

Clarity of information for transport users – train company website assessment (September 2020)

Providing clear and accurate information to passengers has always been a priority. Traditionally it was about ensuring people had accurate information on fares and on services, especially during periods of disruption. But since Covid-19, it has also been about providing reassurance to passengers, so they know what to expect and enable them to travel with confidence

Transport Focus published an assessment of train company websites in June 2020. This looked at the advice given on things like face coverings, social distancing measures and cleaning. The Department for Transport commissioned Transport Focus to conduct a second audit, taking account of our earlier findings.

This report represents a snapshot of website information quality at the time of the review and the key issues that were identified. It is worth noting that many train operators have made positive changes as a result of our feedback.

Key issues

In conducting the review of websites we identified several areas where we felt the clarity of information given varied widely across operators.

- **The provision of relevant local lockdown travel information**

In some instances the advice wasn't clear enough, either because of a lack of warning that the train company was serving a local lockdown area or because an incomplete picture was given.

We accept that such advice is constantly under review and evolving. However, we believe that all operators should, at the very least, advise passengers to check whether their journey is affected by local lockdown restrictions and show them where to get such information.

If there are no local lockdowns in place, information may not need to be prominent, it could be in FAQs for example. However, where an operator directly serves such an area, we believe there should be a much more prominent warning that alerts passengers to the fact their reason for travel, and possibly their journey, might be impacted. This is particularly so when the local restrictions advise 'essential travel only'.

In more than one instance where local lockdowns were directly relevant to the operator, we found advice at the bottom of a long list of FAQs. In others we found an incomplete picture being given where one lockdown area was referred

to, while others weren't, even though all of the areas were served by that operator.

While it was not something covered by our review, we think the recent introduction of lockdown 'tiers' has created an additional need for advice. This needs to include the basic information about travelling to and from a 'lockdown' area, and when crossing national borders. It also needs to include interchanging at a station within a lockdown area. While current guidance advises against travelling into or out of a 'very high alert' area it does not specifically mention changing trains at a station within such an area.

- **The provision of advice on refunds if travelling to/from a lockdown area**

In a number of cases the advice wasn't explicit in saying that lockdown restrictions had no impact on the standard terms and conditions covering refunds. Given the previous flexibility during national lockdown and the increasing focus on essential travel only, we think there needs to be clear advice given to passengers.

We are not commenting here on whether passengers should be entitled to a refund (in the case of Advance fares) or whether admin fees for refunds or for changing the date of travel should be waived - just on whether the train company makes its stance clear. We are pleased to see that the government has since announced the removal of admin fees for passengers on advanced tickets if Covid restrictions later affect their journey.

We believe it essential that passengers are at the very least given a 'buyer beware' message that clearly states tickets bought for journeys to/from local lockdown areas are subject to the same terms and conditions as other tickets. If passengers are to make an informed purchase it should be clear that, for example, an Advance ticket is not refundable even if you can't make the trip because of a local lockdown.

In addition, in a small number of instances, we found operators were directing passengers to the 'refunds' section in order to find out about refunds concerning local lockdowns, only for there to be no reference to this at all once there. This will only serve to frustrate passengers further.

Our checks focussed on the Covid-19/FAQ section of the website – we did not check the information provided when actually buying a ticket. Nonetheless, we believe that websites also need to be very clear at the point of purchase what the refund terms and conditions are, as well as the Covid-19/FAQ section. This is an issue that Transport Focus is already looking at.

- **The provision of advice on the type and level of assistance available through the passenger assist service**

The key issue here was making it clear that assistance would be provided to people who had not booked assistance in advance as well as to those who had.

On several operator's sites it was not always clear that un-booked assistance is still available. On others we found that there was often contradictory information on different pages. The Covid-19 information page would say one thing, the Passenger Assist page would say something contrary.

At the very least we believe the overarching message should be consistent.

- **What to do if the train you want is too full to board safely? (Board safely meaning passengers can socially distance)**

Where boarding isn't managed, physically or through reservations, the advice is generally 'board the next train if you think the train you want to catch is too busy'.

Where passengers are being asked to make the decision, we think it should be clear what the implications are for them in terms of ticket validity. For example, if a passenger is travelling on an off-peak ticket and the last off-peak service is busy to the point of social distancing not being possible, what should the passenger do? Do they have to wait for the next off-peak train and incur substantial delay, buy a new ticket, or will discretion be shown by staff to allow them to travel beyond the validity of their ticket?

