Informed traveller investigation

Information for passengers – March 2018 review

25 May 2018

Summary

In February, Network Rail said it was not able to finalise train timetables until six rather than the normal 12 weeks in advance. Therefore, on 23 February 2018 ORR wrote[1] to Managing Directors of the Train Operating Companies (TOCs) regarding Licence Condition 4 of the Passenger Licence (the licence) which requires TOCs to provide appropriate, accurate and timely information to allow passengers to plan and make their journeys with a reasonable degree of assurance. We set out our expectations for compliance with the licence under three broad principles that we expected them to follow while the online timetables for passengers are unreliable and potentially subject to late change. The industry is already working to make improvements in passenger information by delivering a number of agreed initiatives; the Passenger Information During Disruption (PIDD) industry actions. Rather than create new tasks we have linked into the existing actions where possible, although it is recognised that some of the outstanding industry actions remain aspirational.

As part of our close working relationship with Transport Focus we agreed that ORR would concentrate on capability issues, reporting on whether TOCs are able to deliver the principles. In turn, Transport Focus would carry out complementary work[2] examining the impact on the individual passenger by looking at a detailed level for incorrect journeys that are in journey planners. This joint working was intended to provide a complete picture of the impact on passengers.

We established a framework designed to monitor TOCs performance against each of the principles. An initial check of all TOC websites was made at the end of March 2018. We found that:

- Few changes had been made to retailing websites to take account of the issue with longer term timetables (e.g. that the train times shown may not be confirmed or that advance tickets may not have yet been released). The majority of TOC ticket engines do not provide warning icons or messaging when the train service is liable to change. This is despite warnings being shown on the National Rail Enquiries[3] (NRE) website.

- The NRE website has a week by week breakdown[4] by TOC to show which times are confirmed and which may change. However, this information is not referred to or available on TOC websites.

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[1] http://orr.gov.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0020/27047/licence-condition-4-letter-to-toc-managing-directors-2018-02-23.pdf

[2] https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/advance-notice-rail-engineering-works-update/

[3] National Rail Enquiries is part of the Rail Delivery Group (RDG), which provides business services to TOCs.

[4] http://www.nationalrail.co.uk/service_disruptions/184755.aspx

■ For weekday peak time planned engineering work that may result in the closure of lines or stations the messaging is lost amongst other engineering work that may be taking place overnight. TOC websites are likely to show that a "good service" is operating with no mention of the network closures.

As many of the TOC owning groups share similar websites/ticket engines, we focussed our next steps on one TOC from each group; Chiltern (Arriva), GWR (First Group), and Greater Anglia (Abellio). We met with each to understand whether there is any confusion or misunderstanding regarding our expectations in this area, and to discuss what changes they plan to make to the information about their services to ensure that passengers are kept informed.

On 8 May 2018 we wrote[5] again to TOC Managing Directors to set out the main areas of concern identified from our monitoring against the principles. We asked that they explain what they have done and intend to do to improve the information provided to passengers, and to highlight any barriers that are preventing them from making all the improvements.

Next steps

We asked TOC Managing Directors to reply to our letter by 21 May. These responses will be published on the ORR website. We will undertake another assessment of TOC compliance with the principles in June/July to establish whether improvements have been made and consider what further action is appropriate in the light of the results.

This document sets out our initial findings. It covers the period March to 6 April and proposed next steps under each of the principles.

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[5] http://orr.gov.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/27670/licence-condition-4-letter-to-toc-managing-directors-2018-05-08.pdf

Breakdown by principle

Principle 1 – train operators should be open about the impact on all passengers of the challenges they face and take responsibility for ensuring that their passengers can get the information they need to plan and make their journey as that information becomes available

1 (a) – passengers should not have to look at multiple sources of information to get the information that they need; information should be aligned across all channels. It should be obvious from the train operator or third party ticket engine/journey planner if the journey presented is not the normal one. For example if there is a replacement bus or the journey takes longer than normal or is diverted.

