

Response from Passenger Focus

ORR Consultation: Towards a code of practice on retail information

Questions

1) Given the requirements of consumer law and industry specific obligations, do you agree that the types of information highlighted above and in the associated Annex B are the types of information that passengers need when choosing, buying and using rail tickets?

ORR's research on what constitutes material information mirrors our own experience and research with passengers. We agree that passengers need to have information about the 'core product'¹, especially the times of trains, journey duration, any restrictions on use and price.

Confusion about price is exacerbated by a fares structure that many passengers feel is complicated, confusing and illogical. On some journeys two Singles may be cheaper than a Return, on others a combination of tickets may be cheaper than a through ticket; for some, the peak 'Anytime' ticket is the only ticket available in the off-peak, while for others the Off-peak is the only fare for some journeys, even in the peak. These are explained in more detail in our response to the Department for Transport's (DfT) fares and ticketing review²

One consequence of this is that passengers are not always fully aware of what they are buying. ORR's research in June 2012, 'Fares and ticketing – information and complexity' highlighted that:

- Nearly three quarters of all those interviewed were not confident what 'off-peak' times were.
- Over 50% of online respondents agreed that 'it is a bit of a lottery as to whether you find the best price for a rail journey or not'
- 45% said that the fare system is too complicated for them to understand
- 41% of online respondents said they had previously purchased tickets and later found they could have made the journey on cheaper tickets
- 70% of on-train interviewees were unaware that they could only travel on the specified train on an 'Advance' ticket
- Among those travelling on an 'Advance' ticket, 37% interviewed did not realise that if they missed their train, and travelled on a later train, they would normally have to buy a new ticket.

¹ Rail Passengers Priorities for improvement. Passenger Focus. October 2014. This work identified core priorities for improvement: value for money, frequency, punctuality, getting a seat and information during disruption.

² Passenger Focus's response to the Government's rail fares and ticketing review. 2012

Passenger Focus's own research in 2010 identified specific concerns with ticket-vending machines³ (TVMs). We found that passengers have difficulty with the layout of information on the screen (e.g. certain screens containing too much information, and jargon that passengers do not understand); with programming issues (e.g. screens timing out while passengers are still deliberating); and with the paucity of supporting information about the times each ticket is valid or routes that can be used.

We are pleased to see reference to disruption and the provision of rail replacement bus services in Annex B of the consultation. How the industry manages delays is the main driver of overall passenger dissatisfaction with a journey⁴. While much of this surrounds the provision of accurate information during delays⁵, the physical nature of bus replacement services is also an issue for passengers. Our research in 2012 showed that passengers were not always made aware that part of their journey will be made by a bus⁶. When they were, such as we found in our research on engineering works at Reading station in 2010⁷, passengers were more accepting of the additional disruption and inconvenience experienced.

When there is planned engineering work the industry must do more to make passengers aware of the extended journey times involved and/or the provision of a bus replacement service. The occurrence of either is material to the decision to travel in the first instance, especially given there is no reduction in price to reflect the reduced service provision. We think this is an area where the industry must do better in future.

We are pleased that ORR has included consumer rights within the list of material information. We agree that while this may not be 'top of mind' for many passengers some of this may be due to it being important only to a segment of the market (e.g. refund rights on season tickets) or because there is a low level of awareness of rights in the first place. Our own research into awareness of compensation rights⁸ in 2013 confirms ORR's analysis. It found:

- 88 per cent of those apparently eligible for compensation for their delay did not claim.
- The main reasons given were down to a lack of awareness:
 - 44 per cent did not even consider it
 - 30 per cent considered it, but did not think they would be entitled.

³ Ticket Vending Machine Usability. Passenger Focus. 2010

⁴ National Rail Passenger Survey - NRPS - Spring 2014 - Multivariate Analysis Report

⁵ Passenger information when trains are disrupted. Passenger Focus. September 2014.

⁶ Rail passengers experiences and priorities during engineering works. Passenger Focus. 2012

⁷ Reading Station engineering works. Passenger Focus. May 2011

⁸ Understanding rail passengers – delays and compensation. Passenger Focus. July 2013

2) Are there other types of information that should be covered by the Code?

