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Dear John

Timetable failures

Passengers have borne the brunt of the failings ORR found through its Investigation, failings long pre-dating the 20 May crisis which resulted in the Inquiry. The focus on successful delivery of the de-scoped December 2018 timetable and on getting back to publishing accurate information 12 weeks in advance is right. However many passengers will be wondering why ORR has not gone further at this stage, given that the Investigation “found systemic failings in [Network Rail’s] general management of timetable changes”.

Transport Focus supports the four actions. However they do not give passengers a clear sense of when the regulator will require Network Rail to be delivering against the basic requirement to publish an accurate timetable in advance. Nor do they specifically require Network Rail to address long-standing issues we have been highlighting about Informed Traveller T-12, most recently in our reports in November 2017¹ and May 2018². To help the Investigation and Inquiry in their remaining stages, I thought it would be useful to reiterate Transport Focus thinking. Given the systemic failings you have found, we hope ORR will require action in these areas. While there is inevitably some cross over, we have focused mainly on engineering-related alterations to the base timetable rather than creation of it.

Weekend timetables for Govia Thameslink Railway (GTR)

Thankfully, introduction of a formal interim timetable on Thameslink and Great Northern has stabilised the service. However at weekends the timetable is not showing correctly in passenger-facing systems until very late. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there are still Very Short Term Planning (that is, by staff in Control) alterations being made to accommodate planned engineering works. We ask that ORR requires the System Operator to produce a specific GTR Informed Traveller recovery plan, separately from the wider initiative.

Additional information in the System Operator timetable data

At present, any organisation ‘consuming’ the System Operator timetable data must assume that it is accurate – there is no means of knowing otherwise. National Rail Enquiries (NRE) adds

¹ Advance notice of rail engineering works – correspondence <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/advance-notice-rail-engineering-works-correspondence/>

² Advance notice of rail engineering works – an update <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/advance-notice-rail-engineering-works-update/>



manually-generated messages where other information indicates there is an error, and some retailers use the NRE information. But these messages are labour intensive to generate and not perfect. The System Operator should do three things in future:

- Flag any train that is known to be showing incorrectly so a warning can be presented to passengers making journey enquiries or buying tickets. The most likely scenario is in the time-lag between a possession being agreed outside the normal process and the revised train plan being worked up and published.
- Flag any train where it is not yet confirmed that it will run. In normal circumstances this should not be necessary – a train will either be confirmed by default because it is after T-12 or flagged as being incorrect. At the moment it is necessary to caution passengers against assuming trains are correct when they might not be – for example, beyond T-6. And there will always be circumstances where the ability to convey uncertainty would be useful – for example if there is doubt about a route's reopening date following a major landslip.
- Provide accompanying text alongside any material Short Term Planning alteration explaining what has changed and why. This would be 'consumed' by journey planners to present contextual information to passengers about how and why the timetable is different from normal. An example: "this train is diverted between X and Y, taking 30 minutes longer than normal. It will not stop at Z. This is because track is being renewed at Z."

At our encouragement, discussions are going on between Rail Delivery Group, System Operator and the third-party retailers about this. We encourage ORR to consider how its intervention here could speed up delivery of better information to passengers.

Transparency as a catalyst for improvement:

You say in Action Two that Network Rail is required to publicly report on progress with its T-12 recovery plan, which "will include details of any late notice changes being considered and the reasons for those changes." This is welcome and we believe must provide transparency about who requested the late access and their justification for departing from Informed Traveller timescales. But we think transparency needs to go further, shining a spotlight on where Informed Traveller is not working and allowing action to be taken. The System Operator should routinely publish the following:

- Details of the number of trains amended after T-12, by operator, and how far before the day of operation they were amended. It must be possible to analyse this information by day of the week, to avoid impacts at weekends being hidden within an overall figure.
- Details of its own performance at publishing accurately and completely at T-12, by each operator.
- Details of each operator's performance at bidding changes accurately and completely at T-18.

We encourage ORR to make regular publication of this information a requirement.

