

Anthony Smith
Transport Focus

By email

cc: ORR (Marcus Clements), DOHL (Robin Gisby) and DFT (Tom Elworthy)

13th November 2019

Dear Anthony

Informed Traveller, T-12

Thank you for your letter dated 1 November 2019 regarding the current situation with the opening of reservations and ticket sales for LNER services, especially for the forthcoming Christmas and New Year period. I appreciate the recognition that LNER (and predecessors) have been industry leaders for many years regarding the Christmas period and more generally a 24 week booking horizon; as such I want to take this opportunity to explain the challenges we have faced this year, when it will be rectified and what actions we have put in place for customers to return the opening of reservations to our normal high standards.

In terms of the full opening of reservations and ticket sales at T-12, issues actually stem right back to late 2018 and are largely caused by 4 separate factors all of which intertwine and all represent an unprecedented amount of impact on T-12.

1. Initial Network Rail slippages with the Informed Traveller process between October 2018 and April 2019
2. Introduction of the LNER Azuma fleet from May 2019
3. The intensity of the engineering work plan from July 2019, including the start of major works for King's Cross remodelling
4. Issues with Planning Systems reliability and Train Planning resource deployment at LNER

Outline of Issues

To briefly explain each of these issues in order:

1. Network Rail started having issues with providing Informed Traveller timetable offers at T-14 back in October 2018. This came about due to the well-publicised May 2018 timetable issues, then compounded by resource related issues, which lead to the industry T-12 Informed Traveller recovery plan. The impact of this on LNER was that additional and condensed work was created, as timetable offers were received late (down to T-7), meaning a revisit of such timetables and ultimately disrupting the whole important rhythm and beat rate that is required and which has been such a fundamental element of previous T-12 success over the last 4 years at LNER.
2. LNER launched the Azuma fleet in May 2019. This was much later than originally envisaged. Numerous changes to the delivery plan resulting in 15 trains being in total 1000 days late ,coupled with infrastructure issues related to electrical interference led to significant and frequent re-working of the plan. As such, several Azuma roll out plans have been developed and modified, both pre-roll out and then as the fleet roll out continues. Given that the Azuma train seating configuration is so significantly different from the existing LNER HST and IC225 fleets, we have been extremely careful to ensure that reservations have been loaded for the correct planned fleet type for each service. This has ultimately resulted in repeated reworkings of the rolling stock plans to resource various amended timetables throughout the

Summer and Autumn period. The volume of these changes (which then need to be fed into the reservation databases) has been significant and has largely all been undertaken inside of T-8, when it has been agreed and confirmed that each Azuma set will enter service and which particular diagram it will operate. This issue has continued, but I am pleased to say that as recently as last week, we created a longer-term plan from January onwards, which will return some stability as the second half of the fleet is introduced by rebuilding a sizable buffer between the latest Hitachi delivery plan and our train service introduction.

3. Whilst LNER is well sighted and well-practised in terms of patterns of engineering work throughout the late Summer and Autumn, there have been 2 brand new and very high profile pieces of work in mid-July and over August Bank Holiday in relation to the East Coast Upgrade project. This work proved extremely complex as the industry focused on optimising the passenger service. Despite these pressures LNER successfully delivered a far higher level of service during the work. The timeliness and volume of this work, when coupled with the Azuma changes, has ultimately resulted in the Train Planning process slipping behind resulting in our reservations now opening late.
4. To compound this further LNER has encountered IT System issues during 2019 in respect of the reliability with our Train Planning tools. This also removed capacity in the resource pool and has been further impacted by an increased attrition rate in the Planning department, seeing the Head of Ops Planning recently leaving the business. She has been temporarily replaced with her predecessor. However at a time when we need the team to be functioning at its optimum, the team has also been compromised.

Since the critical nature of the situation became apparent over the last few weeks, supporting resource has been called in from around the business, with previous members of the team being deployed to help support and recover, effectively doubling the normal resource levels within the team. This has included weekend working to supplement the plan.

Recovery Plan

Looking ahead, LNER is now working on a 4-point recovery plan to address:

- a) The opening of Christmas and New Year reservations as soon as possible
- b) Full recovery to T-12 timescales by early January 2020 (for services applicable from the end of March 2020)
- c) Recruitment, training and return to stability for the Train Planning team
- d) Train Planning Software System Improvements.

In relation to the Christmas and New Year reservations which we fully appreciate the importance and sensitivity of to customers, please see Appendix 1 for a summary table as to our commitment to when these will be open and advance tickets on sale including those which have been opened over the last few days. The team are focused on this and where possible expediting this plan, which has been escalated to our senior leadership team for their involvement. Please note that 21-27 December have been opened over 11-12 November.

