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A TOC Managing Director
BY EMAIL

19 January 2023

Dear TOC MD,

Resource Availability Shortage “P*-Coded” Pre-Cancellations

I write to you today, further to my letter titled “Understanding Where Rail Passenger Experience Differs from Official Cancellations Statistics” and dated 25th November 2022.

For the benefit of passengers and to support industry transparency, we are seeking confirmation that your TOC will support and participate in action by the industry to stop the use of “P*-coded” pre-cancellations caused by late-notice resource availability shortages.

Effect on Passengers

Over the past year there has been a significant national rise in train service cancellations affecting passengers.

The work we have done since my previous letter has demonstrated that there has also been significant use of “pre-cancellations” by a number of TOCs, on becoming aware that traincrew or rolling stock would not be available to run planned services. These “pre-cancellations” are made in advance of 22:00 the previous evening, at which point the timetable is finalised.

The use of this practice means that official statistics on cancellations for some TOCs have not recently resembled the service quality experienced by passengers.

Where cancellations are necessary and known, advertising these in advance for the benefit of passenger planning is good practice.

Operators acting in advance also allows for good operational discipline, supporting Controllers to modify passenger information systems, book replacement transport where necessary, ensure appropriate ticket acceptance arrangements are in place, brief passenger-facing staff at stations and in contact centres, and amend stock and crew diagrams to minimise the knock-on disruption on the day itself.

However, as you will be aware, removing trains from the timetable in this way can mean that a train a passenger expected to catch when they went to bed can disappear from the timetable by the time they leave for the station, unaware that the train has been cancelled. We recognise that some TOCs have developed good workarounds to retain these trains on customer systems as cancelled services, but these may require additional manual intervention.

Delay Repay eligibility for passengers may also be impacted by removal of the train from the timetable. Again, we recognise that in practice some TOCs have developed a methodology to ensure that passengers receive appropriate compensation for delayed journeys – but these workarounds may require additional manual intervention.

Other Unintended Consequences

These practices have had unintended consequences which have led to questions about the transparency of industry official statistics published by ORR: as highlighted above, “pre-cancelled” trains are not included in the official statistics, giving the impression of better performance than many passengers have been experiencing.

The official statistics are used by railway industry stakeholders to make judgments and inform decision making; it is important that trust in the statistics, and therefore the industry, is not eroded. While accurate to the definition, official statistics on cancellations could be seen as non-transparent as they do not reflect the realistic scale of cancellations experienced by passengers.

This practice also means the industry’s delay attribution process does not fulfil its primary purpose: by excluding these cancellations it does not produce an accurate dataset on which to base future plans for industry performance improvement.

Industry Mechanisms

The act of changing the timetable at late notice is covered by the Network Code and Railway Operational Code provisions on “Emergency Timetables”.

ORR recognises that the Delay Attribution Board’s “Delay Attribution Principles & Rules” (DAPR) currently allows any train service cancelled before 22:00 the previous night – for any reason - to be removed from the “Applicable Timetable” for that day, by marking the service with a “P*-code” (normally “PG”). This stands for “Planned Cancellation”.

This mechanism exists to cater for large-scale issues such as incoming severe weather or major infrastructure damage – or other causes that require whole-scale amendment or replacement of a planned timetable for a given day (or period of the day). We are not seeking to amend these established provisions.

As mentioned above, we have become aware that this “P*-coding” has been increasingly used over the past year to remove or cancel specific trains from the planned timetable that cannot be operated due to a shortage of traincrew or suitable rolling stock. These service changes are confirmed within 24/48/72 hours of the

timetabled service and trains are removed from the operational plan, ahead of the finalisation of the Applicable Timetable at 22:00 the day before.

These cancellations are reactive to a resource availability shortage. ORR's view is that such late-notice amendments should not be considered an "Emergency Timetable" and so should not lead to a late change to the Applicable Timetable.

Corrective Actions

When cancellations necessarily occur, TOCs and Network Rail making and communicating plans as soon as possible (preferably in advance of the day) is very important. This improves passenger outcomes and reduces knock-on delays to the wider rail network. Although not the primary purpose of this letter, we identify that TOCs should share (or continue to share) good operational practices in this regard.

While publicly identifying and communicating the cancellation is good practice, the specific identified practice of "P*-coding" cancellations due to a late-notice resource availability shortage – normally of traincrew or rolling stock – is not in the best interests of either passengers or stakeholders. We believe it also goes against the intent of the relevant parts of the Network Code.

We are therefore asking you to engage with the following two actions:

Action 1

Network Rail and all TOCs are to work together to identify and implement an appropriate method to end the use of late-notice, resource availability shortage "P-coded" pre-cancellations.*

Cancellations must remain visible to passengers and must also form a part of the industry dataset to inform decision making.

For clarity, this should not simply mean a return to 'on the day' cancellations only. We require a method to be employed by which cancellations due to late-notice resource availability shortages remain visible, counted against their true cause and within the official statistics.

We are asking the rail industry to define the exact scope and methodology required to achieve this. Note that any thresholds identified in this letter must not prejudice industry's thinking in designing that plan.

We are asking the Network Rail System Operator to contact TOCs and develop a coordinated timeline with specific milestones to implement this.

Further to industry consultation undertaken prior to writing this letter - and recognising the significant detailed work that will be required to ensure there are no new, unintended consequences - we are asking Network Rail to provide the plan and associated timeline to ORR no later than **Friday 10th March 2023**.

If this date looks likely to be unachievable once work gets underway, I have asked Network Rail to contact me at the earliest opportunity to discuss further.

Action 2

Until this practice ceases (in line with the plan established in action 1), we ask all TOCs to provide ORR with data counting this type of resource-driven “p-coded” pre-cancellation at the end of each railway period.*

This is for the express purpose of reporting on ORR’s website as supplementary information to the official statistics to maintain the high levels of transparency about rail industry performance relied upon by passengers and stakeholders.

ORR will shortly provide your TOC with a data template to complete with the following information:

- Trains **fully cancelled** using a “p-code” that are caused by shortage of available traincrew (where such cancellation is identified within 72 hours of the service day);
- Trains **partially cancelled** using a “p-code” that are caused by shortage of available traincrew (where such cancellation is identified within 72 hours of the service day);
- Trains **fully cancelled** using a “p-code” that are caused by shortage of available rolling stock (where such cancellation is identified within 72 hours of the service day);
- Trains **partially cancelled** using a “p-code” that are caused by shortage of available rolling stock (where such cancellation is identified within 72 hours of the service day).

We would like to receive this information from the current period, Period 11 of rail year 2022-23, until further notice. Recognising this period has already started, please indicate with your first data submission if your TOC is unable to provide a full and accurate count for Period 11.

For TOCs who do not provide us with data, we will highlight this as a “non-response” in the published supplementary information for each applicable period.

I would welcome your positive confirmation that your TOC will support our efforts to improve passenger provisions and industry transparency in this area.

I am available to answer any questions on this or related matters.

Yours sincerely

Feras Alshaker