What we expect

A consistent message should be provided between NRE and the TOC website. Passengers who go direct to the ticket engine should get the same information as those who go via the website. Messaging that is attached to specific trains or incidents on the NRE website should also be shown on the TOC website.

What we did

We checked TOC journey planners against NRE for journeys that were known to be flagged in NRE or where buses were due to operate. Both journey planners and ticket engines were examined for website, mobile site and apps.

What we found

We found that journey planners are generally clear when replacement buses will be used and indicate this with various icons. No TOC is currently able to show that a journey is taking longer than usual or is diverted. TOCs still tend to have information about timetable changes on their websites but this does not follow through to the journey planners e.g. the SWR weekend timetables show PDFs on the website when the times in the journey planners are wrong. The majority of TOC websites are inconsistent with NRE in that they

do not show messages which may be displayed on NRE. This is discussed in more detail in 3a.

Next steps

In our May 2018 letter we have asked each TOC to explain if there are any barriers that are preventing NRE messages from being shown on its website.

Industry action PIDD-49[6] asks for journey planners to make it clear that the journey returned is not the normal one and we look to RDG, through its governance of the industry PIDD process, to ensure that this is delivered.

1 (b) – Extra effort should be made to advertise changes that are unusual such as work that might affect a weekday peak period rather than just overnight or weekend trains so that all travellers, regular and infrequent, are equally well-informed

What we expect

- Engineering work that affects weekday peak periods has always been unusual but is becoming increasingly common, often as late running Network Rail projects try to catch up. In 2018 we have already seen long blockades between: Blackpool and Preston; Ely and Kings Lynn; and Reading and Bedwyn. There have also been weekday daytime works at Bristol Temple Meads. Looking forward in 2018 there will be more week long blockades between Reading and Bedwyn, and between Three Bridges and Brighton, and weekday works on the South Wales Mainline. In addition, lines through Derby will be closed in various combinations for 79 days.

- Weekday works do not show up clearly enough as the messaging gets lost with the overnight works that may be taking place on that day. We expect weekday works to stand out clearly in the engineering work information and for TOCs to draw attention to them when they are taking place.

- Finding an answer for weekday works may also allow for better information to be given during all-day works at weekends.

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[6] PIDD-49: TOCs and third party retailers should ensure that throughout the journey selection and purchase process it is clear that the journey returned is not the normal one (examples include if there is a bus journey, if it takes longer than normal, if the train is diverted from then normal route, if the journey is to a different station than usual or if there is a reduced or significantly amended timetable)

What we did

We looked at the Reading to Bedwyn closure in March 2018 and the weekday works at Bristol Temple Meads on 3 April 2018 to see how they were advertised to passengers. Both of these works affected mainly GWR services. We also discussed forthcoming Oxford closures with Chiltern Railways.

What we found

- Advance publicity of the closures is generally good with information and maps on a separate web page plus posters at stations. Changes to the timetable are normally in journey planners well in advance of works.

- However, on the day the works are not easily distinguished from the list of planned works due to take place overnight. Because the timetable has already been amended the changes do not show up as disruption and so websites tend to show a "good service" even if part of the network is closed.

- Some information systems such as Journeycheck do not recognise bus departures and show that no service is operating despite the planned replacement buses.

Next steps

- NRE and TOCs can do more to make weekday works stand out on their websites. While the service may not be disrupted, these changes are major and unusually affect weekday peak time travellers who may normally dismiss engineering announcements as being outside the period that they travel. There should be a clear message on the front of the TOC website when this work is taking place. This should link to a page that shows a map of the affected area.

- Further work is required by TOCs and NRE to improve the information in these circumstances.

- We will continue to review weekday blockades as they occur.

1 (c) – When there are engineering works, explain in clear jargon-free language what is being done and why and the impact it will have on passengers. This should be information about the specific works and not just references to the general reasons why engineering work may be necessary

What we expect

This is an existing industry PIDD action, PIDD-48[7]

What we did

We searched for future engineering work on NRE and TOC websites and reviewed the information.