Customer Communications

We understand the importance of not only delivering the basics of T-12 to customers but also communicating effectively with customers in the event we cannot achieve this. Various steps were taken in respect of this including proactive CRM to customers signed up to LNER.co.uk and multi channel encouragement to sign up to 'ticket release notification' email alerts. Given the extent of the issue the communications have been enhanced to include additional pro-active emails to keep customers abreast of the situation and emails/web pages to communicate planned 'on sale' dates. This has been added to higher volume web pages related to ticketing to particularly target those people who haven't signed up for a 'ticket alert' and information re 'ticket alerts' has been made more

visible on the homepage and within the booking journey. To support this our social media team have engaged directly with customers who had questions around availability to answer them in real-time. This information has been shared with all areas to ensure it can be disseminated out to all channels (business, travel agent, third party retailers, social etc).

Our relationship with our customers is of great value to us, therefore we are continually monitoring external channels, particularly social platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, to proactively identify where we think we can help customers who have been affected by these issues.

Another important aspect is to ensure that customers are not out of pocket as a result of the delays to loading reservations and Advance fares. In this respect we have taken the approach to always put the same availability for Advance on sale as it would have been had it went on sale at T12. On top of this we have a price guarantee whereby anyone who has previously bought an 'open' ticket for the dates in question can receive a full refund with no administration fee and rebook an advance fare.

Please see Appendix 2 for examples of the steps taken to communicate with customers.

Information across retail sites

Finally, in respect of how incorrect information presents itself in the public domain, causing confusion and frustration for customers:

On our website, LNER excludes date for sale where we are awaiting the release of reservations for LNER services. This is to ensure we do not mislead customers with advertising unconfirmed timetables and also that we ensure we offer our full fares range.

This is different from the norm where in general retailers including Trainline will display the base timetable and retail tickets which do not require reservations (e.g. super off-peak/anytime). Retailers operate across multiple TOC's all with different booking horizons and as such do not make any allowance for excluding particular dates for individual TOCs.

Provision of information for customers before and during their journey is a known pain point, it is made worse if TOCs and retailers are not joined up. We know through Wavelength that customers who are aware of an issue before they arrive at the station have a higher satisfaction score. We are therefore working with fellow TOCs, RDG and Network Rail to develop improved timetable feeds which would highlight/flag to retailers where a service is affected by pre-planned retiming/engineering works/rail replacement.

Similarly, we have improved the frequency and content of our own NRE bulletins and ensured they are being picked up correctly at source. Here is an example bulletin:

“LNER Advance fares and seat reservations have not been released for this date due to the timetable not being finalised. If you buy a ticket now, you will not have a reserved seat and may be overpaying for your journey as only fully flexible fares are showing. Reservations and advance fares will be available from xx/xx. For more information visit LNER.co.uk”

On the broader discussion around provision of information to customers, and with the help of RDG, we would like to work with retailers to agree a framework within which we can ensure that relevant information is provided to customers in a timely and consistent way. A working group facilitated by RDG has been established. Where there is planned disruption that for any reason has not been picked up in time, we are also working with retailers such as Trainline to create bespoke CRM communication to affected travellers (see example in Appendix 3).

In conclusion, the approach we have taken (not putting trains on sale until both the engineering work and train type are confirmed) eliminates the risk of mis-selling, which is clearly an important priority in


terms of consumer protection. We believe that it has been right to prioritise against mis-selling during the circumstances we have experienced.

I hope that provides an explanation of why we find ourselves in this situation, when we commit to having Christmas and New Year tickets on sale, and what we are doing to inform and update customers. Throughout this situation LNER has ensured that on-the-day operational performance is achieved. Trains have not been cancelled / operational performance has not been compromised.

Please be assured that returning all services to a reliable T-12 (and T-24 for weekdays) at the earliest opportunity has our absolute focus and attention.

Please accept my sincerest apologies for this situation.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Suzanne Donnelly', written in a cursive style.

Suzanne Donnelly
Commercial Director (Deputy MD)
London North Eastern Railway (LNER)

Appendix 1: Recovery Plan

Travel Date	Reservations to open on	T-?
Saturday 14 December	Thursday 14 November	T-4
Sunday 15 December	Thursday 14 November	T-4
Monday 16 December	Opened 25 October	T-8
Tuesday 17 December	Opened 25 October	T-8
Wednesday 18 December	Opened 25 October	T-8
Thursday 19 December	Opened 25 October	T-8
Friday 20 December	Opened 25 October	T-8
Saturday 21 December	Opened 11 November	T-6
Sunday 22 December	Opened 11 November	T-6
Monday 23 December	Opened 11 November	T-6
Tuesday 24 December	Opened 12 November	T-6
Friday 27 December	Opened 12 November	T-6
Saturday 28 December	Tuesday 19 November	T-6
Sunday 29 December	Tuesday 19 November	T-6
Monday 30 December	Thursday 21 November	T-6
Tuesday 31 December	Thursday 21 November	T-6
Wednesday 1 January	Friday 22 November	T-6
Thursday 2 January	Friday 22 November	T-6
Friday 3 January	Opened 25 October	T-10
Saturday 4 January	Tuesday 26 November	T-6
Sunday 5 January	Tuesday 26 November	T-6
Saturday 11/Sunday 12 January	Friday 29 November	T-6
Saturday 18/Sunday 19 January	Tuesday 3 December	T-7

Appendix 2: LNER Customer Comms Examples

a) Pre-notification Email



Ticket alert update
Can't see this email? [Click here.](#)



KEEPING YOU UPDATED

We know you're waiting to book tickets for 23 December

We're getting in touch as you've registered for an LNER ticket alert to tell you when LNER Advance tickets for travel on 23 December go on sale, and we know you really want to get everything sorted for Christmas.

