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Head of Consumer Policy



TOC MDs
by email only

6 September 2023

Dear TOC MD,

Notifications when booked trains are cancelled or timetables are changed

In [January 2023](#) we wrote to all train operators to set out our expectations around the provision of proactive notifications to passengers when trains that they have booked are cancelled, or timetables are changed. I can now update you on the findings from that work.

Notification service for tickets purchased in advance

The Smarter Information, Smarter Journeys programme is a cross-industry programme established in response to research and a subsequent [challenge from ORR](#) for the industry to develop a strategy for improving passenger information. The timetable comparator system is a key deliverable of the programme and we recognise the good cross-industry working that has enabled its development. It allows proactive notifications to be sent to ticket retailers (whether train operators, independent retailers or travel management companies) when booked trains are changed or cancelled two or more days before travel. Retailers are then able to contact and advise their customers.

In our January 2023 letter we set out an expectation that all train operators would implement the notifications system by the end of March 2023. Most operators met that deadline and, by the end of May 2023, 1.8 million notifications had been sent by third party retailers and operators. ORR is continuing to engage with Transport for Wales and c2c, both of whom retail tickets across the national network but have yet to implement these automated notifications. We have been assured by Transport for Wales that its notifications will go live via its app this month.

Customer information pledges

The passenger information licence condition requires operators to enable passengers to plan and make their journey with a reasonable degree of assurance. Under this licence condition, we accepted the [Customer Information Pledges](#) as operators' regulated code of practice.

In our January 2023 letter, we noted that we had previously accepted that the pledge to “notify passengers if train times change after tickets have been purchased” should

be a future commitment as the functionality was not yet available to operators. Following delivery of the timetable comparator tool, we set out an expectation that the pledge should become a regulatory commitment from April 2023. We welcome that the industry's first annual review of the pledges delivered this change.

Content of the notifications

We have reviewed the content and clarity of the notifications that operators are sending to passengers, based on samples submitted to us in March and April 2023, and with a focus on the advice about alternative travel options and refunds.

Where a train is rescheduled, we would expect passengers to be able to use their existing ticket, together with any seat reservation, on the retimed train. Should they no longer want to travel, they should alternatively be able to receive a fee-free refund. Where a train is cancelled, we would expect passengers to be able to travel on an alternative service at no additional cost, or to have the option of a fee free refund.

All operators' notifications were consistent with these minimum expectations. However, the clarity of the communications was often poor. Advice to passengers about what to do if they still wish to travel, if they want a refund, and how to get in touch was not always present or clearly set out. For these notifications to be useful to passengers, the content needs to set out their rights and options clearly and we now expect to see all operators reviewing their notifications for clarity, taking into account any feedback from passengers over the initial months of operation.

There is, however, a question over whether the current minimum expectations will remain sufficient to protect passenger interests, particularly if, looking ahead, there are routinely expected to be timetable changes that raise risks to the experience of passengers that have booked in advance.

A key question for operators is the degree of flexibility that passengers should be offered in replanning their journey at no additional cost where a service is cancelled. Most operators currently allow passengers to travel on any other train that is consistent with their ticket type. For example: if a passenger has an off-peak ticket for a cancelled service, they can travel on any other off-peak train that day; if they have an Advance ticket, they can travel on the next service.

However, where services are cancelled there is a risk that adjacent services become busy. We note that over the past year "insufficient space to sit or stand" has been second only to punctuality as the cause of complaints from rail passengers to train operators. Operators have recognised this risk where services have been cancelled as a result of strike action. In these cases, passengers have been able to use their tickets to travel from the day before strike action up to several days after their booking at no additional cost. We would like to see operators reviewing their policies on ticket flexibility with a broad focus on enabling a good customer experience, and informed by an understanding of the scale and nature of timetable changes that may



trigger notifications to booked passengers, the impacts on passengers, and the learnings from strike action. Passengers should not be disadvantaged because they have purchased tickets in advance and should be able to use their existing ticket on the alternative services in most cases, thus avoiding complications and costs of rebooking. Because the notifications give advance notice of changes, the industry needs to consider how it includes the use of earlier services, rather than just the next train when services are cancelled.

Timetable information

Network Rail's timetabling reform programme, Better Timetables for Passengers and Freight (BTPF), proposes to introduce new timescales for timetable production that would see a draft timetable produced 12 weeks before services run, and a confirmed timetable 8 weeks before services run. In July 2023, following consultation, we [published our decision](#) not to proceed with the licence change at this time that would have enabled Network Rail to formally bring these proposals to us for consideration.

To address issues with its current proposals, Network Rail has agreed to produce further evidence. We consider that this requires Network Rail to work with train operators to produce that evidence, in particular on how booking and train information would work practically and impact on passengers under the BTPF proposal. We anticipate that Network Rail will draw on evidence about the scale and nature of timetable changes anticipated after a draft timetable has been published 12 weeks before services run, and the impact of the notification service for passengers, as part of that work.

Next steps

We expect all operators to review the content of their notifications for clarity, taking into account any feedback from passengers over the initial months of operation.

We would like to see operators reviewing their policies on ticket flexibility with a broad focus on enabling a good customer experience. Should changes be required to secure the right outcomes for customers – whether to the National Rail Conditions of Travel, retail systems or individual TOC policies - we would expect those to be progressed at pace.

We will carry out a further review of the use, content and clarity of operators' notifications in October.

We will consider any further evidence that Network Rail brings forward on the potential impacts of their BTPF proposals on passengers in due course.

Yours sincerely

Jacqui Russell

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