We note that SWR and Chiltern have since updated their website to advise passengers that they can board a later service with the same ticket. We think this additional level of reassurance could prove useful to passengers.

- **What to do if the last train you want is too full to board safely? For example will alternative transport be provided and who do passengers contact?**

Whilst it was generally clear that passengers should speak to staff, some operators were explicit in saying they'd provide alternative travel whilst others weren't. Where operators weren't able to say the latter, we believe they should at least encourage passengers not to aim for the last train if possible. Operators do this during severe weather events – so it is feasible.

We liked the advice given by ScotRail:

'We recommend you avoid the last service of the day unless you are unable to travel earlier. In the unlikely event that the last service is too busy to board, please use the station help point to contact us and we will discuss alternative arrangements with you.'

- **How easy is it to navigate the coronavirus information?**

This is clearly a subjective topic and we are conscious that operators are being asked to provide a lot of information, but we felt that some operators seemed better at making that information easy to navigate.

Users might be discouraged from reading if there are large chunks of text, lots of scrolling and/or long lists of FAQs, all of which could mean important information is missed.

In some instances there would be a number of pages with non-distinct titles and which contained overlapping information – for example headings such as returning to work, safer travel pledge, travel checklist, travel advice and what's new – all linked from a page called Covid-19 Information.

While carrying out the checks we also found issues that were not part of our original objectives. For the sake of completeness we have set these out below.

- **Waiting rooms**

We noted that some waiting rooms were still temporarily closed to help ensure social distancing. We believe it would be useful if operators make clear exactly which waiting rooms are impacted rather than including a general warning that they *might* be. There may be passengers, including those with disabilities, who previously relied on waiting rooms being available.

- **What to do when returning from abroad**

At the start of the national lockdown several operators made clear to passengers that they were still able to use the train to get home if they were returning from a country outside of one of the travel corridors – meaning they had to self-isolate.

This had largely disappeared when we did our recent checks. We think there is value in having this information – even if just for those operators that serve airports and ports.
























- **Website updates**

This is the second time we have carried out checks on websites. We noted that useful information made available to passengers in the first audits (for example additional measures put in place to help those passengers needing to use passenger assist) had been removed or forgotten as other information had been updated.

We accept that websites constantly evolve, and that in most cases there is more than one department/person responsible for providing updates, but arguably there should be some sort of checks/process to ensure that important information isn't lost as a result of change.

We think it could also be helpful for train companies to clearly highlight where important information has recently been updated on their website, particularly where information is constantly changing to avoid passengers missing out on any key updates for example about refund eligibility.

