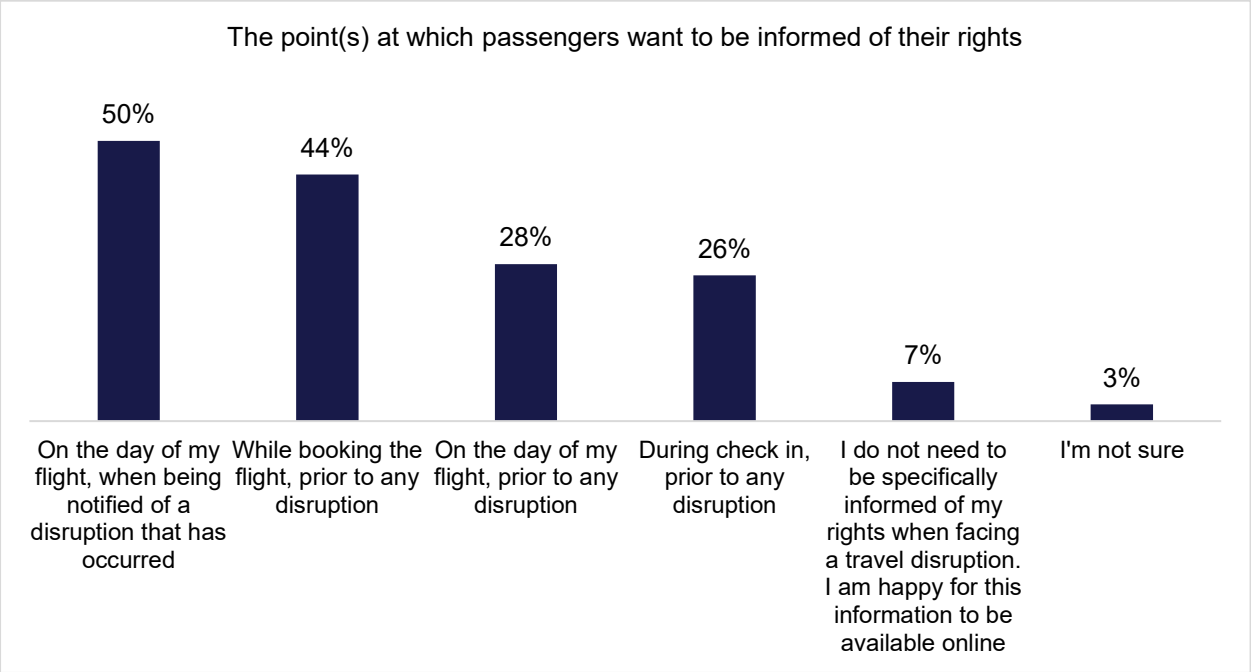
"I think it's really important for airlines to share information with their customers as soon as they receive it, just so the customer knows how to plan their journey, because it is quite difficult with delays, especially when you have family and younger kids. It's hard to keep them occupied. There are flight tracker tools nowadays, but I don't often see these being pushed."

The timing of information about passenger rights is also important to get right.

93% of passengers want their airline to communicate their rights to them at some point along the journey (as opposed to seeking that information out themselves, online). 50% would like this information upon first notification of disruption, but airlines have the opportunity to

[28] Q20. Overall, what (if anything) could the airline have done to improve your experience of the disruption? Base: All (2,005)
[29] Q18. Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with each element of your [delay / cancellation] experience? Base: All (2,005)

provide this information before disruption occurs, with 44% desiring this at the point of booking (increasing to 87% of those who are Digitally Excluded),[30] so they have a point of reference in case no communications are received during the disruption itself.