We are pleased to see that the provision of catering and Wi-Fi are listed in Annex B as part of 'on-train services' that would be covered by the Code. Wi-Fi in particular is becoming increasingly important to passengers as it allows them to do something else while travelling⁹ – this is particularly so for business passengers where the value of travel time is an important consideration in choosing to travel by rail.

We think that class of travel should also be listed as part of the on-train services section. We have received complaints from passengers who had purchased first-class tickets for their entire journey only to discover that significant parts of the journey did not have first-class accommodation. Where this is the case it is important that passengers are informed of which legs contain first class so they can make up their own minds as to the overall value.

3) Are there any reasons why any of the information outlined above can't be provided at all, or certain, points of sale?

4) If there are points of sale at which some of the information outlined above can't be provided, or can't be provided in a form that is useful to passengers, what measures do you take to mitigate for this and ensure that passengers buying their tickets from these points of sale have the information they need to make an informed decision?

We will take questions 3 and 4 together.

As mentioned above perhaps the biggest limitations concern ticket vending machines. To use a current-generation TVM with confidence, a passenger must already know which ticket he or she wants. This is not only a matter of personal preference: it is often for hard, practical reasons about being guided to the right ticket. For example:

- Passengers buying from a TVM cannot be sure it is displaying all the tickets (e.g. weekend fares); will sometimes find the fare they need on the second or third screen (often with a more expensive fare appearing first with the potential to mislead); may not know that other (potentially cheaper) products are available from other TOCs' TVMs at the station or from the ticket office.
- TVMs sometimes display the most frequently purchased tickets rather than the cheapest fare available (thereby perpetuating the problem). We were recently contacted by a passenger who commented that one company was displaying its competitor's fare for a journey more prominently on its TVMs than its own cheaper fare – the inference being that it made more money out of selling the higher-priced fare than its own. This may not be the case but it does highlight the sense of suspicion surrounding fares.

⁹ In our research on priorities for improvement (see footnote 1) WI-FI was in the top ten.

- TVMs are designed to switch over from peak fares to off-peak fares at a certain time. However, some are not always programmed to do so in time to enable passengers to actually buy tickets for the first off-peak train and still reach the platform in time to travel on it.
- Lack of clarity surrounding the routes you can take.
Some tickets require a working knowledge of the rail network. For example, if travelling from Farnborough in Hampshire to Birmingham you will be presented with a choice of route options (via London, via Oxford or via High Wycombe) without any real way of knowing what you are buying.

Other tickets may simply state that they are valid via 'Any Permitted' route. This is often mistaken as meaning that you can use any route rather than, as intended, that only certain routes are permitted. In addition there is often no way of determining which routes are permitted without access to the internet or by asking staff.

- Lack of clarity regarding the times you can travel.
The space limitation on TVMs makes it difficult to give an accurate explanation of when you can use certain off-peak tickets. This is particularly the case when the same ticket validity code is used for multiple flows (where it can run to a full page or more of A4) or where the restriction is too complicated to be easily remembered. See question 6 for more detail.

Clearly there has to be a balance between information provision and information overload. Having a very thorough but slow process will have an impact on queue lengths and frustrate passengers making very simple trips or where they are already familiar with the route and restrictions.

We believe that having a two-tier process for TVMs may help to minimise queue lengths and transaction times. There could be a fast-track option for those frequent travellers who know the ticket they want to buy and which takes them straight to individual fares. There would then be a more thorough, staged approach for those who are less sure. This would ease the passenger through the process of selecting and purchasing the correct ticket. When buying from a ticket office for instance, the clerk will ask some basic questions (about destination, day and time of travel and, where appropriate, about the choice of route/operator) and then offer the passenger a narrowed down range of options - in essence the ticket clerk navigates the passenger through the decision-making process. The two-stage process would look to replicate this. One option would be to continue the development of TVMs that have a 'help' facility whereby the user can elect to either talk to an adviser or where the adviser can take control of the transaction remotely.

While it is certainly easier to get access to more information from websites passengers still cannot always establish whether the website they are using is impartial or steering them towards travelling with a particular train company¹⁰. The current National Rail accredited logo is, unhelpfully, displayed by both partial and impartial retailers. Giving passengers the confidence that all online retailing sites abide by the same rules of impartiality would help – passengers should not have to hunt out the ‘small print’ to understand the basis on which a particular website operates.