What we found

This is largely not being delivered by any TOC except where major work is planned and it has separate information. Most TOCs take the NRE engineering work feed so that the information on NRE and TOC sites is the same. However, the feed does not contain a reason why the work is necessary. The standard NRE entry contains a link to a generic explanation of engineering work[8].

Next steps

■ Information about the reason for the work needs to be added into the NRE engineering work template and can presumably be obtained from the engineering work circular. The TOCs generally produce the messages which are then uploaded by NRE.

■ Further work is required by TOCs and NRE to improve the information in these circumstances. We look to RDG, through its governance of the industry PIDD process, to ensure that this is delivered.

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[7] PIDD-48: So that customers have access to the full details of their journey when there are engineering works, textual descriptions should explain what is being done and why.

[8] http://www.nationalrail.co.uk/service_disruptions/121347.aspx

1 (d) – Information should be consistent across all the train operator's channels. The passenger should receive the same information and warnings when they are buying tickets via an app or mobile website as they would if they were using the main website

What we expect

Industry action PIDD-01[9] requires disruption banners on websites, mobile sites and smartphone apps. This was due for completion in March 2017. We expect that prominent warnings will be displayed if there is disruption regardless of which channel is used.

What we did

We are aware that some TOCs previously marked as complete for PIDD-01 no longer meet the requirements (particularly the new FirstGroup apps). When a TOC was in disruption we visited the website, ticket engine, mobile site and app (where available) to see whether a prominent warning was displayed.

What we found

While banners on websites are universally used, this is not the case with apps where a number of TOCs do not meet requirements. (Results are based on checks carried out on 6 April 2018.)

Most TOCs have consistent messaging across their channels although disruption banners do not generally show in the ticket engine itself.

Table 1   Provision of banner messages when services are disrupted

	Website	Mobile site	App
Arriva Trains Wales	✔	✘	✔
c2c	✔	✔	✘
Caledonian Sleeper	✔	✔	No app
Chiltern Railways	✔	✔	✔
CrossCountry	✔	✔	✘

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[9] PIDD-01: So that customers get the right level of information when there is disruption, the industry needs to specify good practice in the area of prominent warnings on websites (which cover local and multi route disruptions) for incorporation into the "Good Practice Guide for providing Information to Customers" and TOCs then need to deliver the changes to desktop and mobile websites and Smartphone apps.

	Website	Mobile site	App
East Midlands Trains	✔	✔	✖
Gatwick Express	✔	✔	✖
Grand Central	✔	✖	No app
Great Northern	✔	✔	No app
Great Western Railway	✔	✔	✖
Greater Anglia	✔	✔	✔
Heathrow Connect	✔	✔	No app
Heathrow Express	✔	✖	✖
Hull Trains	✔	✖	✖
London Overground	TfL	TfL	No app
London Northwestern	✔	✔	✔
Merseyrail	✔	✔	✔
Northern	✔	✔	✖
ScotRail	✔	✔	✔
South Western Railway	✔	✔	✖
Southeastern	✔	✔	✔
Southern	✔	✔	✔
Stansted Express	✔	✔	✔
TfL Rail	TfL	TfL	No app
Thameslink	✔	✔	✔
Transpennine Express	✔	✔	✖
Virgin Trains	✔	✔	✖
Virgin Trains East Coast	✔	✔	No app
West Midlands Railway	✔	✔	✔

Next steps

- The CXDD[10] has marked this action as complete for most TOCs and so monitoring of adherence is now done by ORR.

- We will contact those TOCs that are not meeting requirements and continue to check adherence as part of our annual compliance checks with all licence holders.

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[10] Customer Experience During Disruption industry working group at RDG – owners of the industry actions.

Principle 2 – clear information on the availability of advance tickets, what is available and when, is necessary to help passengers plan journeys even when the timetable is uncertain

2 (a) – when advance tickets have not been released this should be made clear to passengers using the ticket engine and an estimate given of when these tickets are likely to be available. Where feasible, a facility should be provided for passengers to register their interest in future advance ticket dates and to be e-mailed by the train operator when these tickets become available.