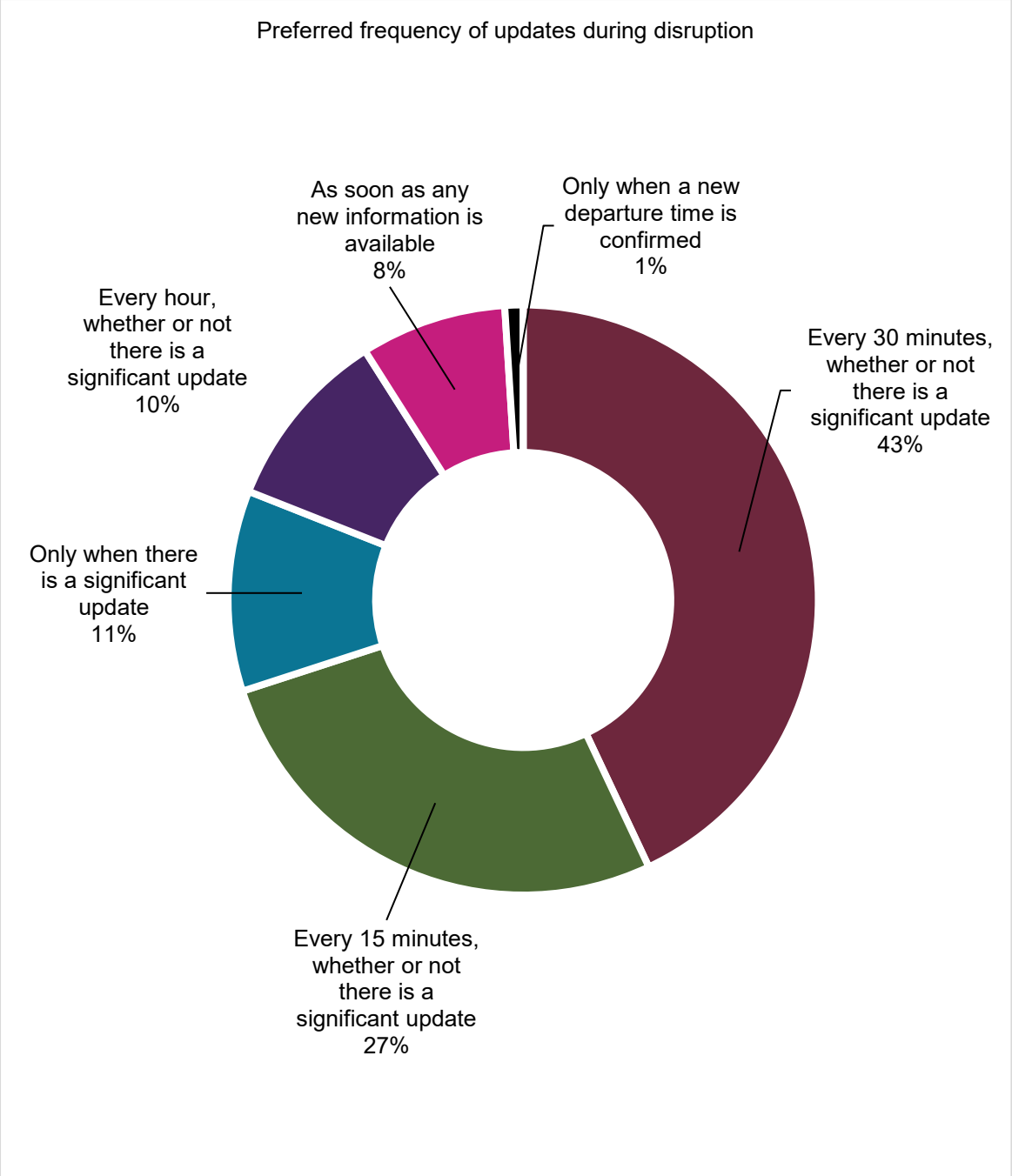
Q31. At what stage of the travel process would you prefer to be informed / reminded of your rights when facing a travel disruption? Base: All (2,005)

Once a disruption has occurred, frequency of updates is vital, even if there is no significant change to communicate to passengers.

Passengers want clarity over when they can expect to receive updates regarding their flight, with 43% saying they want to be communicated with every 30 minutes, and 27% preferring every 15 minutes.

“The number one priority for airlines when communicating travel disruptions should be constant communication. Updates should be every half an hour. It would also be good for these updates to come with reasoning, and we should be informed of how long they think that this will take to be fixed.”

[30] Q31. At what stage of the travel process would you prefer to be informed / reminded of your rights when facing a travel disruption? Base: All (2,005), Digitally Excluded (100)



Q24. How often would you like to receive these updates? Base: All (2,005)

Where possible, airlines should aim to provide disrupted passengers with advanced warning and avoid last-minute updates such as changes of gate and 'boarding now' alerts without forewarning. This is of particular importance in large hub airports, where there are longer distances between gates and where more vulnerable passengers (disabled passengers, those with children under 5 years old) may struggle to change location quickly.

"We were checking and checking the board and all it said was delay, delay, delay. Eventually after four or five hours it said 'go to gate', and we thought 'oh my god!' – we had to run back to my family and say, 'right, get your stuff together'. People were scrambling around, kids were crying. One or two elderly people were on Zimmer frames as well. The voice announcement then said 'get to gate X immediately'. People were trying to pick the bags up for the disabled people and saying, 'they won't wait for you!' – it was panic stations."

Following up the day after a disruption event can help mitigate negative sentiment

A timely, next-day follow-up can help show that airlines take accountability for passenger care and acknowledge the potential impact on people's wider journey. Yet only 43% of passengers said they received some form of follow-up communication.[31]

Content preferences – What information should be provided during disruption?

"What's happened, what's being done about it, when might it be fixed and what should I do."

Cancelled Passenger, Male, 37 years old, N. Ireland

An indication of length of delay is a priority for nearly half of passengers

81% of passengers said the length of delay or new flight time is in the top 5 most important pieces of information they want to receive when first notified about a travel disruption, with 44% of passengers rating it as the most important piece of information.

The reason for the disruption and rebooking options are a distant second and third. Only 16% of passengers with disabilities rated the availability of disability support staff in their top 5 most important pieces of information to receive, suggesting this is well covered or that even for those who have a disability, other information takes greater priority.[32]

Information type	Most important information (ranked 1st)	Ranked in the Top 5
Length of delay / new flight time	44%	81%
Reason for disruption	13%	61%
Rebooking options / next available flight to my destination	10%	50%
Any boarding gate changes	5%	38%
Refund / reimbursement / compensation eligibility	4%	49%
Refund / reimbursement / compensation process	4%	49%
Impact on connecting flights (if applicable)	4%	36%
Estimated wait times for customer service support	3%	23%
Contact details for customer service	3%	28%
Options for in-person airline support	3%	29%
Checked luggage handling information (if applicable)	2%	27%
Options for online airline support	2%	19%

[31] Q17. Which of the following describe(s) the communications you received from the airline after your [delay / cancellation] was resolved (that is in the days / weeks following the disruption)? Base: All (2,005)
[32] Q22. What are the most important pieces of information you want to receive when first notified about a travel disruption? Base: All (2,005), Disabled passengers (591)

Amongst those with disabilities	Most important information (ranked 1st)	Ranked in the Top 5
Availability of disability support staff	3%	16%

It is also important to provide context for passengers, with a clear reason for the disruption, no matter who is at fault.

