Statements and chief executive blogs on coronavirus

(Most recent first)

These can also be viewed at: https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/

Anthony Smith blog: Coronavirus refunds – what's happening for rail passengers 23 March 2020

Earlier today the Department for Transport announced emergency measures to support the rail industry and passengers through coronavirus. It includes details of a temporary suspension of franchise contracts. A huge change and a lot of public money, but for now the most important thing is that these changes should keep key workers moving and make sure train companies are there to get things going again in due course.

Details of the timetable changes are still being worked through in places, but it's clear that services are going to be substantially cut across the network. This is understandable as most passengers are asked to stay at home, but it's vital those who still need to travel can do so safely and avoid crowding that makes social distancing impossible. Might further measures be necessary to ensure those making essential trips can do so safely? Information must also be clear and train companies will need to listen and make changes where they can if these emergency plans create difficulties for key workers.

Today's announcement included a welcome commitment to refund passengers who hold Advance tickets bought before 23 March which they no longer need. Transport Focus pushed for this – it's vitally important passengers who followed the advice not to travel are not left out of pocket. The exceptional circumstances imposed by coronavirus – on almost all aspects of our lives – meant the usual terms and conditions cannot stand. Passengers will still have questions about how this is going to work in practice.

On Advance tickets it's welcome that the Government has made it possible to get refunds on Advance tickets from today. This brings them in line with Anytime and Off-Peak tickets and brings an end to the rigmarole of passengers being advised to change their travel date when they had no way of knowing when travel would be possible again.

There are still questions about season ticket refunds. Although today's announcement looked like a change, it turns out that nothing has changed – existing terms and conditions for season ticket refunds continue to apply. We'll continue to discuss the need for pro-rata refunds with Government and train companies; it isn't the passenger's fault that they won't be using the ticket for a full 12 months. And there's also the question of backdating if you've not been travelling but haven't yet

handed in your season ticket. How about backdating until Tuesday 17 March, the first day of official work from home advice, for passengers who have not been travelling?

The standard advice is to return tickets to the point of purchase; but what if this is a ticket office, as is so often the case for season ticket purchases? Clearly it would not be safe for every season ticket holder to set out to the station today just to claim a refund. Can train companies and retailers please think about how this can best be done during social distancing?

In these extreme circumstances where households may need to make money go further it is important that the railway is seen to do the right thing by its customer

Joint statement from Transport Focus and London TravelWatch on reduced transport timetables 20 March 2020
Commenting on decisions to scale back public transport timetables during the Coronavirus outbreak, Transport Focus and London TravelWatch chief executive Anthony Smith said: “This is a pragmatic response to the dramatic fall in passenger numbers and rising staff illness – there is no point in running empty trains and buses. But the remaining service must meet the needs of those who still have to travel, including key sector workers.

“We’ve published some principles that should be followed, including protecting first and last services, providing enough capacity to keep passengers at a safe distance from each other and making the new timetable reliable and the information accurate. Coordination between operators, particularly between train companies and Transport for London, is crucial.”

Anthony Smith blog: Coronavirus – what changes to bus and tram services means for passengers 19 March 2020
Our buses and trams carry most of us on public transport across Great Britain. Getting us to places of work, education, shopping, medical appointments and – normally – places to relax and enjoy ourselves.

In recent weeks the number of us using buses and trams has fallen significantly as we take heed of official advice designed to slow the spread of coronavirus.
Bus and tram operators have, until very recently, been running their full timetables. However, that has started to change – both because there are fewer passengers and because staff illness or precautionary self-isolation is starting to bite. There is no point in running empty buses but continuing to provide a decent network is essential for those of us who need to support family and friends or need to get to essential jobs that can’t be done from home. And that must be done against a backdrop of the inevitable impact on hard-working frontline transport staff.

We are now seeing bus and tram operators and transport authorities introduce, or announce plans to introduce, reduced patterns of service and timetables. So, Transport Focus has put together some principles to protect the interests of local bus and tram users in this fast-moving situation. Change is coming, but the passengers must not be forgotten.

First, we've been working closely with the bus and tram industry, including the Confederation of Passenger Transport, the major bus operators, transport authorities and governments across Britain. We have shared our 'principles for amending transport timetables' to help organisations identify the priorities for those who will need to continue using public transport. Tomorrow our Director David Sidebottom, who is a member of the Mayor of Greater Manchester's Board, will be joining Andy Burnham and senior officials from transport companies across that city region to discuss plans to deal with the coronavirus and implications for the transport network. Secondly, we are pushing operators and authorities to make refunds fairer on various forms of season ticket if people no longer need to travel. The rules vary from operator to operator and between areas, but it's important that passengers aren't out of pocket at this difficult time. You shouldn't have to pay to go to work if you are required to work from home!

We will be tracking the scale and impact of changes and will highlight examples of best practice on season ticket refunds, communication of service changes and more generally 'doing the right thing' by passengers, local communities and employees at this very difficult time.

Finally, we've updated our summary of refund information and have published a new guide to how rail season ticket refunds work.

Anthony Smith blog: Coronavirus refunds and service cuts – don't forget the passengers! 19 March 2020

There may be fewer people travelling because of the coronavirus, but buses, coaches, trains and trams are still playing a key role in keeping the country going. Not least in making sure those working in the NHS, supermarkets and other frontline services can still get to work. There are lots of vital jobs that cannot be done from home. Thank you to all the hard-working staff in the transport sector itself. And it's good to see Highways England talking about maintaining its services at all times – food needs to get through to the supermarkets.

Transport Focus is working on two main issues on behalf of transport users.
First, the need for the transport industry to do the right thing by passengers when it comes to refunds if they no longer need to travel. Understandably, train ticket terms and conditions don't envisage something like this. With Advance tickets, finding a way for passengers to get their money back, or at least have an open-ended credit, is a priority. Changing a ticket for another date when the same 'avoid non-essential travel' guidance/restriction is likely to be in place isn't the answer.

And some people may no longer need to make the trip at all. South Western Railway's website sums up the problem for an annual season ticket holder who may not need to travel for three months: 'We do not offer a Pause & Resume offering on Season Tickets'. No, but that could be precisely what passengers need in this situation. And the principle of getting your money back if you are no longer travelling applies to buses and trams, too.

Second, making sure that passenger impacts are minimised as timetables are scaled back. There is no point in running services that nobody is using, but it's crucial that in matching the service to demand (and the number of staff likely to be fit to run it) companies don't go too far. Lower frequencies and shorter trains may be OK on some routes – but think about having enough space for passengers to keep apart. It's also important to maintain current first and last services, whether buses, coaches, trains or trams. Key sector workers in front line services may still need to get to and from work at the usual time, even if others are working from home. In short, make sure the revised timetables meet the needs of those who must still travel. We have drawn up some principles in this area which we are sharing with the Department for Transport, transport operators and other bodies for consideration. Let me know if you have any comments on our principles document using the comment box below.