What we expect

When advance tickets are not yet available it shall be clear to passengers using the ticket engine that advance tickets should be available for that journey. The opportunity to register for ticket alerts is good practice.

What we did

Transport Focus checked for some specific journeys where advance tickets were normally available. It also checked TOC websites to see if an e-mail registration system was available – and what would happen if registered.

What we found

Many long distance operators have a registration facility that generate ticket alerts. No ticket engine indicates journeys where advance fares are yet to be released.

National Rail Enquiries has a page[11] showing advance booking horizons for all train operators. It also offers a registration facility[12] which passengers can use to register for weekly e-mails on advance ticket availability. This is rather hidden away and despite having an option to register for information about a single TOC sends whole industry information each week.

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[11] http://www.nationalrail.co.uk/times_fares/ticket_types/44703.aspx
[12] http://www.nationalrail.co.uk/service_disruptions/183836.aspx

Next steps

We are liaising with Transport Focus.

Operators that do not have an advance ticket registration option may like to consider providing a link to the NRE form on their advance tickets page.

2 (b) – An advance ticket calendar should set out the latest date currently available for purchase. Ideally this should split out weekdays, Saturdays and Sundays

What we expect

It is good practice to include a calendar showing booking horizons. Because there are generally more disruptive works at weekends it can be beneficial to split out weekdays from Saturdays and Sundays as the horizon can be different. We expect to find advance tickets available for the dates shown on the calendar.

What we did

We checked TOC websites to see if they had a calendar and whether it split out weekends. Where dates were given we then checked to see how many weeks in advance tickets could be booked and whether tickets could actually be booked for the dates shown. We also crossed checked with the advance ticket dates page on NRE to ensure that the information was consistent.

What we found

We have ranked operators into categories

- A: Best practice – sells advance tickets, has a calendar which splits out week days and weekends to show the latest dates when tickets are available.

- B: Good practice – sells advance tickets and has a calendar showing the latest dates when tickets are available.

- C: Poor practice – sells advance tickets but does not have a calendar to show when tickets are available.
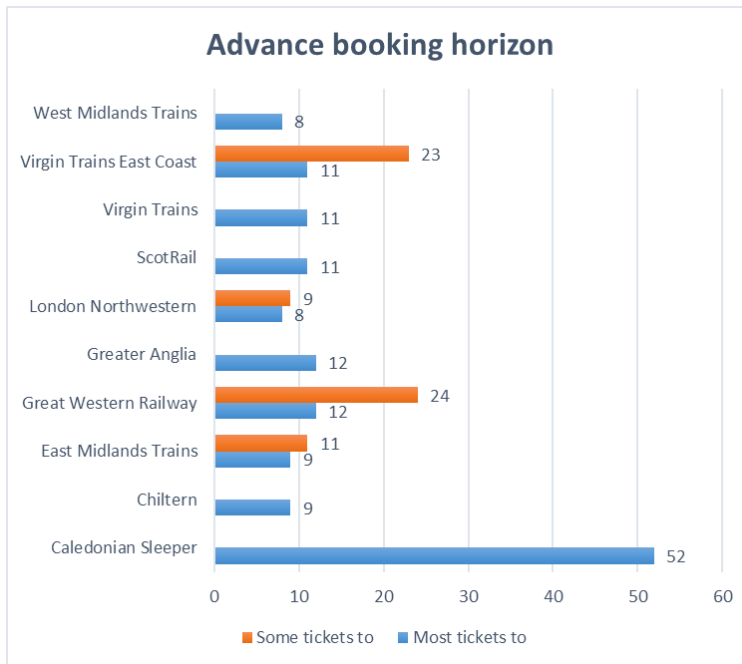
Table 2   Advance ticket calendar categories

A	B	C
East Midlands Trains	Grand Central	Arriva Trains Wales
GWR	Greater Anglia	c2c
London Northwestern	ScotRail	Caledonia Sleeper
Virgin Trains	South Western Railway	Chiltern Railways
Virgin Trains East Coast		CrossCountry
West Midlands Railway		Hull Trains
		Northern
		Southeastern*
		Southern

Not all TOCs are in the table. Great Northern, Gatwick Express & Thameslink do not have their own advance products. Merseyrail, TfL Rail and London Overground do not retail online.