Benefits to passengers include:

- Enabling passengers to judge the scale of disruption, the likely timeframe for a resolution and therefore best course of action.
- Help passengers anticipate their eligibility for reimbursement and compensation.

“It’s important for airlines to provide a reason for the delay as it gives passengers a better indication of how long/bad the delay will be. It stops frustrations and may help manage expectations.”

Whereas benefits to airlines include:

- Increased trust in airlines as passengers are more tolerant of mistakes than they are to deception.
- Reduced pressure on in-person staff, who will be more available to help those who need this most.

“Honesty is the best policy. People are generally understanding. It’s when their excuses feel tactical, or like they’re trying to control your outrage that I get really annoyed.”

As an important caveat, airlines should not provide passenger-level reasons for disruption, as this can cause others to shift blame onto a specific, identifiable individual.

“There was an issue getting my daughters mobility pram onto the plane which delayed take-off. The captain announced this was the reason on the plane and you kind of felt everyone’s eyes pointing towards us!”

Case Study: Nick (General Passenger) – Age 24, Wales

Flight Context:

Cardiff → Belfast

What Happened:

Thirty minutes before his evening flight to Belfast, Nick was informed of a mechanical issue and a one-hour delay. Knowing public transport wouldn’t be running by the time he arrived, he began looking into private travel options.

After the initial delay, he received further updates—via email and the airline’s app—that the flight was now delayed indefinitely, with no estimated departure time. Nick stayed near the gate, anxious about missing any updates.

Over two and a half hours later, staff announced that an engineer needed to be flown in from London. Later still, passengers were told the engineer's flight was delayed and eventually cancelled, as Cardiff Airport had closed for the night.

With no alternative travel offered and taxis too expensive, Nick's mother drove to collect him from Cardiff and again the next morning drove to Bristol for a rescheduled flight.

Impact:
Nick sat on the terminal floor for hours, afraid to miss an announcement. He found the experience emotionally exhausting and felt that key information—like the need to fly in an engineer—was not shared soon enough to make other arrangements.

While he received compensation for the flight and food, he didn't claim fuel costs. He left feeling misled, unsupported, and drained—believing clearer communication could have changed the experience significantly.

In his own words:

"I was frustrated that they gave me false hope by concealing information. It put my family under pressure. It just felt a bit like it was all on their terms"

As the disruption progresses, airlines should proactively communicate the options available to passengers

Frustration peaks when resolutions appear to be dependent on passengers' proactivity or else left to chance.

- Passengers expect airlines to proactively offer solutions and guide them through next steps, rather than shifting blame, passing them off to other parties, or leaving them to resolve issues on their own.

"Airlines have to take responsibility to look after their customers and not look at a holiday like a ticket. They can't just be abandoned." Financially vulnerable

- However, while passengers firmly want airlines to offer solutions to their delay or cancellation, they expect more than one option to be available so they can make an informed choice.

"They should definitely give people options. Absolutely. Because there might be some people that would rather go home and fly the next day. There might be a particular reason they've chosen that airline or time." Carer

Beyond functional information, airlines should also provide more meaningful demonstrations of empathy across the journey.

Perceived insincerity of apologies can stoke or ignite passenger anger. Airlines can reduce this through:

- Acknowledging the potential impact of a disruption to passengers, both during and after the event.
- Considering passenger comfort throughout the process – for example where they are held, and sign-posting available facilities, food and drink provisions.

- Catering to different customer circumstances and providing additional support for those with specific needs, that is disabled passengers, elderly and less mobile passengers, and those travelling with young children.

Empathy should not be mistaken for light-heartedness. Airlines should adopt a professional and respectful tone in follow-up communications to convey that they take the disruption seriously. Attempts at humour or overly casual language can undermine a passenger's experience and should be avoided.

"And remembering passengers are people... in my view, someone should have come round and checked if there were maybe older people or maybe people with young children who might have needed maybe just a bit more TLC or anybody with special needs."

Be transparent and forthcoming about entitlement to help passengers confidently navigate and understand their rights.

Passengers have limited awareness of their rights in the event of a disruption and confusion is compounded by a lack of communication from airlines.

Passengers want earlier, airline-driven promotion of their policies around refunds, compensation and reimbursement, especially on when policies come into effect (that is after a specific length of delay).

Communication of reimbursement and compensation policies needs greater clarity, particularly around:

- What items are reimbursable (for example outside of food and drink, medication, other essentials like toothpaste, deodorant).
- Providing firm limits for reimbursable spending, rather than subjective terms such as 'reasonable' spending.
- Providing an opportunity for passengers to explain during the claims process where it was not possible to meet these definitions, such as where choice is severely limited.
- Providing estimated timeframe for pay-out, allowing passengers to judge whether they can afford unexpected expenses and how best to finance these (that is debit versus credit card, versus help from friends or family).
- Considering financially vulnerable audiences who may need a pre-paid voucher system.
- Ensuring the status of a claim is communicated to minimise extended periods of concern.