Our timetables for weekends in December, January and the festive period have taken longer than usual to finalise. As a result we've been unable to open seat reservations or bookings for LNER Advance tickets for these dates.

The good news is that tickets for 23 December will be available to book from 10.00am on Monday 11 November.

Please be assured we're working hard to get everything confirmed and we'll send you an update on Monday as soon as the great value LNER Advance tickets are available for sale.

We apologise for any inconvenience this may have caused you.

Kind Regards

The LNER Team

P.S. Don't forget by booking direct you can reserve a seat to make getting home for Christmas even more relaxing.

b) Home Page Banner

The screenshot shows the LNER website home page. At the top, there is a navigation bar with the LNER logo, 'LONDON NORTH EASTERN RAILWAY', and utility links like 'Buy tickets', 'Customer services', and a progress indicator '75%'. Below the navigation bar, a service update banner reads: 'Minor delays on some routes - Check to see if your journey is affected. Disruption between Leeds and Wakefield Westgate expected until 22:00. Read about this disruption'. The main banner features a night-time photograph of a city with a Ferris wheel and lights, with the text 'CHRISTMAS TICKETS ARE NOW ON SALE UP UNTIL 27 DECEMBER' and a 'Book tickets' button. Below the banner is a 'CHECK YOUR JOURNEY' section with a search bar containing 'From *' and 'To *'. At the bottom, there are three buttons: 'Travel alerts', 'Live departures & arrivals', and 'When is my next train?'. A 'FEEDBACK' button is visible on the right side of the banner. A chatbot bubble is present in the bottom right corner with the text: 'Got a question? Our digital assistant is happy to help.' and a 'Help' button.

c) Exclusion Date list with link to more information

The screenshot shows the LNER website page for 'travelling-later/early-bird-ticket-alerts/'. The page is divided into three main sections:

- Your details:** A form with fields for Title* (dropdown), First name*, Surname*, Email address*, and Confirm email address*.
- Your journey:** A form with fields for From* (dropdown), To* (dropdown), Duration* (dropdown, currently set to 'Just this journey'), and Outward journey date* (calendar icon).
- AVAILABILITY AND CURRENT EXCLUSIONS:** A section with the following text:

Tickets for LNER services are available for weekend travel up to and including **Friday 17 January 2020**, and usually up to three months in advance.

Tickets are available for travel up to and including: **Friday 17 January 2020**

Dates not yet available for booking: 7, 8, 14, 15, 28, 29, 30, 31 December 2019

1, 2, 4, 5, 11, 12 January 2020

Find out more information on when tickets will go on sale [here](#).

d) Additional info on when future dates will be released for reservations

The screenshot shows the LNER website page for 'travelling-later/tickets-for-future-dates/'. The page features a red banner at the top with the text: 'You may have noticed our cheapest Advance fare tickets aren't on sale for weekends from Saturday 7 December 2019 onwards. We're working to confirm our train timetables and get these tickets to you for the best deals. Make sure you're notified when your travel dates do come on sale by setting up a ticket alert here. Create a ticket alert.' Below the banner are two main sections:

- WHAT'S HAPPENING?:** Explains that some tickets aren't on sale yet due to unconfirmed timetables. It lists:
 - Christmas tickets now on sale are: 21 - 23 December, 24 December, 27 December.
 - Weekday trains: Weekday trains up to 17 January 2020 are currently on sale. There are some excluded dates due to engineering works that are taking place meaning our timetables are unconfirmed for weekend dates.
 - Excluded weekday dates are: 30 December - 2 January.
 - Weekend trains: Engineering works are taking place over a handful of weekends meaning our timetables are unconfirmed for weekend dates. The dates below are when we are planning on releasing these tickets, but these may be subject to change.
 - Wednesday 13 November
 - 7 and 8 December
 - Thursday 14 November
 - 14 and 15 December
- WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR ME?:** States that tickets for the following weekends will be available from:
 - Wednesday 13 November
 - 7 December
 - 8 December

The screenshot shows the LNER website page for 'travelling-later/tickets-for-future-dates/'. The page features two main sections:

- Want to know when tickets will open for booking?:** States that you can register for a ticket alert email if you have specific date(s) you know you want to travel on. We'll send you an alert as soon as your chosen date(s) open for booking so you'll get access to our best value Advance fares. A red button labeled 'Set up your ticket alert' is visible.
- What should I do if I book a ticket and then an Advance fare becomes available?:** States that if you buy a ticket for a train affected by the changes and then at a later date an Advance ticket is made available for a cheaper fare, you should book the Advance fare for that train and then [request a fee-free refund](#) on your original ticket.

Appendix 3: Trainline CRM Email