Individual train operator website assessments

Is it clear....	Who May Travel		Face Coverings						Fares ticketing and refunds										Providing reassurance							Passenger Assistance		General					
	Are any government restrictions on cross border travel made clear?	Relevant local lockdown travel information	Where they are mandatory	Cross border advice (where applicable)	That exemptions apply	What these exemptions are	What might happen if you do not wear one (without valid reason)	Whether reservations are mandatory, advised or not required	If only advisory, is it clear that you risk not being able to board	If mandatory, how to change your flexible ticket reservation at short notice	Whether cash is still accepted	If any ticket offices are closed or have amended opening hours	What to do if you have a National Rail Travel Voucher that expired since 17 March or is nearing its expiry	What the current rules on refunds are	If a local lockdown exists: any specific advice on refunds to/from the area	About the governments safer travel advice	What social distancing measures are in place at stations	What social distancing measures are in place on trains	When is the best time to travel and when is best to avoid	How busy particular services are	What happens if the train you want is too full to board safe?	What happens if the last train you want is too full to board safety	What additional cleaning is being carried out	The availability of hand sanitiser	The availability of toilets at stations and on trains	The availability of catering (if applicable) and if the service is different from how it was previously	That Passenger Assistance is available (both booked and turn up and go)	How assistance is/ may be different to normal	Is it clear when the information last updated	How easy is it to find the COVID-19 information from the main page	How easy is it to navigate the coronavirus information		
 Avanti West Coast	g	g	g	g	g	g	a	g	g	n/a	a	g	g	g	g	g	g	g	g	g	a	g	g	g	a	g	a	g	g	g	g	g	g
 C2C	n/a	n/a	g	n/a	g	g	g	g	n/a	n/a	g	g	g	g	n/a	a	a	g	g	g	g	g	g	r	n/a	a	g	r	g	g	g	g	
 Chiltern Railways	g	g	g	n/a	g	g	g	a	n/a	n/a	g	g	g	g	a	g	g	g	g	g	a	a	g	g	n/a	g	g	g	g	g	g	g	
 CrossCountry	g	g	g	g	g	g	g	a	g	a	g	g	g	g	r	g	g	g	g	r	g	g	g	r	g	g	a	g	g	g	g	g	
 EMR	n/a	g	g	n/a	g	a	g	g	n/a	n/a	g	g	g	g	r	g	g	g	g	g	a	g	g	g	g	g	a	g	g	g	g	g	
 Grand Central	n/a	a	a	n/a	g	a	r	a	r	n/a	r	n/a	r	r	g	a	n/a	a	g	g	r	r	g	g	g	r	a	r	g	a	g	a	
 Great Northern	n/a	n/a	g	n/a	g	g	r	g	n/a	n/a	g	g	g	g	n/a	a	g	g	g	g	a	a	g	g	r	n/a	g	g	g	g	g	g	
 GWR	g	a	g	a	r	r	g	g	g	n/a	g	g	a	g	r	g	g	g	r	r	a	a	g	g	g	g	r	r	g	g	a	g	
 Greater Anglia	n/a	n/a	g	g	g	g	g	g	n/a	n/a	g	g	g	g	g	g	g	g	g	g	a	g	g	g	g	a	a	g	g	g	g	g	
 Heathrow Express	g	n/a	g	n/a	g	g	g	g	n/a	n/a	g	n/a	n/a	g	n/a	a	g	n/a	g	n/a	g	g	g	g	a	n/a	a	a	r	g	g	g	
 Hull Trains	n/a	n/a	g	n/a	a	a	g	g	n/a	n/a	g	g	g	g	n/a	a	g	g	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	g	g	g	r	r	g	g	g	g	g	
 LNER	g	g	g	g	g	g	g	g	n/a	g	g	g	g	g	g	g	g	g	g	g	g	g	g	g	g	a	a	g	g	g	g	g	
 London Northwestern Railway	n/a	g	g	n/a	g	g	g	g	n/a	n/a	g	g	g	g	r	g	g	n/a	g	g	a	g	g	g	n/a	a	g	g	g	g	g	g	
 Merseyrail	n/a	g	g	n/a	a	g	g	g	n/a	n/a	g	a	g	g	g	g	g	g	n/a	g	g	g	g	a	n/a	g	a	g	a	a	a	a	
 Northern	n/a	g	g	n/a	g	g	g	g	n/a	n/a	g	g	g	g	g	g	g	r	a	a	g	g	g	g	n/a	a	a	g	g	g	g	g	
 ScotRail	g	a	g	g	g	g	g	g	n/a	n/a	r	g	g	g	a	g	g	n/a	g	g	a	a	g	g	a	g	a	g	g	g	g	g	
 South Western Railway	n/a	g	g	n/a	g	a	g	g	n/a	n/a	g	g	g	g	n/a	g	g	g	g	g	a	g	g	g	g	g	a	g	g	g	g	g	
 South Eastern Railway	n/a	n/a	g	n/a	g	g	g	g	n/a	n/a	g	g	g	g	n/a	g	g	g	g	g	a	g	g	g	g	g	g	g	g	g	g	g	
 Standed Express	g	g	g	n/a	g	g	a	n/a	n/a	n/a	g	g	g	g	n/a	g	g	g	g	g	a	g	g	g	g	g	a	g	g	g	g	g	
 ThamesLink	n/a	n/a	g	n/a	g	g	r	g	n/a	n/a	g	g	g	g	a	a	g	g	g	a	a	g	g	r	n/a	g	g	g	g	g	g	g	
 TransPennine Express	g	a	g	a	g	a	g	g	n/a	n/a	g	g	g	g	r	g	g	n/a	g	r	a	g	g	g	a	g	r	a	a	g	g	g	
 TransPennine Express	r	a	g	r	g	g	g	g	n/a	n/a	g	g	g	g	r	g	g	n/a	g	g	a	g	g	g	a	g	g	g	g	g	g	g	
 West Midlands Railway	n/a	g	g	n/a	g	g	g	g	n/a	n/a	g	g	g	g	r	g	g	g	g	g	a	g	g	g	n/a	a	g	g	g	g	g	g	

Mark scheme
Information is...
Green
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clearly worded
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easy to find
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Correct
Amber
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Present but difficult to find/too many clicks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Had to use google or site map to find it
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wording not as clear/helpful as it could be
Red
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not present
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information incorrect
N/A
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not applicable