* Southeastern introduced an online calendar on its advance ticket page in May 2018 and would now be classified as category A.

For those TOCs with calendars we looked to see how many weeks ahead tickets could be booked (this may change as the finalisation of train timetables at six weeks start to have an effect). This is early April data.

Advance booking horizon

Operator	Some tickets to	Most tickets to
West Midlands Trains		8
Virgin Trains East Coast	23	11
Virgin Trains		11
ScotRail		11
London Northwestern	9	8
Greater Anglia		12
Great Western Railway	24	12
East Midlands Trains	11	9
Chiltern		9
Caledonian Sleeper		52

Next steps

Operators that sell advance tickets but do not wish to have their own calendar on their website may like to consider including a link to the NRE booking horizon page.

2 (c) – When train times are changed for a ticket that has already been purchased, the train operator should make every effort to contact the passenger to let them know. Should the new journey times not be convenient for the passenger they should be invited to apply for a refund. Refunds should be given on request without having to pay an administration charge, including for advance tickets

What we expect

Industry action PIDD-19[13] makes provision for the customer's journey to be linked to their ticket so that tailored advice including compensation can be provided. The solution is the new industry reservation system being developed by RDG which was due to be delivered by March 2019. We understand that the project may be running late. It is reasonable to

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[13] PIDD-19: So that customers are aware of disruptions, the industry needs to develop and implement a method of tying a customer's journey to the ticket they have purchased (where their journey and personal data is known) – in order to provide tailored information (e.g. emails/texts on delays/cancellations and invitations to claim compensation).

expect that TOCs would be keen to develop a system that they could use to contact their passengers and may therefore adopt a different solution.

What we did

It is difficult to test this requirement which is probably best resolved by asking the TOCs what they would do in these circumstances. However, Transport Focus has made speculative ticket purchases to see what information is provided.

What we found

Waiting for data

Next steps

Our May 2018 letter asks TOCs to set out their arrangements.

Principle 3 – timetable information should be correct as far ahead as possible, and where timetables are not confirmed information about their current status should be accurate and updated frequently

3 (a) – When the times are not confirmed and there is a possibility that they will be changed this should be flagged to passengers. Ideally, this information should include the date when the timetable will be confirmed to allow passengers to check back at that time and the reason for the possible/confirmed change to times

What we expect

Trains that are not confirmed should be flagged with icons in the journey results summary. This should link to a more detailed message that could be displayed in the journey details. Separate information about the current timetable issues could be provided on the TOC website or they could link to the relevant page[14] on NRE. The information needs to be correct on both TOC websites and apps.

What we did

The NRE page shows the periods where timetables have not been confirmed. For each website we checked a train known to be flagged as uncertain in the NRE journey planner to see if any warning was given. We checked all TOC websites that sell tickets and also TOC apps where a ticket purchase facility is provided.

What we found

The majority of TOCs do not include the NRE flags or messages in their ticket engines. As a result, passengers using these sites will not be aware that the timetable is not yet confirmed. (Screenshots from the review are provided in the appendix).

We also checked some TOC apps to see if tickets bought that way would be flagged. For TOCs that did not have website warnings there was also no warning given on the app.

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[14] http://www.nationalrail.co.uk/service_disruptions/184755.aspx

We ranked the TOCs into categories.

■ A: Best practice – shows a warning for trains that may not run by using icons in the journey results summary and explanatory messages in the journey details.

■ B: Good practice – includes messages with individual train details but no warning in the summary.

■ C: Poor practice – shows future trains as if they are running with no warning messages in the journey planner (even if there are general warnings elsewhere on the website).

