

promoting quality public transport.....

Abigail Grenfell
Manager, Licensing and Network Regulation
One Kemble Street
London, WC2B 4AN

17th June 2011

Dear Ms Grenfell

Amending licences to give passengers the information they need to plan and make journeys - a consultation

TravelWatch NorthWest is an independent organisation representing all public transport users in NW England. We welcome the proposals to amend licences to give passengers the information they require to plan, make and complete their journeys by train.

It is our experience that the current system allows for too much fragmentation and inconsistency and passengers become frustrated at the matrix of systems they have to navigate to obtain the information they require. In our view Network Rail (NR), Train Operating Companies (TOCs) and the National Rail Enquiry (NRE) service are all guilty of this and so any initiative to tighten the operation and as a consequence, provide the passenger with a consistent and easy to use set of information portals is to be welcomed.

It must be remembered that passengers have different journeys to complete, often using a number of different timetable options, routes and train companies, so the information provided to them to plan and complete their journeys needs to be as seamless as possible.

Current published information

Websites

Provision of information by a variety of websites has been a welcome asset to the industry and its continued development is to be applauded. However passengers planning their journey have to navigate a number of varying formats provided by the, National Rail Timetable, and those of the individual Train Operating Companies. This is a recipe for inconsistency and inefficiency as updating information, particularly in times of disruption, can happen in a fragmented fashion, dependent upon the efficiency of the individual website management and the passenger can be left deficient of the latest information depending upon which source he or she uses.

Websites can also differ in their user friendliness. They should be more consistent in their design and appearance and be easier to use for the uninitiated passenger.

We agree that NR should be under more stringent obligations to provide information to TOCs to enable them to keep passengers better informed. Notice of planned engineering work disruptions should always be at least 12 weeks ahead to enable passengers to plan journeys and book tickets in advance.

Printed Timetables

These appear in many formats depending upon the design fashion of differing TOCs. This inconsistency is confusing to passengers who may have to use a number of different publications to plan and complete a journey. A design template to be used by all TOCs would greatly assist the consistency of information provision and display, as well as providing an attractive eye-catching vision at points of distribution.

Distribution also needs attention as all too often passengers experience gaps in timetable availability and we have heard instances when insufficient stocks have been provided to outlets and others where over supply has occurred. Planning distribution appears to be extremely “hit and miss” and requires tightening.

Although not used by very many passengers the current edition of the National Rail Timetable contains many errors. Correcting supplements to this timetable are not issued so there is a real danger of false information being released to the rail travelling public.

Telephone enquiries

The voice recognition systems of NRE and some train companies often fail to cope with differing accents and, as has been seen in media features, this leads to ridicule. If this system is unable to respond to the needs of the variety of accents in Britain it must be deemed a failure and abandoned. We have also noted some failures in the provision of accurate information and so some type of independent monitor is required.

Information at Stations

Whilst this has improved there are still regular inconsistencies and failures. Electronic displays are, on the whole, fairly good, but do need local intervention from time to time and the application of this appears to vary between operators and stations. Again, a variety of systems are in use in different locations and we would call for consistency to provide a corporate style of provision throughout the rail network. Automatic contact points at stations that link with the train control centre are good and effective. However their use appears to be minimal and better publicity to encourage passengers

to use them is desirable. They have still not appeared at many unmanned stations (where there is no facility at all) and all too often the passenger is left without any information when trains are delayed or cancelled. In these circumstances passengers have to search for a telephone number to contact control centres and these are often buried in the matrix of information posters. Steps must be taken to provide at least one basic contact system at **all stations on the network**.

Poster sites are, on the whole, reasonably located to attract passenger attention but often the display of emergency or temporary information can be poorly managed. This is dependent upon the vigilance and dedication of local staff and again inconsistencies are often noted. A common example of this is where replacement bus services are in place when disruption occurs when direction of passengers to the bus embarkation point is variable. Our experience is that it can be good, or very bad, but there are good examples of best practice in the system and there is no reason why these cannot be followed at every location.

Staffing provision is also variable and a good consistent training regime that results in a corporate standard is paramount to ensure that customer facing staff have the appropriate training to either answer queries, or direct passengers to where they can find the answer.

On Trains

Information provision on trains is extremely variable and exhibits the greatest degree of inconsistency we have come across in the whole area of information provision. Automated announcements do not always convey up to date information and human intervention is often needed, particularly during service disruption and changes to normal timetables, connections and routings. An example is when a train comes to an unexpected stop and doesn't move for a prolonged period. The absence of information or some reassurance about what is occurring can be annoying and worrying to passengers who are left uninformed. Our members have noted failures in this provision too often and it requires attention. Equally there can be instances of too much information with duplicated announcements, and unnecessary messages being broadcast, all of which can be unhelpful. The rail industry has been operating these systems for over 25 years and still has to achieve consistency.

Conclusions

Passengers have to be treated as though they are first time travellers and accordingly are unfamiliar with the rail network. They need the reassurance that, wherever they find themselves on their journey, they can be confident of obtaining good and reliable information to help them complete it in comfort. This has to be the benchmark upon which to build information systems.

TravelWatch North West supports the initiative to introduce formal accountability in providing information to passengers and calls for greater consistency in the style, design and user friendliness of the provision. To successfully achieve this it is believed that some central ownership is needed. Dissemination of information can be split between the various licence holders but the central Code or Practice must be centrally enforceable.

Licences are believed to be the correct method of regulation but a monitoring and sanctioning system needs to be in place alongside this, in order that accountability can be enforced. This may require some type of independent assessment scheme.

TravelWatch North West possesses a degree of experience in passenger issues and will be pleased to provide any advice it can to enable delivery of the initiative.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Yours sincerely,

(signed)

John Moorhouse
Company Secretary

(Author : John Owen)

From: Richard Rollins
To: TravelWatch NorthWest
Cc: Abigail Grenfell, ORR
Sent: Fri 17/06/2011 18:29
Subject: Re: Amending licences to give passengers the information they need to plan and make journeys - a consultation

Thanks John,

Too late for comment but I have recently experienced three further enquiry problems. I recently needed to buy a ticket to Crewe at a Virgin station booking office. The standard off peak return I was told was the best offer available was rather dear. I asked the clerk if a day return was available from a station further down the line which also had a day return facility from my boarding station. Although he supplied this information grudgingly (saving me several pounds) he advised he had been instructed not to offer this service to passengers.

I needed to plan a journey some months ahead. All the websites I tried would only give me times a month or two ahead or print timetables for the next month or so. Printed timetables to December are however available at local stations but are not available for other parts of the country. I am aware I can buy a National Timetable (from Waterstones etc but not from a station) very few people outside the industry are even aware this still exists, but many may wish to look up the possibility of journeys some time ahead for conferences, family visits, holidays etc.

The computer will only advise of trains which fit the regulations. e.g. if the exchange time for a station is embedded in the computer as 10 minutes it will not show a connection for an ongoing destination if it leaves 5 minutes or so after a scheduled arrival. With trains now better timekeepers this information should be given - with a suitable warning plus subsequent train. The present situation is very annoying for passengers on on time trains.

Richard