Failure to reassure passengers can result in passengers going without basic essentials.

"I would assume that airlines are hoping that you don't claim and that's why they don't proactively do it. Whatever proportion of people don't bother to claim they probably make back in paying everyone else. But realistically, if you're entitled to it, why not just send them an email saying you're entitled to 200 quid because you're on this flight."

Ensure all communications are clearly identifiable and easy to navigate, to help passengers in these high-stress, low-headspace moments

Airline communications should be clearly identifiable to promote trust in its contents:

- Ensure communication is in-keeping with airline brand guidelines and looks official.

- Reference flight number and ensure it is sufficiently personalised to passenger details to prove it is genuine.
- Provide a mechanism to follow up and check validity of communications to ensure it is genuine, that is, link to flight tracker.

“I do think about whether it’s a scam when you get a text. Showing the flight number is a pretty good reassurance it isn’t.”

They should also be easy to read to aid comprehension of what can be complex information.

- Clear and simple with visual aids to ensure passengers can easily find relevant info, for example, chunking, bold headers, use of colour to highlight key information.
- Minimise steps that passengers must take by proactively providing key links.
- Avoid jargon and unnecessarily dense and complex language.

“What I got was nicely laid out on the app. I got a notification saying it was delayed, that they’re sorry and laid out every potential scenario and at the top of the screen it would always tell me where I needed to be, like at the gate, or if I could go back.”

There is potential for the CAA to become a more publicly accessible authority on passenger rights and entitlement in air travel disruption

Passengers feel they are at the mercy of airlines and seek someone to be in their corner to provide clearly defined rules and a point of escalation.

Given low awareness of aviation regulatory bodies, passengers express interest in airlines promoting links to the CAA website and CAA information sheets as a concise, clear 3rd party outline of passenger rights.

There is potential to alert passengers to their rights via communications at airports in relevant spaces, that is, ‘cheat sheets’ and QR code to more info at check-in and transfer desks.

Further resources could include a compensation calculator, specific guides for different scenarios, step-by-step process to claim, letter templates, customer support, which are currently being crowdsourced in places like Reddit and Money Saving Expert.

“I don't know whether the CAA is, like when you go to Ofgem and Ofcom and all the regulation is all there. But the CAA should outline that in these instances you are able to claim xyz. I wouldn't think to go to them on my own.”

“The airline could say, for further information, here's a link to the CAA pages that could then tell you your options and give the letter templates to use.”

Case Study: Petra (General Passenger) – Age 41, South East

Flight Context:

Petra was flying home from New York to London with her family when their return flight was cancelled just hours before departure. The cancellation came without clear explanation, and communication at the airport was minimal. Staff directed passengers to rebook online or wait overnight for the next departing flight the next day but gave no details on next steps or

passenger entitlements. With no alternative flight that day and no support offered, Petra had no choice but to arrange and pay for another night in a hotel.

What Happened:

Out of pocket and unsure of her rights, Petra covered the cost of the extra night's accommodation—about £250—as well as meals for her family. Once back in London, she visited the airline's website and submitted a claim using their delay and disruption form.

It took four months before she received a response from the airline, agreeing to reimburse some of the expenses, including the hotel and meals, but nothing for the cancelled flight or any acknowledgment of the disruption and inconvenience caused.

Impact:

Petra felt she had been dismissed. The long silence and lack of clear follow-up left her feeling ignored, with no sense of where to turn next. The airline didn't offer a way to escalate the issue, and Petra didn't feel confident that any further attempts to contact them would lead anywhere. It left her with the impression that the power was entirely in the airline's hands, and that there was little she could do to challenge how her situation was handled.

In her own words:

"I'm at a loss, this was 7 months ago and the airline has just stopped replying to me."

Channel preferences – How to reach passengers during a disruption?

"I don't think they can overcommunicate. They should cover every channel so passengers have no excuse of saying they missed it."

Delayed Passenger, Male, 21 years old, England

Across the journey, take an inclusive, cross-channel approach to meet all passenger needs

There is no one channel that meets all passenger needs, with a range of abilities, preferences and circumstances. A multi-channel approach is important to ensure communications reach the largest groups of people.

"All information regarding the passengers' flight should be communicated via all technology avenues. Text, email and a phone call should this be necessary. Thinking of the elderly who are not always up to speed with smart phones a phone call would help."

For initial communication, passengers predominantly want to receive an SMS text from their airline in combination with email and in-person airport screens.

- SMS text is the top preferred channel for initial notification as they pop up on all mobiles (including non-smartphones) and are not dependent on availability of Wi-Fi

and data. 64%[33] of passengers would like text alerts and this is highest amongst passengers over 45 years old (with around 70% preferring this channel vs. 53% of 18–24-year-olds). Text is the 2nd preference for those who are Digitally Excluded (77%), behind airport screens (84%).

“I'd say a text message just in case somehow there was no Internet signal but you still had mobile signal, even a text just to flag you have been sent comms elsewhere for example check your app!”

- Email is acceptable when disruption is flagged far in advance but can be easily missed for first notification.

