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Email

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Dear Martin

Informed Traveller publication timescales

I am writing in response to your letter of 11 November 2020.

Context

As you note in your letter, we continue to operate in an environment of immense challenge and uncertainty due to the impact of Covid-19. There is an ongoing need for our timetabling development to respond to changing passenger demand, operational risks and government/funder requirements.

As you are aware, since March the industry has collaborated to make four significant timetable changes in response to the Covid-19 crisis and the impact on passenger demand and the industry more widely. There have also been numerous smaller changes and there has been a substantial increase in short term plan (STP) activity. Furthermore, we have re-planned the December 2020 timetable that was originally offered by the System Operator to train operators in August 2020, and we are continuing to make changes to the current timetable and to the re-planned December 2020 timetable in response to operator and funder requirements.

The System Operator has coordinated the timetable development since March in order to deliver robust timetables. I am pleased that the various changes have been implemented successfully given the difficult operating environment, and train planning teams across the industry have put in huge efforts to deliver these changes. The various changes and timescales that the industry has worked to since March have largely been outside of Network Code timescales, with the industry agreeing and evolving the future Timetable Change Strategy to meet the evolving needs and priorities.

Future Timetable Change Strategy – from December 2020 to May 2022

The System Operator made proposals to JEOT on 5 November 2020 to agree the future Timetable Change Strategy (as well as addressing how we deal with immediate changes in November and December 2020). JEOT agreed these changes in principle.

Our proposals to JEOT were drafted in anticipation of a demand for further future changes to the timetable during 2021 to respond to changes in the level and pattern of passenger demand and other operator/government/funder requirements.

Over the last two months, we have seen multiple operators request amendments to their December 2020 timetables at very short notice with changes that are heavily driven by resource constraints. The System Operator has successfully worked closely with the train operators involved to accommodate these late notice changes as they have emerged, though this does mean some operators will see their Christmas timetables published to passenger facing systems only one week in advance. These developments sparked the conversation about how we can maintain this agility in timetabling looking forward, but within an agreed framework to provide appropriate stability for train planning teams, and balance this with providing advance passenger information.

We have developed a proposed process to underpin the Future Timetable Change Strategy that meets three core objectives:

1. It provides stability to the train planning process and the timetable itself, thereby reducing the risk to service performance, and enabling timetable information to be provided to passengers at a reasonable level of advanced notice.
2. It enables the train planning process to have the agility to respond to emerging trends across the industry, including new patterns of demand, other government/funder priorities, and higher expectations of service punctuality and reliability.
3. It realises the benefits resultant from the rail investment programmes funded by governments and funders.

To achieve the objectives, it is proposed to formalise additional opportunities during 2021 where operators have the opportunity to amend their base train plan on a (roughly) quarterly basis.

This approach has developed further since the paper submitted to JEOT, based on constructive industry discussion, including through the Industry timetable PMO Steering Group. Chris Curtis has also spoken to you about it.

It is important to highlight that the proposals are not currently intended to represent a permanent departure from normal timetable development processes. We do, however, see merit in this approach as a possible basis for future timetabling beyond 2022 and will coordinate industry dialogue on the future process in parallel with implementing this approach.

At the moment we are still delivering in line with the development plan for the May 2021 timetable change. However, we are aware of the industry desire to provide opportunities for timetable change to be made more frequently, which is a key driver for the quarterly timetable intervention process proposed in the Future Timetable Change Strategy. This process will provide opportunities for timetable change to be made in a more responsive and agile way, and it is expected that each intervention will take around three months to prepare and be published eight weeks before it is implemented. Following feedback from planning practitioners across the industry, and in a development of the process outlined to JEOT, the May 2021 timetable change date will be retained, with the current development work progressed to a conclusion. There will be an opportunity window to revise the bids already made for May 2021, for those operators that need to.

Managing systemic risks

In principle the quarterly intervention process will not change our approach to how systemic risks to the timetable are identified, assessed and managed. The Industry Timetable PMO will continue to provide assurance on behalf of the industry on the preparations and readiness for the delivery of new and revised timetables. For the duration of the Covid-19 crisis the PMO has been instrumental in co-ordinating operators' timetable development activity, and providing assurance to the industry and governments, often at very short notice, that the numerous timetable changes provide sufficient capacity to passengers and would operate to a high level of reliability. The move to quarterly interventions will enable the PMO to focus on the specific change dates and apply similar assurance techniques to those used in normal circumstances.