Table 3   Inclusion of NRE warning messages on TOC websites

A	B	C
Gatwick Express	Virgin Trains East Coast	Arriva Trains Wales
Great Northern		Caledonian Sleeper
Southeastern		c2c
Southern		Chiltern Railways
Thameslink		CrossCountry
		East Midlands Trains
		Grand Central
		Greater Anglia
		Great Western Railway
		Hull Trains
		London Northwestern
		Northern
		ScotRail
		South Western Railway
		Stansted Express
		Transpennine Express
		Virgin Trains
		West Midlands Railway

We have not carried out a detailed review of third party ticket sellers but found that neither the Trainline website nor app displayed information about trains that were flagged as uncertain in NRE. This is significant as the Trainline provides the ticket engine functionality for a number of train operator websites.

Next steps

- TOCs that are not giving the correct information need to be reminded of their responsibilities. We will follow up these results in our next report.

- TOCs need to improve their information in this area as they are currently publishing information that they know may be incorrect without any warning.

- We have written to third-party retailers[15] setting out their responsibilities under consumer law.

3 (b) – Should incorrect timetables still be in planners at T-1 the train operator should take extra steps to advertise that the times shown are incorrect. This could include website banners and publishing PDF timetables showing the correct times. National Rail Enquiries messages should also point to the enhanced information to ensure as wide an audience as possible

What we expect

It seems reasonable that times will be correct at least a week in advance and it would not be unreasonable for passengers who have been asked to "check back nearer the time" to assume so too. Trains that are known to be incorrect should be flagged with icons in the journey results summary. This should link to a more detailed message that could be displayed in the journey details. Separate information about the current timetable issues could be provided on the TOC website. Because of the very short notice of changes we would expect more effort to be made to draw attention to the issue so the use of social media, website banners and home page messaging would be appropriate. Messaging needs to include a reminder that passengers who have already booked tickets for the published times can obtain a refund with no admin fee if the new times do not suit their plans.

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[15] http://orr.gov.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0019/27361/compliance-with-consumer-law-regarding-providing-information-to-passengers-2018-03-29.pdf

What we did

By checking the weekly NRE engineering circular it is possible to see errors that are still in the timetable for the week ahead. The trains affected can then be checked in TOC and NRE planners to see if they are flagged accordingly.

What we found

We only currently have examples of SWR performance in this area. There has been no new work in this area since we raised our concerns with SWR (we wrote to SWR about T-12 in January and February[16]). The SWR website had a banner message with the links to changes in the next 4 weeks. The link goes to an engineering work page that includes PDFs when required. When there is other significant disruption we agreed that SWR could remove the banner. To facilitate this the homepage now includes a graphic with warning messages about weekend travel.

At week one the circular showed only SWR with errors in the current week (856). In week two Northern has 828 errors, with seven other TOCs showing errors but none having more than 60. In week three it is Northern again (484) that has the most errors but the other three TOCs with errors have less than 60 each.

Next steps

We will check the circular each week to see if any TOCs have a significant number of errors for a week in advance. We will then cross-check with information provided on the TOC and NRE website.

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[16] http://orr.gov.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0019/26830/south-western-railway-compliance-with-condition-4-of-your-passenger-licence-2018-01-23.pdf, http://orr.gov.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0009/26829/compliance-with-condition-4-of-south-western-railway-passenger-licence-swr-reply-to-orr-2018-01-26.pdf, http://orr.gov.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/26828/south-western-railway-compliance-with-condition-4-of-your-passenger-licence-2018-02-08.pdf

Appendix – detailed screenshots

3ai – when times are not confirmed this should be flagged to passengers

National Rail Enquiries shows trains that may not run with a yellow triangle and warning message.

However, that information is not generally reflected in TOC journey planners. We have considered a journey from Euston to Manchester on Friday 15 June at 1100. Examples for VT, SWR and c2c are shown and have no icons or messages for those services.

The exceptions are the Go Ahead TOCs (in this case Great Northern) and VTEC which do carry NRE messaging through to their sites

We also checked some TOC apps to see if tickets bought that way would be flagged. Screenshots show output from Chiltern, Transpennine Express and the Trainline with no icons or warning messages.

Southern and National Rail Enquiries apps do give the necessary information