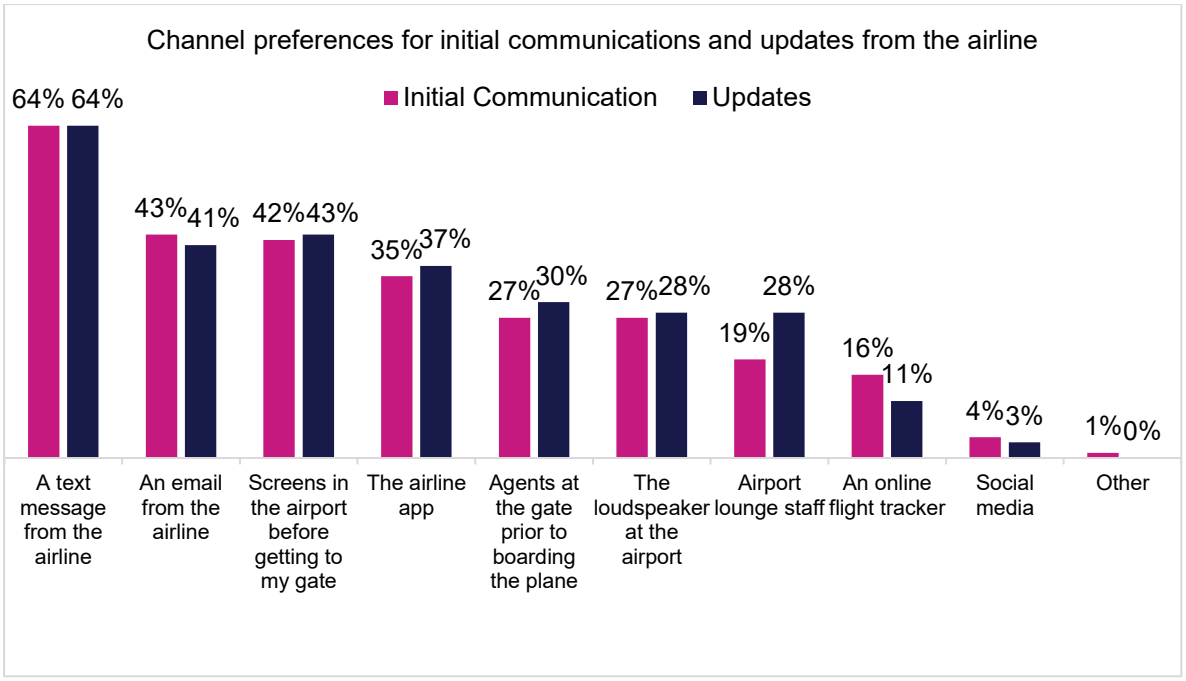
“When managing multiple responsibilities like getting my children to the airport, checking emails is often not feasible during such hectic moments, and a text would be more immediate and accessible."

“I get so many emails so I do not have notifications on, so this would likely be missed on its own”

- Airport board communications are an effective flag for those monitoring them, especially for older and less digitally confident passengers, however on their own do not give enough information and can be easy to miss.
- Airline apps are used by some passengers who appreciate the ease and ‘live’ nature of airline apps, but not all passengers use them. Older and less digitally engaged passengers opt to never use them. Some people aren’t always able to access them due to a lack of Wi-Fi when overseas. No key groups rate airline apps as the top 2 preferred channel for initial communication.

“My experience would be that I would use apps and I have checked apps of airlines that I'm flying on regularly, but they're not always up to date so you just can’t trust them.”

[33]Q21. Please think about the next time you may experience a flight delay (not a cancellation) on the day of your flight. Via which channel(s) would you prefer to be first notified about delays? Base: All (2,005), Digitally Excluded (100)



Q21. Please think about the next time you may experience a flight delay (not a cancellation) on the day of your flight. Via which channel(s) would you prefer to be first notified about delays? Base: All (2,005)

Q23. After being first notified of your delay, how would you prefer to receive updates about your delay? Base: All (2,005)

For updates while waiting, passengers prefer the combination of SMS text and in-person airport screens[34]

Passengers actively look to multiple sources for confirmation and airlines shouldn't rely solely on departure boards.

Regarding updates, passengers aged 18-44 years old prefer digital channels, however passengers aged 45+ years old prefer a blend of off and online.

- SMS text continues to be preferred as a reliable communication channel, with 64% of passengers saying this is their preferred channel for updates, where timely updates can be received irrespective of access to Wi-Fi and data.
- Airport board communication can help passengers stay up to date while at the airport, and is seen to be the most accurate information on where they should be and any last-minute updates, for example change of gate. 43% of passengers prefer this as a secondary channel.

"I just look at the board... It's probably a bit old fashioned; I just tend to look at boards and find out what's going on that way."

- Airline email follows closely behind screens at the airport (41%) in terms of preference, and are more important to 25-44 year olds than other age groups.
- Airline applications have a mixed reception. For 18-24 year olds and passengers with children, the airline app is one of the two preferred channels for updates. 18-44 year-

[34] Q23. After being first notified of your delay, how would you prefer to receive updates about your delay? Base: All (2,005)

olds are more likely to prefer airline application and airline email over in-airport communications.

Cancellation communications and the route to rebook also see a mix of channel preferences.

In the event of a same-day cancellation,[35] those under 24 years old and those with children prefer the combination of SMS text and the airline app, however all other key groups (passengers over 25 years old, those who have a disability) prefer to receive communication by SMS text and email.

Email is more relevant for cancellation vs. delay,[36] as passengers appreciate a more formal paper trail.