Indeed, we would like to see the “impartial retailing” requirement that applies to transactions at ticket offices extended to ticket machines and online retailing.

5) Do you agree that a principles’ based Code, such as is outlined above, is the best approach? For example, that it would provide the flexibility necessary to address the differing capabilities/uses of different points of sale and/or to respond to future developments?

We think a principles based Code is a sound approach. It’s strength, however, would lie in the examples of good and bad practice which would act as mini case studies. It will be important that Code is capable of being easily updated each time a new issue or case study is identified.

6) Do you agree that the principles outlined above are appropriate to the provision of retail information to passengers? Are there any other principles that you think it would be helpful for the Code to cover?

The four main principles seem to cover the broad aspirations of passengers:

- 1) The right information (principle 1: retailers should provide passengers with the information they need in order to make informed decisions)
- 2) Clear information (principle 2: retailers should present information in a way that is clear, intelligible, unambiguous and timely)
- 3) Accuracy and consistency (principle 3: the information should be accurate, truthful and should not be provided in such a way as it might be provided in such a way as it might deceive, even if factually correct)
- 4) Trust (principle 4: retailers should make it clear what tickets they sell at different sales channels and the basis on which they present ticket).

5) Are there any specific issues retailers are likely to face in complying with these principals, given the different characteristics of different sales channels (e.g. Ticket

¹⁰ Ticket retailing website usability. Passenger Focus. July 2011

Offices, websites, TVMs, etc.)? For example from a technological, practical or cost perspective?

However wide-ranging the principles in reality, they will only be as good as the examples of good and bad practice that underpin them.

We have already outlined examples above where the detail could be difficult to deliver. Perhaps the main area concerns TVMs. For them to be an acceptable alternative to ticket offices they must be able to sell all the tickets from that station; present information to passengers in a way that guides the unfamiliar to the best fare for their journey; and give passengers a means to speak to an appropriately-trained human if they need assistance with their transaction. All TVMs should also offer the facility to collect tickets bought previously on the internet – Ticket on Departure (ToD).

Principle 1 determines that passengers will be provided with the right information on which to make an informed decision. As part of this it will be important that the code establishes whether this expectation differs according to the time elapsed between purchase and departure. This is perhaps best outlined with an example: if a passenger presents himself at the Virgin ticket office at Euston and asks for a ticket to Birmingham should staff be obliged to mention that Chiltern also offer fares but from Marylebone? And does this obligation differ if the person is asking for a ticket for the next train, for a train later that day or for a few days in advance? Establishing a clear sense of how impartiality is to be applied in practice will be an important element of defining principle 1.

At the heart of principle 3 is the issue of accuracy and consistency. We have recently identified an issue whereby different journey planning websites can present different options for the same journey. It appears this is to do with the algorithms they use. If TVMs in the future were to involve a degree of journey planning then will we see this issue replicated? Would, for instance, TOC A's TVMs at a station present one set of journey options and fares while TOC B's TVMs at the same station (but from a different supplier) present a different set? Different options returned from what is ultimately exactly the same database can only contribute to passengers' concerns about complexity and transparency.

Finally, we think there is a real challenge facing the industry with regard to split tickets – something that also goes to the heart of principle 3.

Split ticketing offers the ability to purchase a combination of tickets at a cheaper price than the through fare. On the one hand this can give rise to further complexity and so add to passenger confusion but on the other it can leave the impression of an incoherent fares system that results in the uninitiated paying a higher fare than they need to.

Perhaps the most common form is to split tickets at an intermediate station/calling point. This is valid as long as the train you are on stops at the station where you combine tickets. For example:

- Bristol Temple Meads to London – Anytime Single through cost is £96.50. An Anytime Single from Bristol to Didcot Parkway (£27.80) and an Anytime Single from Didcot Parkway to London (£29.60) is only £57.40 – a saving of £39.10.

There are also many journeys where a change of trains is required anyway and where buying tickets for separate legs is still cheaper. For example:

- Aberystwyth to Leicester (requiring a change of train in Birmingham) Anytime Single through fare is £61.
An Anytime Single Aberystwyth to Birmingham (£28.80) plus an Anytime Single Birmingham to Leicester (£17) comes to only £45.80.