The PMO's assessment for the May 2021 change is in the final stages of development and will be shared with you shortly, before being updated on a periodic basis. Similar assessments will be provided for each of the intervention points. Whilst the timescales are shorter with the new approach, the PMO will be working closely with operators and service specifiers to identify risks and make recommendations prior to services being formally bid through the timetable process.

During this period of quarterly interventions there will be timetable changes being driven by significant change to infrastructure, notably on the Midland Main Line in connection with electrification to Corby, and on the Great Western Main Line and Great Eastern Main Line in connection with the completion of the Crossrail project. The continuation of the May 2021 timetable development process protects the delivery of the service proposals for both projects. In the case of Crossrail, the additional intervention opportunity in September 2021 has the potential to assist the multiple timetable changes required for the entry into service programme. The PMO will continue to liaise with Industry Readiness Boards to provide a further level of assurance for the introduction of new timetables in these circumstances.

Impact on Informed Traveller – passenger information

One of our priorities continues to be responding to changing operator and government/funder requirements to ‘do the right thing’ for passengers and rail users in unprecedented circumstances. In light of this, we are maintaining delivery of our Informed Traveller recovery plan for the time being, which currently sees timetables published at TW-5, moving to TW-6 in early December. Current circumstances have led to TW-12 compliance not being the industry’s priority, but we do recognise that as part of recovery from Covid-19 and sustained increase in passenger numbers that there will be greater importance placed on Informed Traveller and providing advance booking.

We – and the industry – know that the ‘quarterly interventions’ approach will lead to an effective derogation from Network Code. We are working to understand how best to achieve the balance of providing an agile approach to longer-term timetabling and providing the weekly amended timetable for passenger information purposes in a sustainable way. It is worth noting that we have successfully worked well together as an industry over last nine months and we anticipate this continuing.

We are working with the Smarter Information, Smarter Journeys programme as part of a pan industry group working together to provide better information to customers during this period. There are currently two trials underway which aim to improve the information available customers:

1. The NRCC are updating customers using the yellow triangle information flag which is displayed on NRES to inform passengers about the status of the service they are booking
2. Asseris are due to start a trial of a new system with Caledonian Sleeper which will automatically contact customers when their journey changes in the near future. We believe this capability will be able to be rolled out to other operators in time, assuming the trial is successful, and are working closely with the relevant parties to understand how we can support this.

Balancing freight requirements

In reference to how we balance the requirements of freight, we understand the importance of providing stability in the Informed Traveller planning process and provision of amended timetables to support crew rostering and diagramming. We have been working closely with Freight operators to work through their concerns about the lateness of Informed Traveller offers when we are publishing timetables later than TW-6. We believe that when we achieve a consistent TW-6 position in early December 2020 many of these concerns will be alleviated.

Despite the current informed traveller situation, to maintain some stability in the planning process we continue to provide possession check information at TW-22 for freight operators which is used to shape their Informed Traveller bids. This has enabled all freight operators to bid for weekly amended timetables at normal TW-18 timescales. Whilst the Informed Traveller Recovery Plan does see informed traveller offers sent at the same time for all operators, currently TW-5, as freight operators are bidding at TW-18 we do start work on their timetables early. This means we are able to send a summary of possible rejections in advance of the offer to provide early sight of any issues and a longer window of time to work through these together before the timetable is published.

The working processes to support the Future Timetable Change Strategy are being drafted at the moment and will take account of the needs of all operators. The ‘rolling spot bid’ (RSB) process is still available for freight operators to add services to the base timetable outside of the usual timetable development periods. We do not envisage amending this process and will ensure that the quarterly intervention process takes account of RSB activities.

I trust this letter provides an adequate response to your letter, recognising that the details of our original proposal to JEOT have evolved and that there are continuing industry discussions on its detailed application. Please don’t hesitate to contact me if you would like to discuss anything further.

Yours sincerely



Paul McMahon
Managing Director, System Operator