Where a passenger needs to be rebooked, the majority of passengers navigate to online channels, potentially due to the lack of in-person staff or as a way to bypass long queues.

- Passengers under 55 years old prefer to book directly via the airline's online channels.
- However, those 65+ years old, Digitally Excluded and disabled passengers prefer in-person routes to rebook. When asked if in-person support wasn't available, nearly all those who originally preferred in-person support would transition to an online rebooking channel, with the exception of Digitally Excluded, where 84% preferred airline telephone rebooking service.

"Human interaction is crucial for effective communication... It's already a stressful situation so direct communication with a staff member provided me clarity about the next steps."

Preferred rebooking options[37]	TOTAL	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+	Digitally Excluded
Airline website / In-app rebooking support	50%	55%	58%	60%	55%	48%	33%	6%
In person	41%	36%	32%	34%	39%	45%	55%	64%
Airline telephone rebooking service	8%	10%	11%	6%	6%	6%	10%	26%
Other	1%	-	-	-	-	1%	2%	4%

[35] Q25. And now, imagine your flight has been cancelled. Via which channel(s) would you prefer to be notified about cancellations that happen on the day of your flight? Base: All (2,005)
[36] Q25. And now, imagine your flight has been cancelled. Via which channel(s) would you prefer to be notified about cancellations that happen on the day of your flight? Base: All (2,005)
[37] Q27. If it is necessary to rebook your flight, what is your preferred method of doing so?

Preferred rebooking options (if in-person not available)[38]	Total	55-64	65+	Digitally Excluded
Airline website / in app rebooking support	70%	69%	60%	14%
Airline telephone rebooking service	29%	29%	38%	84%
Other	1%	2%	2%	2%

Communications must be delivered consistently across channels, allowing passengers to engage with the one that meets their needs

Mixed messages prompt confusion and undermine trust in that the airline.

It is essential to ensure consistency across channels:

- Information must be consistent across digital and in-person channels to avoid confusion which increases pressure on staff.
- Airline and airport touchpoints must be joined up, with consistent information.

“Even before we went to the airport the app was saying one thing and, and when you got to the airport, boards were saying another. So yes, have all those lines of communication, but they have to be consistent and be telling you the same thing. Because we were sat in the bar at that airport thinking, well which one do we believe?”

Consider offering passengers an option to choose their preferred channel at point of booking:

- Passengers are also open to selecting their communication preferences in the event of disruption at point of booking.
- Those who are confident and prefer to engage digitally should be able to do so, while those who require or prefer in-person help should be allowed to find a resolution at the desk.
- This would mean shorter queues, and speedier service and support for those who need it.

"I think that they should be sending the notice of the delay as soon as they know to us, to the email address and phone number, whatever way you have put your details in when buying the tickets, they should be sending that notice of delay to the registered email and registered phone number."

[38] Q28. If in person support is not available, what is your preferred method of rebooking your flight?

Case Study: Andy (General Passenger) – Age 63, Scotland

Flight Context:

United States → Gatwick

What Happened:

After first learning of the delay through the departure board, he was advised to check the airline application for further information.

Andy usually relies on airline apps for check-in and live updates, but during this disruption, he was travelling without a roaming data plan. Every refresh of the app to check for flight updates incurred extra charges and Wi-Fi at the airport wouldn't connect. To make matters worse, he received no text messages or emails from the airline.

The updates provided through the app were sparse and unclear. After spending £10–15 on mobile data just to stay informed, Andrew eventually lost faith in the app's usefulness.

With no reliable updates coming through, he ended up depending on departure boards, which provided no information on expected departure until it was announced gates were boarding.

Impact:

Andy was frustrated that the airline didn't appear to have an established communications channel. Each channel re-directed him to another and offered no additional information.

In his own words:

"No doubt that we're sold this [the app] as being a great way to communicate with passengers, but actually old school is probably a bit better... I think I would have much preferred to have received a text because they seem to manage better overseas"

Summary of communication preferences

What does good communication look like and what do passengers need?

Through this research, we have identified passenger preferences across three key communications areas:

Timing – when to communicate

- When disruption occurs, inform passengers as soon as possible – the earlier the better
- After the 1st notification, ensure a consistent flow of information via frequent 30-minute updates and provide a timely follow-up

Content – setting expectations and providing what information people need

- First and fore-most, passengers want to know 'the expected or likely length of delay or new flight time' to be able to replan and prioritise next steps.
- Provide context for passengers, even if airline is at fault
    - Providing a reason for disruption is not just a nice to have, but essential for passengers to be able to make informed choices on next steps (that is

whether to eat, stock up on provisions, wait in more comfortable areas, or consider logistics of alternative travel arrangements).

- As the disruption progresses, proactively facilitate a solution and empower passengers to choose an option that works for them
    - Frustration peaks when resolutions appear dependent on a passenger's own proactivity or left to chance, leaving some passengers feeling powerless.
- Set expectations on what the airline will do and what the passenger is expected to do throughout the disruption and beyond.
    - For example, it must be made clear whether the airline will provide food vouchers or expects passengers to pay for their meals and reclaim.
- Be transparent and forthcoming about passenger entitlement and duty of care
    - Passengers have limited awareness of their rights in the event of a disruption and confusion is compounded by a lack of communication from airlines.
    - Clearly communicate what passengers should expect and do in the event of disruption. If vouchers have been issued (for example for food or accommodation), confirm this upfront or if passengers are expected to pay and reclaim, make it clear and provide guidance on reasonable limits (for example daily spend caps).
    - Provide guidance if the airline will handle rebooking or if passengers need to rebook themselves and reclaim, providing clear instructions and any relevant criteria.
- Demonstrate empathy across the journey
    - While an airline apology is expected by passengers, many don't see this as genuine and it 'means little' in isolation after the event.
- Ensure all communications are clearly identifiable and easy to navigate
    - Passengers can be concerned about scams and want to make sure information is genuine. While passengers are hungry for information, they are also in a high-stress headspace where complex content can overwhelm.