Passengers must have confidence in the information they are given and trust in the fare quoted is a crucial part of this. We note the comment in paragraph 4.16 that retailers “will not search out potentially cheaper combinations of tickets for a journey unless specifically asked to do so”. However, the rise of bespoke websites that will compute split-ticketing options means that this is no longer a niche item known only to a few experienced customers. It is now becoming a mainstream issue that has to be addressed. It cannot simply depend on you knowing the correct questions to ask.

We believe that on any ‘walk-up’ interavailable flow the through fare should not exceed the cost of buying ‘walk-up’ interavailable fares for individual legs of the journey.

We note that Transport Scotland has taken steps to remove some of the fare anomalies within Scotland¹¹. In 2013 Transport Scotland and ScotRail removed more than 1,500 of the bigger inconsistencies. This has reduced split-ticketing by meaning that it will almost always be cheaper for a customer to buy one end-to-end ticket rather than two separate tickets for the same journey.

6) Can you provide examples of good and/or bad practice of how retailers already provide information to passengers within this context?

We mentioned above the difficulty in explaining ticket validities, especially on a TVM. The following are two examples of this.

¹¹ <http://www.transportscotland.gov.uk/news/cheaper-fares-across-275000-journeys>

Example 1: Northern Rail evening peak restrictions

Northern Rail recently introduced restrictions on travel in the evening peak. We identified that the restrictions applied not just to the originating station (as is custom and practice) but also to a connecting train when passengers change en route.

However, the industry did not make the detail of these restrictions available. Indeed it was several weeks after the restriction was introduced that the actual wording was made publically available; and even then it was hardly in a form that was easily understood online, let alone useable for a TVM. See Annex A for details

Example 2: the use of restrictions covering more than one flow

The same ticket validity code is sometimes used for different flows (i.e. the restriction that may apply between station A and B will also apply from station A-C, A-D etc. While this may make sense operationally it can make it very difficult for passengers who wish to get a clear sense of the restrictions attached to their ticket.

Annex B contains a screenshot from the NRE website of the restrictions attached to a £55 Super Off-peak Return fare from London Paddington to Bristol Temple Meads.

ANNEX A

Restriction Code	ND
Applicable days	Mondays to Fridays
Outward Travel	Return Travel
<p>Not valid on trains timed to depart before 09:30 or after 16:00 and before 18:30.</p> <p>The restriction after 16:00 and before 18:30 includes any connecting train departing during this period (or re-commencing your journey following a break of journey) within the following areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transport for Greater Manchester area plus Alderley Edge, Birchwood, Burscough Bridge, Buxton, Chapel-en-le-Firth, Disley, Dove Holes, Earlestown, Furness Vale, Handforth, Hoscar, New Mills Central, New Mills Newtown, Newton-le-Willows, Padgate, Parbold, Styal, Warrington Bank Quay, Warrington Central, Whaley Bridge and Wilmslow; • Travel South Yorkshire area plus, Darton, Denby Dale, Moorthorpe and South Elmsall; • West Yorkshire Metro area plus Cononley, Harrogate, Hornbeam Park, Knaresborough, Pannal, Skipton, Starbeck and Weeton. <p>Valid trains can also be checked using the journey planner at www.nationalrail.co.uk</p> <p>Further information including maps of the restricted areas can be found on the Northern Rail website.</p>	<p>Not valid on trains timed to depart before 09:30 or after 16:00 and before 18:30.</p> <p>The restriction after 16:00 and before 18:30 includes any connecting train departing during this period (or re-commencing your journey following a break of journey) within the following areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transport for Greater Manchester area plus Alderley Edge, Birchwood, Burscough Bridge, Buxton, Chapel-en-le-Firth, Disley, Dove Holes, Earlestown, Furness Vale, Handforth, Hoscar, New Mills Central, New Mills Newtown, Newton-le-Willows, Padgate, Parbold, Styal, Warrington Bank Quay, Warrington Central, Whaley Bridge and Wilmslow; • Travel South Yorkshire area plus, Darton, Denby Dale, Moorthorpe and South Elmsall; • West Yorkshire Metro area plus Cononley, Harrogate, Hornbeam Park, Knaresborough, Pannal, Skipton, Starbeck and Weeton. <p>Valid trains can also be checked using the journey planner at www.nationalrail.co.uk</p> <p>Further information including maps of the restricted areas can be found on the Northern Rail website.</p>