Urgency in addressing known problems

Transport Focus has consistently highlighted that known inaccuracies in the timetable are not always corrected until very late in the day. Some of this seems to relate to apparent System Operator practice that if timetable change requests are received from train companies late they are, in effect, put on a pile and processed at the last minute, even if the late bid was caused by another part of Network Rail. We believe the System Operator needs a robust process to 'mop up' errors which exist beyond T-12.

We encourage ORR to require the System Operator to present proposals for minimising the number of days an inaccuracy exists in public-facing information after T-12.

Passenger information when trains are 'P Coded'

The post-20 May timetable crisis highlighted a long-standing passenger information consequence of 'P Coding', that is making a decision by 22:00 the previous day that a train will not run. Once a



train is 'P Coded' it simply disappears from information systems – it does not exist to be shown as cancelled. This has implications for passengers who are looking (online, on an App, on a station information screen) for a train that now does not exist. At least you know where you stand if your train has “cancelled” marked against it. There is an important trust point, too. It helps fuel the suspicion that denying the existence of a train in the first place results in fewer cancellations being reported in official statistics. The System Operator should introduce changes to the timetable data which allow a train to be 'P Coded' for industry internal purposes, while showing as “cancelled” in publicly-available timetable information.

We encourage ORR to require that 'P Coded' trains show in the System Operator information feed as cancelled, irrespective of how they are treated for other industry purposes.

Greater automation

It appears to Transport Focus that a particular area is ripe for greater automation. We believe there needs to be a tool which automatically identifies trains in the System Operator data which are incompatible with booked possessions and with other planned trains. If this existed it would be easy to highlight errors to passengers and easy for the industry to focus attention on fixing problems.

We encourage ORR to examine the extent to which the System Operator's Control Period 6 business plan will bring this about.

I hope this is helpful and look forward to receiving your comments. For completeness, I have attached the recommendations we made in May 2018, including to parties other than Network Rail.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Guy Dangerfield'.

Guy Dangerfield
Head of Strategy

Encl.



Appendix

Is the timetable correct? An update on the issues rail passengers face while the industry is not meeting Informed Traveller T-12 obligations. May 2018

Recommendations to Rail Delivery Group

1. Where a journey schedule is showing incorrectly in the National Rail Enquiries (NRE) online journey planner a red triangle warning, not a yellow one, should be used.
2. The message passengers see when hovering over the triangle should make it crystal clear that the train concerned will not run as shown. A link to further details should be provided, setting out among other things when the information is expected to be correct.
3. RDG should introduce an obligation on all online retailers to integrate the NRE 'triangle warning' in how they present journey planning results to passengers. The Govia websites already do this. And once the Network Rail System Operator train planning system has the capability to 'flag' trains that are known to be incorrect (see next recommendation) the obligation should be extended to include presenting that information.

Recommendation to Network Rail System Operator

4. The train planning system should have the facility for trains to be 'flagged' with a simple message that this train will not run as shown, for use between engineering works being agreed and an amended train plan being published. The message should be configured to be automatically 'consumed' by journey planners and be clear to passengers whenever trains involved are 'returned' in journey enquiries.

Recommendation to train companies

5. Where they don't already, all train operators should press their website/booking engine provider to integrate a data feed from NRE that allows them to mirror the 'triangle warnings' applied to incorrect schedules. These warnings should be clearly visible when making enquiries and attempting to book tickets. It is unacceptable that passengers can buy tickets with no warning at point of sale that the journey will not run as scheduled. The Govia websites provide warnings in such circumstances; others should follow their lead promptly.

Recommendation to third-party retailers

6. The message is simple: please emulate what the Govia websites have achieved as quickly as possible.

Recommendation to multiple parties

7. Unrelated to errors in the timetable data, our checking causes us to reiterate a long-standing Transport Focus concern. A symbol that is more clearly a bus is required on journey planning websites – on some sites, the symbol is very similar to that used for a train. In short, on some websites the warning to passengers that a journey involves a replacement bus needs to be much more prominent.