Channel – how best to reach them

- Take an inclusive cross-channel approach, especially at initial notification
    - There is no one channel that meets all passenger needs, with a range of passenger abilities, preferences and circumstances. So, it is felt that for these types of important, time-critical messages, airlines should use as many channels as possible.
- Ensure consistency across channels, allowing passengers to engage with the one that meets their needs
    - When all passengers on a flight are forced to engage with one channel it can result in a high stress environment and lengthy waiting times. Mixed messages prompt confusion and undermine trust in the accuracy of information.
    - Consider asking passengers what their communication preference is as part of the booking process.

> Section 4: Appendix

Methodology Overview

Our research programme consisted of five phases:

1) Desk Research

   Internal audit of openly accessible data and resources such as airline websites, social media posts and reports regarding airline policy and passenger experiences of travel disruption. This stage contextualised and focused development of primary research materials.

2) Online Community

   5-day online pre-task where 60 passengers affected by air travel disruption log their experiences of disruption, airline or airport communication received throughout this time and impact disruption had on their journey and beyond. Respondents that completed the online community were then scheduled to participate in online moderated interviews.

3) Virtual group interviews

   12 groups (consisting of 4 respondents in each, 48 in total from the online community) participated in 90-minute online interviews with other passengers to review their experiences of disruption and share combined preferences for airline communications.

4) Virtual Vulnerable audience depths

   For those identifying as vulnerable (that is, digitally vulnerable, financially vulnerable, disabled, or as a carer), we offered 60-minute online depth interviews (that is 1 to 1 interviews). For those unable to access/use digital devices to conduct interviews, we offered in-person interviews.

5) Quantitative Survey

   2,005 passengers affected by air travel disruption in the past 5 years recruited via Yonder Data Solutions' research panel completed a 15-minute online survey about their experience of disruption and their needs and preferences should they experience disruption in the future. 100 interviews were conducted via Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) to ensure full inclusivity of the sample.

Sample

The sample for this research was designed in collaboration between Yonder and the CAA. Development of the qualitative sample aimed to maximise diversity of voices while over-representing groups of vulnerable passengers for whom the impact of disruption is likely to be more significant. The quantitative sample was designed to be nationally representative of the UK population based on region (England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales) and age.

General Passenger Sample

Our sample frame ensured equal inclusion of those who had experienced delays versus cancellations to their flight. We also ensured equal representation of passenger age cohorts, and their combined household income to ensure diversity of insight across the sample.

General Passenger Qualitative Sample Grid

N	Delay / Cancellation	Age	Combined Household Income	N
1	Delay	18-24	Higher Household Income	4 respondents
2	Delay	18-24	Lower Household Income	4 respondents
3	Delay	25-54	Higher Household Income	4 respondents
4	Delay	25-54	Lower Household Income	4 respondents
5	Delay	55+	Higher Household Income	4 respondents
6	Delay	55+	Lower Household Income	4 respondents
7	Cancellation	18-24	Higher Household Income	4 respondents
8	Cancellation	18-24	Lower Household Income	4 respondents
9	Cancellation	25-54	Higher Household Income	4 respondents
10	Cancellation	25-54	Lower Household Income	4 respondents
11	Cancellation	55+	Higher Household Income	4 respondents
12	Cancellation	55+	Lower Household Income	4 respondents

TOTAL: n=48

Delay: All experienced a flight delay exceeding 2 hours in the past 12 months.

Cancellation: All experienced a cancellation to a flight in the past 12 months and were notified of the cancellation on the same day of the scheduled flight.

Combined Household Income (CHI): Defined as the combined gross income of the respondent's household before Tax and National Insurance deductions. Higher income households and lower income households were determined by the below income brackets:

Higher vs Lower	Single (no children)	Cohabitating (no children)	Single (1 child)	Cohabitating (1 child)	Single (2+ children)	Cohabitating (2+ children)	N=
Higher CHI	£35K+	£40K+	£40K+	£45K+	£50K+	£60K+	24
Lower CHI	Up to £35K	Up to £40K	Up to £40K	Up to £45K	Up to £50K	Up to £60K	24

Vulnerable Audience Qualitative Sample and Definition

We included a separate sample of n12 identifying as vulnerable audiences. For vulnerable groups, we recruited a roughly even mix of disruption type (delay versus cancellation) and natural fallout of age and combined household income, where relevant.

