



National Rail Enquiries research report

December 2011

Background

Passenger Focus recently undertook research looking at the accuracy of journey information provided by National Rail Enquiries (NRE) via its telephone call centres. The research focussed on the following:

- **Information about the cheapest fare**
Establishing whether when passengers call to enquire about a specific train journey, NRE offers details of the cheapest fare for that journey.
- **Information about the most direct route**
Establishing whether for journeys where a number of options exist, NRE provides details about the most direct route in addition to the cheapest.

Methodology

A mystery shopping approach was used to test NRE's response to various train journey scenarios. We used 37 scenarios and our original intention was to test each of them two or three times, making a total of 100 calls. However after all the scenarios had been tested once, it became clear that NRE was giving the correct information in nearly all cases. Therefore after 37 calls work was stopped because we felt that repeating the scenarios would give similar results.

The scenarios were created by Passenger Focus; a number being taken from our previous research on purchasing tickets from ticket vending machines and websites. This ensured we had some consistency across all our ticket retailing research. We ensured that the scenarios were not too vague and gave the adviser a time period, cost and/or route priorities. Some scenarios were created to test fares only. However, the route scenarios had to be tested with fares too, as quicker/longer routes usually had different fares associated with them. Callers followed a set script ensuring that questions about the journey were asked in a consistent way, and only giving further information if prompted by the NRE adviser.

The scenarios covered a range of routes where multiple ticket types and fares were available, as well as journeys where there was more than one route available to reach the destination.

Calls were made between 26 August and 5 September 2011 at different times of the day to ensure we spoke to advisers at both busy and quiet times. After each call, the information given was checked on the NRE (www.nationalrail.com) and the Trainline (www.thetrainline.com) websites.

A full description of the 37 scenarios and outcomes is available on request.

Key findings

Scenario testing

A range of scenarios was tested, and the results were as follows:

Number of scenarios tested	What the scenario tested	Number of correct outcomes	Number of incorrect outcomes
22	Fare only	20	2
15	Route and fare	15	0

Testing the quickest/most direct routes always involved options with different fares, so both route and fare were tested for these cases. Only two scenarios were incorrect. Both were testing whether the cheapest fare was offered – further details are provided in the next section.

Information about the cheapest fare

Examples of good practice emerged when testing the fares scenarios. Some advisers made an effort to understand our requirements by asking further questions to clarify journey options. The key thing to note was they gave us a **choice** of options; it was left to us to decide which one best suited our needs. An example is shown below:

Scenario 1: “I’m travelling to Barnstaple from Lewisham tomorrow (Friday). I want to go in the morning anytime after 07.30. How much does this cost? And what trains do I catch?”

Outcome 1: The adviser initially gave me details for the 07.44 service but explained it was a slow train and cost £42. He then gave me details of the 08.03. He asked if I wanted the cheaper fare and longer journey, or more expensive fare and a quicker journey. He also mentioned there were some advance tickets available for the 8.03 for £59, but I would need to book as soon as possible as they were limited. He asked if I wanted to go ahead and purchase the tickets there and then; I declined so he offered the ticket sales number for First Great Western so I could decide and book later that day.

There were, however, two scenarios where NRE gave us incorrect details. In the first situation, details of an Anytime Return ticket were given when two singles would have been significantly cheaper:

Scenario 2: “I’m going from Reading to Bristol Temple Meads on Monday, leaving before 8am, and returning around 5pm, I don’t know the specific times. What trains do I get and how much will this cost?”

Outcome 2: The adviser recommended an Anytime Return ticket for £116, but it is cheaper to buy two singles – one Anytime Single (£49.50) and an Off Peak Single (£19.50)

This begs the question whether NRE advisers are supposed to offer two singles when it is cheaper than a return, or whether they have been instructed to offer the relevant return ticket that is valid on both 'out' and 'return' trains.

The second situation where we were given incorrect information was testing whether information on a seven-day season ticket, which worked out cheaper than three return tickets in the same week, was offered. Although the correct fare was given, incorrect information was given about the seven-day season ticket itself:

Scenario 3: "I would like three return tickets for next week - London to Colchester, London to Norwich and London to Ipswich. How much will this cost?"

Outcome 3: The adviser correctly said that a seven-day season ticket London to Norwich would be the cheapest option. However she also said I would be refunded for the days I did not use the season ticket. This refund would be calculated at the ticket office.

This is incorrect and appears to be a staff training issue – there are no refunds available on a seven-day season ticket for the days you do not use.

Information about the most direct route

In all cases where we tested the route (and fare), we were given correct information, and more importantly a **choice** of whether wanted a quicker or slower journey option:

Scenario 4: "I need to get from Lewes to London Victoria on Friday, leaving Lewes around 9.30. What train do I need to get and what is the cost?"

Outcome 4: The adviser gave details of the 09.18 and 09.49 - both are direct trains. He also gave me the option of choosing the 09.29 if I didn't mind changing at Brighton

Scenario 5: "I need to get from Lewes to New Milton on Tuesday, leaving after 9am and returning during the afternoon. What train do I get and how much will this cost?"

Outcome 5: The adviser gave details for the 09.07 (changing at Brighton and Southampton) and also for the 17.37 return train (changing at Clapham Junction) which worked out as the quickest and cheapest routes for the times I had given. The adviser also offered details for the cheapest return ticket which would have meant returning to Lewes on the 19.37 train (£20)

General feedback on NRE advisers

We found the advisers we spoke to were professional, polite and helpful. In most cases the adviser volunteered useful additional information such as ticket restrictions, advice on purchasing tickets there and then or a contact number for the train company if we wanted to buy tickets later that day. When enquiring about journeys starting from London Victoria, they also gave information about the engineering works taking place, during which there was restricted access to the station.

The time taken to answer our calls varied and during peak times (morning or late afternoon) we would be put on hold for a few minutes.

Conclusions

In almost all cases advisers were able to find information about the cheapest and/or most direct routes easily. Where relevant we were given a choice and could decide which option was better for us – trading off between cost, route and journey time. However the two cases where the information was incorrect must not be overlooked and NRE must continue to monitor quality closely, learning from mistakes that are discovered.

In conclusion, it appears that in the overwhelming majority of cases NRE is providing passengers with correct and relevant information that enables them to make informed choices about their travel plans. Nevertheless, NRE should always strive to reduce errors yet further.

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