Vulnerability	Definition	N
Financial Vulnerability	Have either household income under or equal to £16,000 and be on universal credit OR single (not cohabitating) with children and have a household income under or equal to £30,000 and self-identify with at least 3 statements related to financial challenges.	3
Digitally Vulnerable	Go online less than 4 times a week, can do between 0-3 online activities (related to basic online tasks such as online banking, shopping) confidently online, has no internet access or no devices which enable online access, and struggle using digital devices or navigating digital interfaces due to limited technology skills or confidence.	3
Disabled	Passengers self-identified as living with at least one of the following conditions: Physical disability, non-visible health conditions, mental health condition, learning difficulties, visual impairment or neurodivergent.	3
Carer	Responsible for providing care for known passenger on day they experienced delay / cancellation. Care can be due to passenger medical condition, disability, mental health condition or age-related issues (not young children).	3

TOTAL: n=12

General Qualitative Recruitment Criteria

Through recruitment, we aimed to capture a broadly representative mix of UK demographics. This included nationally proportionate representation of ethnicity, gender and religion.

In addition, we set recruitment quotas for additional factors that could influence the impact of travel disruption, including:

- 15 passengers who were travelling with children (under 5 years old) at time of experiencing disruption
- A mix of different departure and arrival airports.
- A mix of airlines passengers were flying with when they experienced the disruption.
- Mix of passengers' occupations that allow flexible and non-flexible working.
- Equal split of disruption occurring on outbound or return journey.
- Mix of distance from airport to passengers' home, or temporary accommodation.

To ensure we captured a broad range of experiences, we recruited people through market research recruiters, using their existing panel of respondents as well as community networks to target Digitally Excluded, financial vulnerable groups, carers and disabled respondents. All participants could decline the interview at any point and received a payment to thank them for their time and contribution to the project.

Methodology in Detail

Desk Research

The desk research phases focused on auditing existing airline communications to establish existing patterns, themes and reports to contextualise our primary research. This included reviewing airline website information on disruption policies, social media feeds and other open-source data on airline disruption experiences.

Qualitative Methodology

Online Community

The first part of the qualitative phase was an online community pre-task. Fieldwork for this phase took place between the 5th February – 9th February 2025. The online community involved respondents logged onto a virtual platform and completed a number of pre-set activities, designed by Yonder, in collaboration with the CAA. The tasks asked respondents to recall their recent experiences of air travel disruption and map out positive and negative events. Respondents were able to upload real-life examples of the communications they received while experiencing disruption and review its effectiveness.

Digitally vulnerable respondents did not participate in the online community, instead completing paper-based pre-tasks.

Online Group Interviews

Following successful completion of the online community, respondents were invited to join one of twelve virtual group (12 groups consisting of 4 respondents) interviews scheduled between the 11th – 13th February 2025.

Virtual group interviews lasted 90-minutes and were conducted via Zoom tele-conferencing calls.

For vulnerable audiences, we conducted 12x60-minute one-on-one depth interviews and offered to conduct these online, over the phone or in-person, depending on the respondent's preference.

The interviews were conversational, following a structured discussion guide which was agreed with the CAA, and explored respondents' experience of air disruption with reference to insight they had shared in the online community.

Topics covered in the online interviews included exploring the impact of airline communication on passenger satisfaction and ability to take appropriate action. We then explored passenger preferences in the event of disruption and key 'trigger points' across specific stages where need for effective communication is more pronounced.

Quantitative Survey

The quantitative phase of the programme validated insights from the qualitative phase and helped gather broader data on consumer preferences for communications during

disruptions. To ensure comprehensive representation, we recommended a robust sample size of 2,100 respondents, utilising a mixed methodology approach.

Online Survey (15-minute survey)

2,005 respondents were recruited via Yonder Data Solutions' research panel. All respondents have travelled from the UK or returned to the UK and experienced a flight delay within the past 5 years. The sample was nationally representative across age and region. The vulnerable audiences were based on natural fallout.

The online survey was live between 14th March and 21st March 2025. CATI fieldwork was conducted between 24th March and 3rd April.

Region (Nationally Representative)	n=
North East	80
North West	220
Yorkshire and The Humber	164
East Midlands	146
West Midlands	175
East of England	189
London	261
South East	277
South West	173
Scotland	168
Wales	94
NI	58

Age (Nationally Representative)	n=
18-24	211
25-34	339
35-44	327
45-54	335
55-64	321
65+	472

Income (Natural Fallout)	n=
Higher (details in qual sample outline)	1119
Lower (details in qual sample outline)	878

Sex (Nationally Representative)	n=
Male	1103
Female	889

Delay/cancellation (Natural Fallout)	n=
Experienced a delay in the past 5 years	1267
Experienced a same-day cancellation in the past 5 years	738

Family vs non-family (Natural Fallout)	n=
Travelled with children under 5	125
Did not travel with children under 5	77

Airline (Natural Fallout)	n=
European	1352
Others	653

Journey (Natural Fallout)	n=
Outbound	965
Inbound	1040

Time taken to get to airport (Natural Fallout)	n=
Less than 3 hours	1684
Over 3 hours	220
None – connecting flight	80

Vulnerability (Natural Fallout)	n=
Financial	234
Disability (mental, physical)	591
Digital	CATI n=100
Technological Comfortability (Less confident)	112

Tables display weighted figures; nationally representative based on region and age.

Supplementary CATI Interviews (20-minute survey)

100 interviews were conducted via Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI), as a boost amongst those who conduct limited standard activities online (for instance, managing their finances/ banking, looking for information on leisure activities, used streaming services and so on.), using Ofcom's Narrow Internet User definition.

This approach ensures full inclusivity of the sample, enhancing the overall reliability of the findings and end impact for travellers.